

EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS IN BELIZE: PERSPECTIVES ON SCHOOL EXPERIENCES,
THE PURPOSE OF SCHOOL AND WHY THEY LEFT

by

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A dissertation

submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Curriculum and Instruction

Boise State University

December 2015

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BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE COLLEGE

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Dissertation Title: Early School Leavers in Belize: Perspectives on School Experiences, the Purpose of School and Why They Left

Date of Final Oral Examination: 28 October 2015

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DEDICATION

*This work is dedicated to the
early school leavers who inspired this research.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am forever grateful to all of the people that encouraged and inspired me as I worked on this dissertation. First, I want to thank the participants who were willing to spend their time with me, sharing and reflecting on their own experiences. I have learned a lot from them, and I hope that this work will allow others to do so as well. I thank them for their generosity and their courage to explore their own beliefs, experiences, and events in their lives with me. This work would not have been possible without them. I truly hope that it can serve a purpose and bring awareness to the importance of students and early school leavers' perspectives.

I could not have done this without the support, encouragement, and constructive criticism of my committee. I want to especially thank my co-chairs, Dr. Jennifer Snow and Dr. Richard Osguthorpe, who helped me to shape this project from the beginning. Because of their patience and willingness to explore ideas with me, I was able to embark upon this research. Along the way, their encouragement and feedback helped keep me going and I am truly indebted to both of them for their time and careful attention to this project. I also want to thank the rest of my committee – Dr. Sara Fry, Dr. Scott Willison, and Dr. David Gabbard, for their comments and insights. All of you provided me with new ideas and avenues to explore and I thank you for that!

Others inspired me and made opportunities available for me that eventually led to this research focus. I want to thank Dr. Bill Parrett for giving me the opportunity to work with him to organize the international visit of teachers from the northwest to Belize.

Both Dr. Parrett and Dr. Kathleen Budge took time to think about and discuss ideas for this project from the beginning. I want to thank those who have given me opportunities to work in education, have worked with me in some capacity in Belize, or have simply been willing to dialogue about the project, all opportunities that have helped me in this research: Victor Pott, all of the staff and students at “PHS,” Michelle Murray, Dr. Eve Aird, Dr. Filiberto Penados, and Dr. Ellajean Gillett.

I especially want to thank Dr. Roberto Bahruth for inspiring me to begin the educational journey again, and unbeknownst to him, Dr. Stan Steiner, for simply saying in passing, “You should apply to our Doctorate program.” Sometimes small gestures of encouragement are all that it takes to get the ball rolling. I am also indebted to my professors at the University of Chicago, who shared with me new ways of seeing and making sense of the world. Marshall Sahlins and his “Systems” class influenced the way I see and read everything. I also want to thank a few professors who helped me immensely during the time that I worked with them: Jean Comaroff, John Kelly, Alan Kolata, Phil Kohl, Ed Schortman, Pat Urban, and the late Annemarie Shimony. My heart goes out to all of my family and friends who have been more than supportive and understanding—I couldn’t have done this without you!

ABSTRACT

The research herein focuses on how early school leavers described why they left school, their school experiences, and their beliefs about school's purpose in their lives. This interpretive, multiple case study is based on 21 semi-structured interviews with early school leavers, a Likert-scale survey generated from the themes that emerged in the interviews, as well as national and school policy documents, evaluative reports on education and social issues, and various media pertaining to youth and education (Stake, 2005a). In order to understand the perspectives of participants, I tie them into the larger sociocultural, historical, and economic context.

Although secondary education can be a financial burden for many Belizeans, the findings show that school became financially inaccessible for only a minority of participants. For the rest, issues of affordability combined with a particular trajectory of disengagement often informed other more primary reasons for leaving. Most participants were either excluded by school policies or left because of experiences within school, often culminating in a final event of leaving. Both participants' lived experiences of social inequalities within schools, as well as their own "coming of age" outside of schools, reflected in themes such as motherhood, pregnancy and living with a partner, often led to their leaving school early. Themes herein are situated in Smyth and Hattam's (2004) recognition that adolescents often experience two strands of identity formation, which they call "becoming somebody." These ongoing processes of identity formation focus both on forming a sociocultural identity and on transitioning to economic

independence. As the findings herein show, these strands of becoming somebody often clashed with the specific ways, through school practices and policies, schools set about “making somebody.”

Beliefs about both the legitimacy of a school and the utility of the diploma in helping one navigate the transition from school to work figured prominently. These beliefs reflected both the colonial legacy of an unequal secondary school system, as well as perceptions of the current socioeconomic realities, in this case influenced heavily by a local economy based primarily on tourism. Participants’ assessments of the way one attains a certain type of job, largely based on either social capital or a much higher degree, diminished the value of a high school diploma as a terminal degree.

These findings illustrate the need to give priority to the commonly silenced perspectives of early school leavers as a way to understand how they experience school and how they think about and negotiate the school to work transition. Furthermore, this research demonstrates that early school leaving must be looked at, as Erickson (1987) discussed, as “co-constructed.” Leaving school early was not something that participants did on their own, but rather schools - their policies and practices, often resulted in excluding the same students whom they sought to serve. Both the schools and the perspectives of early school leavers reflect the larger historical, sociocultural, and economic forces of which they are a part. As this research indicates, taking the larger context into account is necessary to gain a better understanding of the questions investigated herein.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In Belize there is increased attention being given to what is happening with students between the year they enroll in secondary school and the year they are supposed to graduate. At the end of primary school, students are not required to continue on to secondary school, as school is only mandatory until the age of 14 or upon completion of primary school. Expenses associated with both primary schools and secondary schools include fees, books, uniforms, transportation, and food. With higher fees, and in most cases tuition charges, secondary schools represent a larger financial commitment on the part of the parents, or sponsors, than primary school. While one might assume that the financial burden of tuition in secondary school would deter many students from continuing on to secondary after primary, this is not the case. From 2011 to 2014 transition rates from primary into secondary schools ranged between 82% and 90% (Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports [MoEY], 2015). However, as reported in the most recent five-year educational plan for Belize, the Belize Education Sector Strategy (BESS) (MoEY, 2012a), only 57% of the incoming class was still enrolled by Form 4¹ (p. 10).

As in most nations, education in Belize is seen by many as both the gateway to a better future on an individual level, as well as the key to a more socially cohesive and economically competitive citizenry. However, as Crossley and Tikly (2004) have noted,

¹ This is based on the 2009/2010 data, the latest available at the time the BESS (MoEY, 2012a) was written.

many of these educational systems at the “so-called periphery of the global economy and politics” have been shaped within their particular colonial encounter. Policymakers must grapple with the “colonial legacy on the one hand whilst simultaneously engaging with the demands posed by rapid globalization on the other” (Crossley & Tikly, 2004, p. 151). In Belize, formal education emerged as a partnership between various churches and the state, whose respective original intentions of imparting morals and having a “well-disciplined labor force” coincided (Bennett, 2008, p. 3). Since colonial times, state policy toward education was generally laissez-faire, and for the most part, education was the purview of the churches. Eventually the colonial government, and later the post-independence government of Belize, took a leading role in primary schools through their efforts to both improve their quality and make primary school education universal. However, for a long time the state’s role in secondary schools remained limited to the granting of scholarships. Because the purpose of secondary schools was originally to serve the upper echelons of society, state involvement at the secondary level progressed at a much slower rate than that of primary. Until recently, international education policy continued this hands-off policy toward secondary schools by focusing mainly on primary schools. Nevertheless, today there is a concerted effort, reflected in the MoEY’s current reform plans, to make secondary education a possibility for everyone.

Currently, educational policy in Belize is influenced by the larger global trends of neo-liberalism (Apple, 2000; Spring, 2009), particularly the linking of education to development and economic goals. Public discourses often feature education as inextricably linked with the goal of eradicating poverty and reducing crime. Underlying the link between education and development in Belize is human capital theory and its

promises of economic competitiveness and social cohesion in the “global knowledge economy” (McGrath, 2010, p. 237).

The current education reform plan, the BESS (MoEY, 2012a), was created in partnership with the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB) and laid out three main policy objectives for the MoEY’s reform agenda. These goals, applicable to all levels of education, were: 1) increasing equitable access, 2) improving the quality and relevance of education, and 3) strengthening governance throughout the sector with an emphasis on increased student achievement. The goal of equitable access in the case of secondary schools involved a joint project with the International Development Bank (IDB) to refinance secondary education in order to distribute government funds more equitably to schools. The hopes for these changes are high, as stated on the MoEY’s website, “Over time, this reform will put an affordable high school within reach of all Belizean children. It will also lead to increased enrollment rates and lower dropout rates – and fight crime, violence and poverty” (MoEY, 2013).

Increasing secondary completion rates is seen as the key to reaching the larger goal of expanded and more equitable access to secondary school. It is speculated in the BESS that reforming the financing of secondary education should “change attitudes” toward dropout and repetition (MoEY, 2012a). Responsibility for lowering dropout rates is placed primarily with the schools, whose administrators and teachers “need to better understand the causes and put in place actions to address them” (MoEY, 2012a, p. 25). As stated in the BESS (MoEY, 2012a), it is assumed that the main reform objectives focusing on quality and relevance of the curriculum, increased governance and

accountability, as well as clearing the financial obstacles to secondary school will together increase the completion rates.

While national ministries of education seek new ways to hold schools accountable for their students' successes and failures, they too are held accountable by the various international agencies that help design reform plans and lend money to implement them. The need for measurable outcomes in project evaluations favors quantitative research over qualitative, a preference which often results in losing the most important "contextual assumptions on which best practice learning is based" (Jules, 2005, p. 5). In the case of students leaving school prior to completion, there is little to no attention given to understanding the early school leavers'² perspectives on why they left school. Rather, the plan is to "maximise the incentives" to schools to reduce repetition and dropout (MoEY, 2012b, p. 4). This approach discounts early school leavers' perspectives, effectively silencing their voices. Furthermore, it assumes that the issue of early school leaving is a problem that rests entirely between the school and the student, and ignores the fact that students have both a relationship to the school and their larger sociocultural and economic context. Although everyone is up against both similar and distinct structural opportunities and constraints, each one of us has some amount of agency with which we act. Assuming that reintegration programs, creating higher quality schools, and even making schools more affordable will lead everyone back to school ignores not only the complexity of the issue, but also the early school leavers' perspectives which undoubtedly inform their actions.

² For purposes here, leaving school prior to graduating from high school with a diploma will be referred to as *early school leaving* and "dropouts" will be called *early school leavers* (Clandinin, Steeves, & Caine, 2013). This is further discussed in Chapter 3.

Research Focus and Questions

This exploratory, qualitative, multiple case study focused on 21 early school leavers between the ages of 14 and 30 who resided on what will be referred to as “Paradise Caye” in Belize. I chose to focus on participants here as they shared a unique set of opportunities and obstacles with regard to schooling. Until recently, opportunities to attend secondary school for caye residents were limited to living off the caye with family members or commuting daily. Particularly in the latter case, this was usually only an option for those of higher SES background who could afford the additional transportation fees. In 2008, Paradise High School (PHS) opened, making secondary education much more accessible for caye residents. Participants in this research attended multiple high schools, but the majority, 15, attended PHS only or another school followed by PHS.

While PHS had a relatively high annual tuition, it opened specifically to address the inaccessibility of high school for many local residents. As such, PHS had multiple scholarships and work-study programs, as well as a policy of not turning away students based on financial need. School administrators actively tried to find financial sponsors for students, and have fostered many relationships with foreign and local sponsors. As a former teacher at PHS, my interest in this topic emerged from knowing students who left school for a variety of reasons that did not seem to be reducible to financial burden.

The purpose of my dissertation research is to better understand the perspectives of early school leavers on why they left school early, their experiences of school, and the purpose of school in their lives. Participants met with me three separate times, first for a discussion about the study, second for a semi-structured interview and lastly, for

member-checking and a follow-up survey. This research focused on three main questions:

- 1) How do early school leavers describe why they left school early?
- 2) How do early school leavers describe their experience of school?
- 3) How do early school leavers describe the purpose of school?

This research is intended to both fill a gap in the literature regarding early school leavers and their perspectives, in particular, as well as to re-present and re-insert their contextualized voices into the more dominant discourses of educational policy.

Many studies of early school leavers operate on “unquestioned assumptions” about the meaning of school in early school leavers’ lives (Clandinin et al., 2013, p. 40-41). In contrast, this study begins from the premise that any understanding of why students don’t finish secondary school is incomplete without first understanding how early school leavers think about school. Focusing on how students experience and make sense of school in their lives is rarely given priority in policy and often overridden by efforts to improve the “quality” of school, to be ascertained at some later date by measurable outcomes. However, these improvement efforts often rest on assumptions about the purpose and experiences of school that are not necessarily shared by the students.

The way in which a student interprets their experience of school and its purpose in their lives is grounded in their own sociocultural, economic and historical context. Desirable, unnecessary, fundamentally important, obligatory, irrelevant, or merely a way to stay out of trouble, however school is perceived, both as an ongoing experience and as serving a purpose, tells a lot about how students see their lives and what is significant to

them. Their perspectives will index and emerge from aspects of the present time and place, as well as the historical and sociocultural specificity of schooling in Belize. As “exiles of school,” early school leavers have often had the opportunity to critique and reflect on their experiences and also have more interest and less restraint in sharing their opinions (Fine & Rosenberg, 1983).

Defining the Scope of the Research

The research herein takes a critical, dialectical approach in that it seeks to tie in these early school leavers’ perspectives to their larger social context. In an interview, Comaroff noted how critical scholarship is sometimes labeled “pessimistic,” which “confuses critical engagement with an affective state” (Comaroff & Kim, 2011, p. 172-173). As she explained, however, “critical analysis is a *positive necessity* [emphasis added] if we are to understand social conditions, and such understanding is a prerequisite for any responsible ethical engagement, any politically relevant intervention” (Comaroff & Kim, 2011, p. 172-173). Social structures and human agency exist within a dialectical relationship, and thus people are not simply acted upon or constrained but their actions may intentionally or unintentionally reproduce or alter the social structures. As McLaren (2003) has emphasized, “dialectical theory attempts to tease out the histories and relations of accepted meanings and appearances, tracing interactions from the context to the part, from the system inward to the event” (p. 193). Thus, the “role of critique” can be envisioned as “the excavation of the wider structural forces—and the unequal social condition—that configure the various worlds we observe and write about” (Comaroff & Kim, 2011, p. 173).

Thus, while this research focuses on the varied and complex perspectives of early school leavers, I make a concerted effort to tie these to their larger context. Early school leavers and their perspectives on their experiences, beliefs about school, and why they left it are windows into the dialectic of these historically specific structures and the different forms of agencies exercised within different circumstances. Furthermore, these perspectives index the historical, economic, and sociocultural particularities within which their school experiences, beliefs about its purpose, and reasons for leaving school emerged.

Although discussed here as early school leavers, the participants are in no way one clearly defined group, nor do I hope to portray them that way. Rather, this research is an effort to extricate that homogenized category of “dropouts” from the larger economic and development discourses which silence and misrepresent them, and resituate their stories in the sociocultural, historical and economic context in which they are a part. Because educational policy is often based on misleading, vague views of why students leave school early, it is hoped that these perspectives will illuminate a path for larger social and educational policies to work toward transforming schools and conditions in society to make being in school—and completing it—desirable, worthwhile, and rewarding.

Brief Introduction to Belize

As a former British colony and the only Central American nation with English as its official language, Belize is considered both part of Central America and the Caribbean. Although originally home to the Maya, and located geographically within Central America, the diverse makeup of races and ethnicities primarily from the two

regions lends itself to this dual designation. Following the Spanish and then British incursion into what is now Belize, the earliest immigrants included African slaves—often brought by way of Jamaica, the Garinagu³—of both African and Arawak descent originally from St. Vincent, and the various groups of Maya -fleeing oppression in neighboring countries.

Achieving the right to self-govern in 1964 with formal independence following in 1981, Belize maintains strong ties to Britain, who, along with the UN, supported its right to sovereignty in the face of territorial claims made by Guatemala.⁴ Belize's government is a Westminster parliamentary democracy modeled after the British system, with two main political parties - the People's United Party (PUP) and the United Democrat Party (UDP), neither of which is divided solely along ethnic or religious lines. The PUP, originally led by George Cadle Price, formed in 1950 in opposition to colonial rule and played a major part in negotiating and achieving self-rule in 1964 and then independence in 1981. Currently, the UDP is the ruling party under the leadership of Prime Minister Dean Barrow.⁵

³ Although commonly referred to as the Garifuna people, the proper term is Garinagu, as the term Garifuna refers to the culture and language of the Garinagu.

⁴ These claims are ongoing and are particularly intense during times of Guatemalan elections.

⁵ Most often, the Prime Minister of Belize is the leader of the majority party in the Belize House. In addition, six of the 12 senators are picked with the Prime Minister's advice, three by the Opposition leader, and three others representing special interests. Thus, the Prime Minister, in practice, has control over both the Senate and the House of Representatives, with the Governor General, representing the queen, who can refuse to sign and enact laws, but has never done so since independence (Harrison, 2015b).

Geography

Bordered in the east by the Caribbean Sea, in the north and northwest by Mexico, and in the south and west by Guatemala, Belize has a total area of 8,867 square miles, roughly the size of Massachusetts and twice the size of Jamaica. Its tropical climate is marked by a rainy season from May to November and a dry season from February to May. The low-lying Maya Mountains in the southwest, with the highest point at 3,688 ft., drain eastward to the mangrove swamps along the coast. Belize's coast is protected by the 190 mi. long Belize Barrier Reef, part of the second largest coral reef system in the world, the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef System. The Belize Barrier Reef, part of which has been a World Heritage Site since 1996, includes 450 cayes, three atolls and seven marine reserves.

The Belize River bisects northern and southern Belize, meeting the Caribbean Sea at the site of the former capital and most populated urban area, Belize City. Regularly hit with one or two major hurricanes every five years or so, Belize is subject to severe flooding, particularly in the western and southern regions of the country. One infamous hurricane, Hurricane Hattie, made landfall in Belize City on October 31st, 1961, as a Category 4. The damage it caused was so extreme—flooding the city, killing over 300 people, and damaging most of the buildings—that the nation's capital was later relocated inland to Belmopan.

Population and Ethnic Diversity

As of September 2015, Belize's total population was estimated at 370, 300 (Statistical Institute of Belize [SIB], 2015a). Today Belize still has the lowest population

density⁶ in Central America with 15 people per sq. km. of land area and 54% of the population living in rural areas (World Bank, 2015). This can be compared to Jamaica, roughly half the size of Belize, with 251 people per sq. km.⁷ Belize's population has been growing, in part due to increased immigration from neighboring Central American countries. Many Belizeans today consider themselves to be of "mixed" ethnicity. Reflecting this, the *Belize Population and Housing Census* of 2010 allowed respondents to indicate their membership in up to two ethnic groups (SIB, 2013). Those who considered themselves Latino/Spanish/Mestizo were by far the largest ethnic group at 52.9% followed by the Creoles at 26%. The three Mayan groups—the Kek'chi, Mopan, and Yucatec—together are 11.3%, with the Garinagu representing 6.1% of the total population. Other ethnicities include Asian, Black/African, Caucasian (Mennonites and ex-patriots primarily from the US and Canada), East Indian, Hindu, and Lebanese (SIB, 2013, p. 19).

Belize has six administrative districts, each with their own distinct economic activities and predominant ethnicities. Toledo, the southernmost district bordering Guatemala, is where the majority of the Maya live. There are also East Indians and

⁷ Unlike other countries in Central America, Belize escaped the Spanish colonizers' latifundia system, which privatized large tracts of land in the hands of the few. While it was common throughout Belize's history that only small groups of elite had title to the land, there was also a significant portion of land designated as crown lands and set aside for the British Empire. This too was a policy of denying whole groups of people, particularly the Maya and the Garinagu but also freed slaves, land ownership. However, these crown lands later became National Estate lands, some of which would eventually be designated reserve areas, and others made available for Belizeans to apply for leasehold title. Thus, while Belize also shares a history of elite landownership, there were nevertheless more public lands available after independence (see Iyo, Mendoza, Cardona, Cansino, & Davis, 2003).

Garifuna along the coast. Rice, corn, peas, and more recently cacao is produced here. Stann Creek, north from Toledo along the coast has many Creole, Garinagu and Mestizos. Large plantations of bananas and citrus, as well as shrimp farms are in operation here. This district includes the coastal tourist destination of Placencia, various Garinagu villages, and the larger town of Dangriga. The Belize District includes Belize City, where 20% of the country's total population lives, the outlying villages, and the popular tourist destinations of the nearby cayes. The majority of the population in the Belize District is Creole. Bordering Guatemala in the west, the Cayo District has the twin towns of San Ignacio and Santa Elena, the Mennonite town of Spanish Lookout, as well as Belize's capital, Belmopan, in central Belize. The Cayo District has a well-developed tourism industry with many eco-resorts and featured activities focused on visiting its rivers, caves, and archaeological sites. In the northwest, the Orange Walk District borders Mexico and Guatemala. It has a predominately Mestizo population and sugar cane, grown for export, is the primary industry. The Corozal District to the far north also borders Mexico and boasts the Commercial Free Zone (free trade zone) next to the official main border crossing with Mexico (Halcrow Group, 2010, pp. 10-11). Similar to Orange Walk, the sugar industry and now increasingly tourism, are playing a large role in Corozal's economy.

Linguistic and Religious Diversity

While the official language of Belize is English, meaning among other things that the majority of newspapers, television and radio shows, legal matters, and significantly, classroom teaching, are conducted in English, not everyone can speak it. In fact, only 63% of the population over three years of age can speak English well enough to hold a

conversation (SIB, 2013). Kriol, traditionally the vernacular language of Belize, is spoken by 45%, with 57% able to hold a conversation in Spanish. Roman Catholicism, although on the decline, continues to be the predominant religion of Belize, representing 40% of the population. According to the census, the second largest group of people in the religion category report having no religion (16%), followed by other (9%), Seventh Day Adventist (5%), and Anglican (4%)⁸ (SIB, 2013).

Political Economy

As a Commonwealth country, Belize is a member of the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM) as well as the Central American Integration System (SICA). It is also a member of the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Group of African, Caribbean and Pacific Countries (ACP).⁹ Belize is a UN member and is considered a small island developing state (SIDS). These are usually defined by a population under 1.5 million. The six criteria for being designated SIDS, as outlined by the Commonwealth Secretariat and the World Bank, provide a useful overview of why Belize is considered “developing”:

- Remoteness and insularity
- Susceptibility to natural disasters
- Institutional capacity constraints resulting from the lack of human capital and the lack of economies of scale

⁸ Religions practiced by between 4% and 1% of the population in descending order are Mennonite, Baptist, Methodist, Nazarene, and Jehovah’s Witness.

⁹ As a member of the ACP, Belize can receive funding from the EU to “reduce the adverse impact of the withdrawal (or reductions) of preferential access arrangement for its agricultural products resulting from World Trade Organization rulings and changing EU policy” (Halcrow Group, 2010, pp. 13-14).

- Limited economic diversification, which also involves a low degree of employment diversification. The small states economic pattern gives importance to the service sector, often tourism.
- Openness, which for small economies results in a high level of external dependency, socioeconomic and cultural vulnerability, and emigration. Remittances remain a major ingredient of the small states growth model.
- Income volatility and poverty. Although there is no definite evidence of higher levels of poverty among small countries, their external dependency and vulnerability lend themselves to considerably uncertain income levels.

(Atchoaréna, Dias Da Graça, & Marquez, 2008, p. 168)

Belize's economy has traditionally been based on agriculture and fishing with marine products, sugar, citrus and bananas being the chief exports. Tourism in Belize began around the 1960s but was not actively developed until the 1980s. It is now Belize's primary industry and has surpassed all expectations with a record-breaking 1.2 million tourist arrivals for 2014 (Humes, 2015). Discoveries of oil in Belize beginning in 2006 have also added to the GDP growth, however production has recently been decreasing. Expansionary policies in the 1990s and early 2000s, including privatizations, borrowing and budget deficits, provoked a debt crisis that resulted in restructuring the debt in 2007 (Halcrow Group, 2010, p. 27). Belize struggles with a large trade deficit and has one of the largest debt to GDP ratios (79.6% debt in 2014), which hinders its fiscal spending. The combination of "heavy foreign debt burden, high unemployment, growing involvement in the Mexican and South American drug trade, high crime rates, and one of the highest HIV/AIDS prevalence rates in Central America" are all major concerns for the Belizeans (Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], 2015).

Poverty, Unemployment and Crime

Currently, Belize has the third highest per capita income in Central America, however there is a large difference between the wealthy and the poor. Forty-one percent

of the population lives in poverty and the unemployment rate as of April, 2015 was 10.1% (April is one of the busiest months for the tourism industry)(SIB, 2015b). The labor force is estimated to be about 120,500 persons, of which 10.2% work in agriculture, 18.1% in industry, and 71.1% in service (CIA, 2015).

Belize is consistently among the top ten countries in the world for homicides per capita, with an average of 40 per 100,000 residents (US Dept. of State, 2015a). To put that in context, however, seven of the top ten countries are located in Central America (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], Research and Trend Analysis Branch, 2014). Violence in Belize is largely attributed to the presence of more than a dozen gangs located primarily in Belize City. In 2015, Belize was ranked the third most murderous country in the world with almost 45 murders per 100,000 people, just below Venezuela and Honduras. Almost half of these murders occurred in the south side of Belize City as different gangs competed for the control of drug trafficking. However these homicides are not contained to Belize City, nor are all gang-related. As such, “a key government objective remains reducing poverty and inequality with the help of international donors” (CIA, 2015). It is no surprise, then, that education has a role to play in this.

The Educational System of Belize

The school system in Belize has developed in a unique way through a state partnership with various churches, in particular the Roman Catholic Church. Reflecting both the nature of its past colonial relationship to Britain and its continual dependency on outside sources for funding, this church-state partnership remains intact today although it has changed somewhat over time. In the recent BESS, it is mentioned that the church-

state system of management makes it difficult to establish standards and raise quality (MoEY, 2012a, p. 5).

Based on the British model of education, Belize's school system is basically divided into four levels: pre-school, primary, secondary and tertiary. There are also nine adult and continuing education programs and six vocational schools (MoEY, 2015, p. 3). Schools are distinguished from one another based on the way in which they are funded. Schools are funded and run by the government, government-aided (which applies to church-run schools), or private/specially assisted. Currently, the government pays for 100% of teacher salaries at all government run schools and government-aided primary schools, as well as 70% at government-aided secondary schools (Halcrow Group, 2010, p. 167). Schools charge fees to make up for the non-funded portion, as well as operation and maintenance costs of the school in general.

The Government of Belize (GOB) currently allocates 27.1% of its overall budget to education, second only to finance and economic development at 28.8%. As a portion of its GDP and in comparison with other developing nations, Belize's expenditure on education is high (Metzgen, 2014, p. 25). Of this, 47.1% goes to primary, 27% to secondary, and 12.1% to tertiary education (MoEY, 2015, p. 51-52).

Primary School

Primary school consists of eight grades, beginning with Infant 1 and 2, and followed by Standards 1-6. There is no straightforward correspondence between the Belize and the US system.¹⁰ Currently there are 300 primary schools – 202 are

¹⁰ Although it is commonplace to assume that Std. 6 is equivalent to Grade 8 in the US, based on years of attendance with Inf. 1 representing Kindergarten, Std. 6 is equivalent to

government-aided, 39 are private/specially assisted, and 59 are funded and run by the government (MoEY, 2015, p.3). There are 67,707 students enrolled in primary school with a Gross Enrollment Rate [GER]¹¹ of 97 (MoEY, 2015, p. 18). A high GER correlates with a high rate of repetition, and the most recent GER is the lowest in five years. The total repetition rate is 6.3% for primary, down from 7.1% in 2009/10 (MoEY, 2015, p. 65). The primary school Net Enrollment Rate [NER]¹², which shows the percentage of primary school-aged children (5-12 years old) enrolled in primary school, is 86.3, and like the GER, is at its lowest in five years. The primary school completion rate was 74.5% in 2014, thus approximately one quarter of the students entering with their cohort did not finish in the prescribed eight years, either repeating or leaving early (MoEY, 2015, p. 73). The student-teacher ratio for primary students is 22.1 and a total of 67.6% of primary school teachers are trained (have completed formal professional training in education), up considerably from 44.1% in 2010/2011 (MoEY, 2015, p. 77).

The “Grammar of Schooling” in Belize

Current pedagogical and disciplinary practices that are part of the “grammar of schooling” (Tyack & Cuban, 1994) in Belize are linked with the school system’s emergence within a British colonial system. The “grammar of schooling” refers to the way school has been experienced and how this both shapes ideas about how it should be

Grade 7. Based on age, however, it is closer to Grade 6 as students are supposed to finish primary by the age of 12 if they start Inf. 1, as prescribed, at the age of five.

¹¹ This figure is calculated by taking the total number of children, regardless of age, enrolled in primary schools nationally, and dividing it by the total population of 5-12 year olds. (MoEY, 2015, p. 61).

¹² The NER takes the number of primary school-aged children and divides that by the total population of 5-12 year olds.

and presents an obstacle to doing things differently in schools (Tyack & Cuban, 1994). Similar to Freire's (1970/1994) transmission model of teaching and Haberman's (1991) "pedagogy of poverty," the traditional approach to teaching in Belize, and one that is continued in most schools today, involves an authoritarian teaching style utilizing direct instruction and rote-memorization (Näslund-Hadley, Alonzo, & Martin, 2013, p. 24).

It is worthwhile to briefly mention practices that are part of the grammar of schooling in Belize, but not necessarily something everyone would be familiar with or expect. The following observations are based on my own experiences as a parent, a researcher, a tutor, and a teacher. Most primary schools in Belize have exams in every subject that contribute to a significant portion of a student's overall grade. In many schools, students are ranked relative to other class members every year starting in Inf. I. In some cases, the day that parents come into school to pick up their children's report cards, these rankings are written on the board. Although usually only the first ten students are written on the board, a student's own rank is commonly noted in the report card. This practice is largely unquestioned even though it influences the way students see themselves and others. For instance, one can often hear students differentiating between the "smart" and the "dumb" students and often "the class genius" or the "know-it-all." Ironically, the mere practice of ranking often discourages any potential critique of the school curriculum and pedagogy and instead points the finger at both the students and their families. Thus, those proud parents of students who rank high are satisfied and complacent while those parents at the other end of the spectrum are invited to see the low rank of their child as a failing of their own, a logic reinforced by the mere existence of the "top ten." This practice is mentioned in conjunction with the ubiquity and importance

of exams as they both reinforce one another. Exams are a large portion of a student's grade and thus a student's rank in school.

A practice more commonly criticized is that of rote memorization as the primary pedagogical technique (Näslund-Hadley et al., 2013). The form which rote memorization takes in Belize is fairly extreme. Often teachers write a topic such as "Landforms" on the board, under which they write ten or more numbered sentences about landforms that the students must memorize. Statements often include other concepts or vocabulary that are not discussed or related to one another. Students are then expected to know the sentences verbatim and the test that they receive will either require them to fill in the blank or to write the same sentences in the exact form that they memorized them. This practice is contrary to one of developing schema with a focus on deeper and relational understanding.

Furthermore, the notion of Bruner's (1960) spiral curriculum is employed in a way that results in both revisiting the same topics year after year and introducing inappropriately advanced material at a young age. An example is the recurring solar system model that students have to build each year. Although, the intention is to add more depth to previous knowledge, this is often limited to the addition of a few more complicated sentences to memorize and/or adding more detail to the solar system model. Often these projects are recycled and passed down to sisters, brothers, cousins and friends. The other misuse of the spiral curriculum has to do with the fact that coverage of material is given primacy over taking the necessary time, particularly in math, for students to understand a concept prior to moving to the next one. For instance, it is not uncommon for many students to finish Std. 6 without knowing their multiplication table,

and if they do know it, often only procedural understandings are obtained. This also has to do with the amount of material teachers are expected to cover throughout the year and their limited resources and time for planning, among other factors. All of these observations do not apply to every student or every school, however it is hoped they provide insight into some dominant patterns in the Belizean education system.

Standardized Tests

Belize Junior Achievement Test (BJAT)

Standardized tests administered nationally also influence curriculum, pedagogy, and school culture. Students take the Belize Junior Achievement Test (BJAT) at the end of Std. 3. Parents are notified of exam results the next year and the exam is not intended to have any influence on whether or not the student proceeds to the next grade. Results, however, reflect the school's overall performance and thus the exam often affects the curriculum to a small degree in Std. 3. Furthermore, there is an assumption among many parents that a student has to pass the BJAT to progress to Std. 4, even though this is not supposed to be the case. Reflecting this concern, BJAT preparatory classes are sometimes offered to students outside of class and/or school.

Primary School Examination (PSE)

At the end of Std. 6, all students must take the Primary School Examination (PSE), formerly the BNSE (Belize National Selection Exam). The PSE is a criterion-referenced exam that assesses a student's understanding of skills and curriculum content in English, Math, Science, and Social Studies. It is administered over two days, usually about six weeks apart. This exam has a huge effect both on the curriculum and the pedagogy in both Std.s 5 and 6, and most likely earlier grades. It is common in Std. 6 for

students to stay after class for PSE preparatory classes or attend on the weekends. Some schools offer these extra PSE prep classes after school for free and students are strongly encouraged to attend. Often the option of paying for additional classes or a private tutor exists for those who can afford to do so. Results on the PSE are used in conjunction with principal recommendations and report cards to gain entry to secondary schools in Belize.¹³ The more prestigious schools have only a limited number of spaces available and thus the PSE can be seen as a “high stakes” exam. The results play a large part in determining eligibility for scholarships, either granted by the schools themselves or one of the many businesses or NGOs in Belize that have scholarship programs.

The PSE results are published annually and widely discussed in the newspapers, television, and radio with the top PSE scorers and respective schools often interviewed on the nightly news (“PSE results ...”, 2014). Besides reflecting on the schools and students, the PSE shines light on the overall state of primary education in Belize. In 2014, 51% scored a C or better, achieving the Satisfactory Level, while only 36% did so in Math.

Secondary Education

Secondary school consists of four years, called “Forms.” There are 56 secondary schools in Belize, of which 27 are government-aided, 12 are private/specially-assisted, and 17 are government-run and funded. The following statistics are based on the most recent education statistics (MoEY, 2015). The percentage of trained teachers in secondary schools has risen, up from 30.3% in 2010/11 to 39.6% in 2014/2015. The student-teacher ratio for secondary school was 15.9. Total enrollment for secondary

¹³ See Barrow (2012) for a detailed discussion of how this exam is seen and experienced by students.

schools was 21,644 students for 2014/15. The most recent transition rate from primary school to secondary for the year 2014/15 was 82.5% (male 79.6%, female 85.3%). Notably, this transition rate is down from the higher 86.8% reported when the BESS was written (MoEY, 2012a). The repetition rate in secondary school was 7.2% for 2013/2014, with a dropout rate of 8.3%. In both cases, more males repeated and left school early, with 8.7% of males repeating compared to 5.8% of females, and 10.3% of males leaving early as compared with 6.5% of females. The secondary GER for 2014/15 was 66.3% up from 64.2% in 2003/04. The NER was 52.1%, up from 49.6% in 2010/11. The secondary school completion rate in 2014 was 61.1%, up from 60.1% in 2010, but down from 63.3% in 2013. As a measure of the secondary education system's efficiency, the secondary school completion rate looks at the proportion of a First Form cohort that is expected to complete within the prescribed four years. As such, 39.9% of those entering First Form will not complete secondary school in four years, due to both repetition and dropout.

Standardized Tests

Toward the end of Fourth Form, students who wish to continue their studies at a tertiary institution sit the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate Examination (CSEC). The Association of Tertiary Level Institutions in Belize (ATLIB) can also be taken, as well as the SAT and the American College Test (ACT). None of these tests affect graduation, and upon successful completion of Fourth Form, a high school diploma is granted. Performance on the CSEC is similar to that on the PSE in that a greater number of students reach satisfactory levels on the English A examination versus the Mathematics. Out of those students who sat for the CSEC exams in 2014, 73% achieved

satisfactory levels on the English A portion, while only 63.7% did so in Mathematics (MoEY, 2015, p. 56). Urban schools outperformed rural schools by roughly 20.1% on the English and 18.6% on Math. Beginning in 2014, the MoEY committed to paying for up to six CSEC exams for students currently enrolled in Form 4.

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is accessible to both those who have completed secondary, for the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) programs, or for those from various levels of education entering pre-vocational programs (MoEY, 2012a, p. 11). Thus, it sits awkwardly somewhere between the secondary and tertiary level of education, perhaps a sign of its ambiguous articulation with the other levels of education. There are currently six Institutes for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (ITVETs), one in each district in Belize. Students at ITVETs range in level of education between having completed secondary to not having completed primary. There are also others seeking skill upgrades and/or certification in specific fields of training (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2014). Enrollment in ITVETs, at only 577 persons nationally, is largely male-dominated, with females representing only 21% of those enrolled (MoEY, 2015, p. 47). Each center, however, has a capacity for an enrollment of 200. As discussed in the BESS:

The broader issue regarding TVET is the sub-sector's articulation with secondary education and the prevalent and persistent view that TVET options are for the less academically inclined student, who opt for this as a last resort having failed to secure a place in a junior college, or in regular secondary school. (MoEY, 2012a, p. 11)

Belize offers the National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) exams, and as of 2014 the government paid up to three exams for students who were currently enrolled in an ITVET.

Tertiary Education

Originally, as in the rest of the British Caribbean, a fifth year called “Fifth Form” existed, and it was during this year that the Cambridge Ordinary or ‘O’ level exam was given. Today, school at the tertiary level is a two-year post-secondary program called “Sixth Form” which grants an Associate of Arts degree by the US Association of Junior Colleges, after which graduates may continue on at the university level. Following secondary school, students also have the option of entering a university directly; however, many opt for the Associate’s degree first, as they can apply most of their credits to a university program if they choose to continue.

At the tertiary level, government-run and government-aided schools represent 95% of schools with a total enrollment of 8,562 (MoEY, 2015, p. 48). There are eleven junior colleges along with three universities—the University of Belize, the University of the West Indies, and Galen University. While more young women are enrolled in secondary than young men (11,351 female to 10,293 male), the greatest disparity exists in the junior colleges and universities where males make up only 38% of the total enrollment (MoEY, 2015, pp. 48).

CHAPTER TWO: A HISTORY OF BELIZE

The importance of including a section on the history of Belize in this dissertation cannot be understated. Without a meaningful context in which to understand the participants' perspectives, it is easy to reify or romanticize student voice by taking it at face value (Cook-Sather, 2006). I provide this context in the spirit of Geertz's (1973) "thick description," which is worthwhile revisiting here. Within the tradition of qualitative research, it is not uncommon to see "thin description," basically a plethora of detail, in the place of the "thick description" it is claimed to be. Geertz (1973) used the example of the many possible interpretations of a wink to explain the difference:

But the point is that between what Ryle calls the "thin description" of what the rehearser (parodist, winker, twitcher . . .) is doing ("rapidly contracting his right eyelids") and the "thick description" of what he is doing ("practicing a burlesque of a friend faking a wink to deceive an innocent into thinking a conspiracy is in motion") lies the object of ethnography: a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which twitches, winks, fake-winks, parodies, rehearsals of parodies are produced, perceived, and interpreted, and without which they would not (not even the zero-form twitches, which, *as a cultural category*, are as much non-winks as winks are non-twitches) in fact exist, no matter what anyone did or didn't do with his eyelids. (p. 7)

While Geertz's focus is on ethnography, his emphasis on contextual meanings is not limited to any one discipline and is particularly important when working in cultures other than one's own. The themes in this research would be misunderstood without attention to the historical, sociocultural, and economic context in which they emerged. One reason is that contextualization is essential for a deeper understanding of the themes. Another often overlooked reason is that to describe, for instance, what participants said,

even with a lot of “thin description,” without attempting to understand their meaning in context would be unethical. This would result in readers referencing their own cultural logics and most likely making incorrect assumptions and judgments. Thus, while even within one’s own culture it is inconsiderate to take what someone said “out of context,” meanings and understandings can be even more distorted when the realities participants face and the different contexts, which inform perceptions of these realities, are omitted.

What follows is not meant to be a thorough, chronological overview of Belize history, but rather a historical framework for understanding education in Belize with particular attention to themes relevant to this research. Historical accounts are often limited to political and economic events due to the limitations of primary documents, the authors themselves, and the purpose for which written material was often produced, among other factors. Thankfully, Belize has a small group of historians and anthropologists who have drawn on historical documents with a critical eye and sought to include the perspectives, experiences, and influences of those “without history” (Wolf, 1982). I will do my best to include these when it relates to this work.

Earliest Inhabitants

While various groups of hunter-gatherers lived throughout the Americas originally and are arguably the “earliest” human inhabitants, the earliest civilization in what is now Belize was that of the Ancient Maya.¹⁴ From Central Mexico in the north to El Salvador in the south, the Ancient Maya civilization began to develop roughly around

¹⁴ The Ancient Maya is the term used to refer to the Maya prior to contact with the Europeans. This is not to suggest that any contact with the Europeans now made them “modern,” but is common practice in writing about the Maya to help avoid confusion.

¹⁴ It is commonly taught that the slaves fought only on the side of the Baymen, however, slaves fought on both the Spanish and the British side of the battle (Shoman, 1994).

2000 BC. The Maya flourished during the Late Classic Period, roughly 550-850 AD, but abandoned most of their large civic-ceremonial centers in the Terminal Classic (AD 850-950) (Lucero, 2002, p. 814).¹⁵ The abandonment of these large civic-ceremonial centers, however, cannot be equated, as it often mistakenly is, with the disappearance of the Maya themselves. Rather, any reference to the “collapse of the Maya” should be interpreted as a “decline or transformation of the political, economic and social system” (Shoman, 1994, pp. 4, 16).

At the time the Spanish arrived, there were many distinct groups of Maya with their own languages and socio-political systems. The Spanish first attempted to conquer the Maya of Belize in 1531 in the area of what is now northern Belize, but the Maya drove them out the following year (Shoman, 1994, p. 9). What developed in the years following this was, as Shoman (1994) called it, a “dual frontier” with the Maya existing in both the colonized north (present-day Mexico) and the more “unruly” south that is now Belize (Shoman, 1994, p. 6). Thus, various Mayan groups coexisted alongside the Spanish and the British. The relationships each had with the Europeans took different forms at different times, including but not limited to resisting, trading with, and fighting with and against each other. Indigenous women endured and suffered the conquest through rape and torture, as well as forced unions with the Spanish to secure dominion through their Mestizo offspring (Shoman, 1994, p. 9). By 1700, the Spanish had succeeded in conquering many of the Maya further south and west into present-day Guatemala. In the process, they decimated the population through both war and disease.

¹⁵ Lucero (2002), among others, suggested the demise of the Maya had to do with a regional drought and the control of water resources. Recent evidence from an underwater excavation at the Blue Hole of Belize supports the theory of a severe and lengthy drought (“Belize’s Blue Hole...,” 2014).

As both Bolland (1988) and Shoman (1994) have discussed, many Belizean historical texts downplayed or completely denied the presence of the Maya and the Spanish in Belize prior to the arrival of the British. The assumption that the Maya had abandoned Belize by the time the British came has been utilized by those in power to deny the Maya right to communal lands, a rejection of the truth that has been repeatedly contested by the Maya.¹⁶ Today, there are three main groups of Maya living in Belize – the Yucatec in the north, the Mopan in the west, and the Kek’chi mainly in the south. The claim that the Maya were not here when the Spanish arrived is often corroborated by an emphasis on the subsequent immigration of Maya refugees from the north and the west at different points in time after the arrival of the Europeans.

The Mestizos are descendants of both the Maya and their European colonizers. However, as in Mexico, Guatemala, and elsewhere, the Mestizos distanced themselves from the Maya in an effort to secure their own niche in a more advantageous socioeconomic and political position. The fight for the Maya’s right to their land has been a long one. On April 22, 2015, the rights of the Maya in the Toledo district to their communally owned land were finalized after a long series of court battles and following the appeals to the same decision in 2010 (Ramos, 2015).

Territorial Disputes Between the Spanish and British

Many works on Belize begin with Huxley’s (1934) frequently heard quote, “If the world had any ends, British Honduras would certainly be one of them. It is not on the way from anywhere to anywhere else. It has no strategic value. It is all but uninhabited”

¹⁶ For more detailed information on this struggle, see the Julian Cho Society’s website at http://jcsbelize.org/pages/landRights_links.php

(p. 32). However, not only was it very much inhabited by the Maya as just discussed, but also after the arrival of the Spanish and the British, it was a place in which “smuggling, profiteering, and bold experiments in self-government” occurred (Bushnell, 2002, p. 23). Belize was both on the periphery of the war between Spain and England, and at the same time a place where lands were claimed, resources were exploited, and boundaries were continually drawn and contested, most often violently. As Wilk (2006) explained, “this Atlantic world in the 200 years after Columbus was the scene of a capitalist free-for-all, a sloppy scramble for control of native peoples, lands and all the things that could be extracted from land and sea and sold for a profit” (p. 28). Belize emerged within a dialectic between the local and the global. Any visions of a people cut off from the rest of the world that arise upon hearing “periphery” belies the reality of the mix of people from all parts of the globe and its position within the larger sociopolitical and economic relations of the day.

While Spain had a monopoly on lands in the New World during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the English fought to secure lands already claimed by the Spanish. The Anglo-Spanish War saw England’s failed attempt to take over Hispaniola. From here they sailed and stayed in Santiago, now Jamaica, which the Spanish failed to retake. Privateering, the legitimate and commissioned raiding of another country’s ships for plunder, was in full swing in the ongoing struggle for power. The death of England’s leader, Oliver Cromwell, in 1658, followed by the reinstatement of the Stuarts and the end of the Anglo-Spanish War in 1660 brought an end to privateering, and commercial opportunism gave way to formal navies. The Treaty of Godolphin (1670) between Spain and England formally outlawed privateering and declared all territories in the West Indies

already occupied by the English to be English possessions. For privateers, the treaty instantly made their work unlawful, however many would continue on as “pirates,” raiding ships without the backing of the state. For those already residing in “Honduras Bay,” what Belize was called then, the treaty had the unintended consequence of legitimating their claim to the land, even though it was not considered part of the West Indies (Wilk, 2006, p. 30).

Wilk (2006) noted that after most of the indigenous population in the Americas had been drastically reduced in numbers through disease and slavery, and before large numbers of African slaves were involved, the European poor were brought to work as servants and indentured workers, many of whom died or fled. Those fortunate enough to escape, along with former privateers, were called “buccaneers”:

Buccaneers sought the margins of settled society, in lawless port towns, distant and lightly inhabited or unclaimed cays and coasts. They hunted and fished for food, meat or hides they could sell, joined navies and privateer ships in search of plunder in times of war, smuggled, robbed and brawled. These people did the dirty work of mercantile capitalism. While investors and governments focused on plantation agriculture, the marginal population were entrepreneurs who explored new territories and resources; they took huge risks, locating and selling products that were widely scattered and hard to find, which could not be exploited by large settled firms. (Wilk, 2006 p. 29)

Those buccaneers living in Belize became known as the “Baymen.” Many had previously stolen logwood from Spanish ships but now extracted it themselves from the freshwater swamps. As the source of a purple and black dye in high demand in the textile industry in Britain, logwood was extremely valuable. The Spanish living north of Belize continually tried to dislodge the Baymen, who were, as agreed upon in various treaties, not to settle or farm the area. In the early 1700s male African slaves were brought to do the seasonal work of extracting the timber for the Baymen (Bolland, 1988, p. 20). Two

thousand more slaves arrived in 1787 after the British agreed to evacuate settlers on the Mosquito Coast along with their slaves, as agreed to in the Treaty of Versailles of 1783. Around this same time, however, the demand for the dye from logwood was being eclipsed by a demand for mahogany, a more labor-intensive process of extraction, requiring and resulting in yet more slaves being brought to Belize (Shoman, 1994, p. 23).

A battle in the last series of Spanish attacks is known and now commemorated annually as the “Battle of St. George’s Caye” on Sept. 10th, 1798. In this battle, a small group of Baymen and their slaves fought off 500 Spanish sailors and 2,000 troops. This battle is considered by many to be the “origin myth” of Belize (Bolland, 1988; Shoman, 1994). The term “myth” is not intended to deny that the battle took place but rather that it has been repeatedly referred to as the inception of modern Belize. Specifically, the Battle of St. George’s Caye has been invoked throughout Belize’s history by different groups in order to emphasize the good relations between the colonizers and the Creoles, and to differentiate the Creoles from others in the colony, legitimating their own authority (Shoman, 1994, pp. 124-130). The story of cooperation between the Baymen, the freed men, and the slaves to fight off the Spanish is part of a larger mythology that slavery in Belize was of the more “benevolent” variety. This battle was the last attempt by the Spanish to move the settlers from the Bay of Honduras. As Bennett (2008) noted, following this battle the unstable environment gave way to “a greater sense of security among the settlers and a readiness to establish a stronger social foundation in their community” (p. 11).

Pre-colonial Education

In the early 1800s, a small group of wealthy British settlers formed a merchant class, which still benefited greatly from the logwood and mahogany trade (Bennett, 2008, p. 11). These settlers are referred to as the “forestocracy,” a term that emphasizes the settlement’s timber-based economy and is juxtaposed to the elite “plantocracies” of plantation-based colonies. The forestocracy controlled the political economy of the Belize settlement, owning four-fifths of the land and half of all slaves. An 1816 census stated the population of the settlement was 3,824, with a breakdown of groups based on an 1823 census as follows: “217 Whites, 809 Coloureds, 613 Blacks, and 2,468 slaves” (as cited in Bennett, 2008, p. 11). The slave trade was banned in 1807, and the next two decades saw the slave population decline from three quarters to half of the total population (Shoman, 1994, p. 40). This decline was due primarily to “a high mortality rate resulting from disease, malnutrition and ill-treatment; suicide and abortion; escapes; and manumission,” (three quarters of those who achieved freedom through manumission were women) (Shoman, 1994, p. 40).

Unlike other plantation-based colonies, because the economy was based on timber extraction, there was a sharper division of labor between women and men. According to a slave register in 1834, almost 90% of male slaves between age 20 and 59 worked in woodcutting, with most women involved in domestic work (Shoman, 1994, p. 41). Male slaves, who greatly outnumbered their colonial masters, had the most opportunity to escape, and many of them did. Women, however, often employed more subtle forms of resisting slavery in their everyday practices and language (Shoman, 1994, p. 45). The seasonal nature of work required men to work away from their families for months at a

time. According to Bennett (2008), the boys born into slavery started working at a young age, while the girls did the same with regards to domestic work (pp. 18-19). Cultural ties to Africa were still strong, and freed slaves organized themselves into nations representing their various tribes of origin. African-influenced language and folklore was a large part of youth's informal education. Creole, a mixed English-African language, developed as the spoken language, and "must have presented significant cultural resistance to the elementary school at the time" (Bennett, 2008, p. 18).

Purpose of School

Between the years of 1816 and 1892, formal education emerged as a partnership between church and state (Rutheiser, 1990). While those governing the Settlement of Belize helped to establish the first school, education in Belize was in no way intended to have a secular bent. Rather, as in so many other places, it was started as a civilizing mission on behalf of different missionary groups, whose primary concern was converting people to Christianity and instilling Christian values. The establishment and management of schools was part of a "vigorous competition of religious denominations for the souls and bodies of the inhabitants" (Rutheiser, 1990, pp. 53-54).

The ruling elite, most of whom sent their children back to England for school prior to the emancipation of the slaves, had intentions for schools that integrated well with those of the churches (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 19). For the forestocracy, imparting a sense of morality was critical given the impending emancipation of the slaves and the threat they seemingly posed (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 51). According to Hitchen (2002) and Bolland (1988), education's main purpose, at the very least from the point of view of the forestocracy, was that of social control rather than the "betterment" of the people. The

words of Reverend John Sterling made explicit the fear of freed slaves and the need to have “power over their minds” through morality. As Sterling communicated, too much knowledge was seen as a threat:

Their performance of the functions of a labouring class in a civilised community will depend entirely on the power over their minds of the same prudential and moral motives that which governs more or less the mass of the people here. If they are not so disposed to fulfill these functions, property will perish in the colonies for lack of human impulsion – There has been – a great increase of the desire for knowledge – its certain result will be a consciousness of their own independent value as rational human beings without reference to the purposes for which they may be profitable to others. (as cited in Hitchen 2002, p. 21)

In Belize, the forestocracy maintained a laissez-faire policy toward education from the beginning, allowing the churches to be in full control of the schools. As Comaroff and Comaroff (1997) explained, missionization in various parts of the world initiated a reorientation of perceptions of “money and goods, work and wants” (p. 22). This internalization of a different set of values aligned itself well with the social control that the ruling class hoped education would bring about.

The First Schools

Beginning as a missionary effort, education in the Belize Settlement was taken up by members of various denominations in Belize. The main religious denominations involved in the beginning were the Anglicans, the Methodists, and the Baptists. As members of the Church of England, the Anglicans built the first church in the Bay of Honduras, St. John the Baptist Cathedral, in 1812 (Bennett, 2008, p. 11). Four years later, the Honduras Free School was established for twelve children of free parents. Notably and unlike most other colonies, the first school to formally open in the Settlement of Belize was the result of a *joint effort* on behalf of the Settlement’s Board of Governors, namely the Superintendent of the Settlement and his Magistrates, and

Chaplain Armstrong of the Anglican Church (Bennett, 2008, p. 10). While most other primaries were opened and operated by churches, this initial relationship between church and state would foreshadow a long partnership that still exists in Belize today.

The opening of the settlement's first school was soon followed by the opening of more primary schools in Belize Town, both by the Methodists, in 1822, and the Baptists, in 1829 (Rutheiser, 1990). Whereas the Honduras Free School was completely financed by the government, the schools of other denominations relied on missionary societies and volunteer workers (Bennett, 2008, p. 16). This was later altered in 1840 when government funds were approved to support schools of other denominations (Bennett, 2008, p. 17).

As far back as the establishment of these first schools in Belize Town, there was already rivalry between denominations regarding school enrollments, which would drop with the opening of every new school (Bennett, 2008, p. 15). This duplication of schools would be, and still is to some degree, an issue that would be brought up throughout the history of the Belizean education system as inefficient and expensive (Hitchen, 2002). Early inter-denominational rivalry also existed at an ideological level, as the Baptists and the Methodists were considered "non-conformist" religions ministering primarily to slaves throughout the West Indies. Their work was a part of the anti-slavery movement in England that eventually led to the Abolition Act (1833) and the subsequent full emancipation of slaves throughout the British territories (Bennett, 2008, p. 14).

On August 1, 1838, all the slaves of the British settlers throughout the colonies and territories, with a few exceptions, achieved full emancipation. Freed slaves, however, still remained dependent on their former owners in many ways. Free land

grants had been given up until 1838, but with emancipation this practice was halted and land was now priced, which kept the newly freed slaves from owning land (Bolland, 1988, p.71). Furthermore, laborers were forced to enter into work contracts of six to twelve months, a practice which kept them economically dependent through a system of wage advances and company-owned stores (Shoman, 1994, pp. 53-54). In this way, those in control of the mahogany gangs were ensured their labor force after emancipation.

Beginning in the early 1800s, different groups of people immigrated both voluntarily and forcibly to Belize. While the Anglicans concentrated their efforts in Belize Town, the Baptists and Methodists expanded their missions inland and along the coast to work with these newly arrived populations. By this time there was also a growing settlement of Garinagu, on the southern coast in what is now Dangriga. As descendants of Carib and Arawak peoples of Africa and the Lesser Antilles, the Garinagu were deported by the British from St. Vincent and left on the Bay Cayes of Honduras. From there they spread out along the Caribbean coast, with approximately 150 Garinagu arriving in Belize in 1802. Their numbers increased further when, in 1832, another group from Honduras arrived (Shoman, 1994, pp. 71-76).

In addition, the Caste War between various groups of Maya and the Spanish in the Yucatan broke out in 1847 and lasted until 1901 (Bolland, 1988, p.102). Throughout the ongoing war, thousands of Mestizos and Maya refugees moved into primarily northern Belize. The more recent settlement of the caye on which this study took place happened at this time and many descendants of the most prominent families trace their arrival to this time period. While Catholics were present in the colony in the early 1800s, they had no school, church, or priest until 1851 when priests were sent from Jamaica to work with

the incoming Maya and Mestizo refugees of the Caste War, who had settled primarily in what is now Orange Walk and Corozal (Bennett, 2008, p. 17).

Education in the Colony

Largely due to the influx of people fleeing the Caste War, the population grew from roughly 3,000 to 4,000 in the first part of the nineteenth century to around 37,479 by the end (Bennett, 2008, p. 33; Shoman, 1994, p. 71). By 1840, there were about 700 children in school, less than half of the estimated 1,300 children in the settlement (Bennett, 2008, p. 16). By 1901, 3,423 children were enrolled out of 9,000 school-aged children in roughly 38-40 primary schools in the colony.

In the 1850s, the demand for both mahogany and logwood dropped and settlers experienced an economic depression. At the same time, British firms, most notably the British Honduras Company (in 1875 their name changed to Belize Estate and Produce Company), took control of land and commerce (Shoman, 1994, pp. 93-94). As the British gave up other territories in their possession, they officially claimed the Settlement of Belize with a formal constitution in 1854. It became a British colony in 1862 and was renamed British Honduras, a name that the country would have until 1973. The continued Maya uprisings and attacks led to members of the Legislative Assembly agreeing to give up their right to self govern for the promise of security that Britain could offer (Shoman, 1994, p. 95). Thus, in 1871 British Honduras became a crown colony, ruled by a governor appointed by the British monarch.

The church-state system of primary schooling was first formally established in the Act of 1850, which allowed for a Board of Education to be appointed by the Superintendent. In 1868, the Colonial Governor of British Honduras and his Executive

Council became officially in charge of the colony's schools (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 67). In an effort to reform the educational system to conform to those of the other British territories, the Board of Education was eradicated altogether in 1868, replaced by the centralized control of the colony's Executive Council (Bennett, 2008, p. 25). A "payment by results" system of paying teachers on the basis of school attendance and their success on annual exams was implemented and the pupil-teacher system, also used in England, was heavily relied upon. The pupil-teacher system was one in which local teachers were hired first as pupil teachers. After passing various examinations, they could become qualified teachers, first with second-class teachers' certificates, and eventually with first class teachers' certificates (Bennett, 2008, p. 6). Curricular outlines were developed, as were systems for teacher certification and school financing (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 67). As Bennett (2008) explained, much of what happened in terms of organizing education mirrored similar educational experiments in England (p. 27).

In the 1880s and 1890s, groups of Kek'chi and Mopan Maya escaping forced labor in Guatemala settled in central and southern Belize. According to Bolland (1988), by the turn of the century, the various ethnicities and their associations with different regions throughout the country were in place. Belize Town had predominately Protestants who spoke either Creole or English and were primarily of African descent. The rural areas in the north and west had mainly Maya and Mestizos who were Roman Catholic, and the Garinagu, speaking Garifuna, English, or Spanish, lived on the southern coast. The East Indians lived both in the rural southernmost district of Toledo and Corozal, and the Mennonites settled in Cayo and Orange Walk (Bolland, 1988, pp. 196-197).

Around the same time, also in the late 1800s, both the Catholics and the Anglicans broke their connections with Jamaica. The Jesuits in Belize were directed and organized from Missouri and Mississippi (Hitchen, 2002, p. 378). The large numbers of Catholic Mestizos and Maya emigrating from the Yucatan prompted American Jesuits to establish schools in their newly formed inland communities, and Roman Catholicism quickly became the second largest religion. At the same time during the 1890s, the Anglican Church expanded into every district except Toledo in an effort to equal the Methodists and Roman Catholics in their missionary endeavors (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 65). The Methodists worked primarily along the southern coast with the Garinagu and the Creoles, as well as in Punta Gorda, where some American Confederates had settled after losing the Civil War.

The government and the denominations officially re-established a church-state partnership in the Education Ordinance of 1892, reflecting the relationship the two already had in place (Rutheiser, 1990). This ordinance re-created the earlier short-lived Board of Education, this time made up of the Colonial Governor as President of the Board, members of the Executive Council and five other Governor-appointed members (Bennett, 2008, p. 27). The power still rested primarily, however, with the different churches due to the Board of Education being dominated by denominational representatives (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 67-68). The “payment by results” system was considered unsuccessful in England and as such, modifications were made to the system in the 1870s with it finally being terminated in 1897 (Bennett, 2008, p. 27).

Religious and moral instruction through character training was the main focus for education in the 19th century. Accordingly, the curriculum was narrow, focusing on “the

basics of reading, spelling, writing, arithmetic, grammar, geography, outlines of history, and needlework for girls” (Bennett, 2008, p.6). Teaching at this time followed along the lines of Freire’s (1970/1994) transmission mode of education, and Bennett (2008) noted importantly how a “tradition of authoritarianism” was formally instantiated in the schools. The Board of Education authorized teachers and ministers to discipline and control students both inside and outside of school, and even outside of school hours to “further the goals of education and the improvement of the children in all schools” (Bennett, 2008, p. 6). Bennett (2008) hypothesized that the limited preparation of teachers, combined with their authority to discipline in such a manner, contributed to the authoritarian style of teaching and the use of corporal punishment (p. 6).

The years between 1893 and 1930 were characterized by the “intensification of denominational rivalry, the benign neglect of the colonial state, and the ambition and growing influence of American Jesuit missionaries in the field of education” (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 54). While the colonial state continued its laissez-faire policy toward education, primary school education expanded drastically, mainly in the rural areas. The American Jesuit efforts to expand primary education into the interior gave them the most influence of the denominations within the church-state partnership. Schools built in the rural areas, however, were inferior in every way to the schools of Belize City. As Rutheiser (1990) noted, “the school system helped perpetuate both social inequality and the geographical dominance of Belize City over the other areas of the country” (pp. 86-87).

Rutheiser (1990) argued that the Jesuits “introduced an alternative metropolitan orientation that ... challenged British cultural hegemony” (p. 54). This orientation, coupled with Belize’s growing economic relationships with the US, laid the groundwork

for more US influence in schools (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 54). While the extent of this influence is arguable, Jesuit schools did align themselves with US tertiary institutions and made available the US standardized tests to their students.

According to Rutheiser (1990), "...Belizean education carried within it the seeds of a crucial contradiction" (p. 68). While "nominally" the state, here represented by the colonial authorities, controlled the "administrative structure and curricular form" of schools, it was the different religious denominations that in actuality had control of the schools (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 68). This church-state partnership was fraught with political tension. In the case of the American Catholic Jesuits of Belize, there was an anti-British sentiment that added a political element to the competition between denominations (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 69).

Secondary Education

Unlike the first primary school that was formed as a joint venture between church and state, neither the first secondary school nor many of the schools to follow were even partially controlled by the state. Rather, secondary schools were run by churches, or in some cases considered simply private institutions. The only financial assistance from the state was based on the successful performance of students on the Cambridge Local Examinations and was given in the form of bonuses to their schools or teachers (Bennett, 2008, p. 46). In 1882, the Methodists opened the first secondary school, Wesley High School for Boys, in Belize Town. With only five students enrolled and difficulties obtaining a teacher considered suitable from England, Wesley closed twice for different lengths of time before reopening finally in 1922. The school's curriculum was based heavily on the Cambridge Overseas Exam (Rutheiser, 1990, pp. 69-70). As Rutheiser

noted (1990), Wesley graduates went on to fill low-level civil servant and merchant positions and formed the basis of a Creole lower middle class (pp. 71-72).

The opening of Wesley was soon followed in 1883 by the opening of a Catholic school, St. Catherine's Academy for Girls. Another school for boys was begun by an English Jesuit in 1887 and taken over by the American Jesuits in 1896. This school, St. John Berchman's College, referred to as "St. John's," was built with the intention of serving Central America, not just Belize, and thus had boarders from neighboring countries. The Catholic schools were aligned with US Jesuit institutions and often the most promising graduates attended Jesuit universities in the US (Rutheiser, 1990, pp. 70, 72). By 1902, seven secondary schools existed in Belize Town (two of which were secular) along with other small ones in the outlying district towns (Bennett, 2008, p. 46).

According to Rutheiser (1990), although secondary schools were still a minor part of the larger school system, the fact that the three major religions sought to develop secondary education in the 1920s exacerbated denominational rivalry "...simultaneously creating and confirming an emerging middle class" (pp. 75-6). Unlike the first primary schools, opened to educate primarily the lower classes, secondary schools were explicitly for the more socially and economically privileged. As Rutheiser (1990) explained:

Whatever their religion, ethnicity, or school affiliation, virtually all secondary school students in this early period shared membership in the privileged sectors of Belizean society. Owing to the relatively high fees and the abrupt cessation of the government scholarship program in 1901, secondary schools were populated almost exclusively by the offspring of merchants, land owners, timber contractors, and civil servants and other relatively privileged groups residing in Belize City. (p. 72)

While the possibility of attending secondary schools was just emerging for a few select groups of students, the state made its first authoritative move in 1915 to make

primary school attendance compulsory in certain areas. At the time, about one third of students were absent from primary school on a daily basis, and state assistance to schools was based on attendance. The political climate changed, however, with a riot in July of 1918. Returning WWI Belizean veterans rioted against their continued political, social and race-based exploitation at the hands of the colonial authorities, and a strong Garveyite movement flourished during the 1920s (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 79). During this riot, younger boys also participated in the looting, prompting colonial officials to identify both “juvenile vagrancy” and the consequent imprisonment of more and more youth as a growing problem (Bennett, 2008, p. 49). One month after the riot, in August of 1918, an Industrial School Committee was formed to look into establishing a reformatory school for boys (Bennett, 2008, p. 52).¹⁷

The educational policies that followed the rioting were created with social control in mind. As part of an effort to exert colonial rule in the furthest reaches of British Honduras and at the request of the churches, the law making primary school compulsory was extended to the entire country in 1920 (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 77). This law was part of a larger effort to bring colonial authority into the interior, simultaneously strengthening the state and the denominations in their missionizing efforts (Rutheiser, 1990). Increased enrollments, however, also meant that the churches were now responsible for making room for more students.

At this time, many considered secondary schools as an appropriate option only for those residing in Belize Town. Bennett (2008) drew attention to a memorandum from the

¹⁷ It opened in the spring of 1927 with the goal of employing students in “productive work and service,” but later closed due to poor management, financial troubles, and its basis utilizing the free labor of students for commercial purposes (Bennett, 2008, p. 52).

Secretary of State for the Colonies dated August 27th, 1929, which supported this belief. The Secretary of State for the Colonies identified the low quality of teaching in rural primary schools, the necessity of students having to leave home to attend a secondary school, and the fact that scholarships would inevitably be granted to school graduates from Belize Town as three factors that would impede rural students from attending secondary schools (Bennett, 2008, p. 47). Thus, the Secretary concluded that the small numbers attending secondary schools, coupled with the low quality of education in primary schools, was actually a benefit to British Honduras. Policy recommendations reflected this belief that primary school was to be the terminal institution for many students. It was suggested that primary schools be disconnected from secondary schools, and more practical studies be introduced into the primary school curriculum (Bennett, 2008, p. 48). Furthermore, scholarships to secondary schools should not be offered nor should primary students be encouraged to attend secondary. The Colonial Secretary explained his reasoning:

If educational effort was directed solely towards the obtaining the maximum number of Cambridge Local Examination Certificates, and to swelling to the maximum the number of recruits eligible for employment at a desk, business houses and the public service might soon be besieged by a swarm of applicants for whom, in the majority of cases, it would be impossible to provide careers, and British Honduras might soon be added to the list of territories suffering from a parasitic pseudo intelligentsia. (as cited in Bennett 2008, p. 47-48)

Economic Depression and Education Reform

The years between 1931 and 1949 were characterized by economic depression and labor unrest. The short-lived spike in US demand for mahogany and chicle (made from the sap of the sapodilla tree and used for chewing gum) was followed, according to the Colonial Report of 1931, by a huge drop in demand (Rutheiser, 1990). To make

matters much worse, a hurricane hit Belize Town on September 10th, 1931, killing roughly one thousand people and destroying three-fourths of all housing. The downturn in the economy, coupled with the hurricane, created conditions that fostered a new labor movement aimed at addressing labor conditions and the continued exploitation of workers. This labor movement, however, was not led by the middle class as those colonial authorities fearing a “pseudo-intelligentsia” might have expected, but rather by the unschooled, working men and women of the lower class (Rutheiser, 1990; Shoman, 1994, pp. 154-159).

In an effort to remedy the situation, the Colonial Office took direct control over the colony’s finances and issued unpopular cuts in financial support for schools, particularly in teacher salaries (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 81). Situated against the backdrop of revisions in education in British territories worldwide and in response to the displeasure with the financial cuts, the colonial government requested an outside evaluation of the school system.

B.H. Easter, Jamaica’s Education Director, wrote the Easter Report of 1935, combining the criticisms of educational officials in the colony with the larger British colonial focus on making school more “practical and relevant” (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 81). Recommendations for reform focused on curriculum, teacher education, funding, and the supervision of schools. These recommendations reflected a growing concern on the part of the government to make education more relevant socially and economically for Belizeans. This secular focus, however, was at odds with the goals of the different denominations, and any implementation of this goal was hindered by their lack of finances and other means (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 54, 82). Most of the recommendations

were uniformly rejected and would not be implemented for another twenty years (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 82). The Easter Report did recommend a system of grants-in-aid, however, which resulted in the awarding of small government scholarships to secondary schools based on academic performance in 1936 (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 84). Financial need was not taken into account nor did the scholarships initially cover all years of secondary. For the most part, these scholarships went to the students of the more elite primary schools in Belize City and only served to further exacerbate relations between the denominations (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 85).

Bennett (2008) noted that by 1939, “a new concept of aid was developing” that saw the importance of funding social services and education in the colonies (p. 80). The Colonial Development and Welfare Act of 1940 made grants available for what, as the Secretary of State for the Colonies explained, could not be funded by the colonies themselves. Outside educational experts increased in numbers and influenced local educational policy. Their recommendations, however, like those of Mr. S.A. Hammond, the Educational Adviser of the Development and Welfare Organization of Barbados, were not immediately implemented (Bennett, 2008, pp. 31-82). In 1941, Hammond had revisited earlier recommendations, which emphasized the need to locally train teachers in an effort to improve the pupil-teacher system. Because secondary school teachers required some level of tertiary education, secondary schools most often employed non-Belizean teachers, such as Americans, British, and West-Indians affiliated with churches (Hitchen, 2002, p. 249). Teacher training centers, however, weren’t built until 1954 when two were opened simultaneously, run by the government and the Catholic Church separately (Bennett, 2008, p. 90). Duplicating efforts, however, didn’t prove practical,

and in 1965 the Jesuits closed their school at the request of a UNESCO team (Hitchen, 2002, p. 248).

As Hitchen (2002) explained, “allying nationalism and the needs of the work place to education became de jure priority after World War Two” (p. 248). The 1950s and 1960s were characterized by an emerging nationalist movement, the end of the timber industry, and an expansion of educational opportunities (Rutheiser, 1990). On December 31st, 1949, the British Honduras dollar was devalued following the devaluation of the British pound sterling earlier that year. Designed to protect the interests of the larger, transnational companies, the devaluation had the unintended consequences of uniting previously separate groups. Under the umbrella of the People’s Committee, the Creole middle classes, labor, and the nationalists united in opposition to the British colonial administration. This was unlike the 1930s in which political unrest was mainly led by the working class. Now middle class leaders, primarily graduates from St. John’s College, were part of this anti-colonial movement. In 1954, the People’s United Party (PUP – formerly the People’s Committee) won eight of the nine seats in the Legislative Assembly, an event which demonstrated the majority of the population was now in favor of independence (Hitchen, 2002, p. 182).

Throughout the British West Indies, there was ongoing debate about the purpose of education that revolved around the dichotomy of “manhood vs. manpower,” manhood being associated with values while manpower was associated with the workforce (Hitchen, 2002). As Hitchen (2002) noted, “the attitude of developing the individual first in order to strengthen the group was equally represented in British Honduras yet, unlike other Caribbean territories under British rule, the principal representation of the

‘manhood’ argument did not rest with any secular body” (p. 199). Religious indoctrination through schooling was considered the purview of the churches.

While the denominations saw education as a means for developing character and imparting values, the state was by default the champion of education for “manpower,” meaning vocational and technical education that would lead into the workplace. The churches were also in favor of education for productive work within the community as long as it rested on the strong foundation of moral education (Hitchen, 2002, p. 201-202). According to Hitchen (2002), “a work-based curriculum without moral training was unthinkable” (p. 202). However, these moral principles, “...because of their denominational nature, were tolerated as a malignant presence by the British and Colonial governments” (Hitchen, 2002, p. 214). Nevertheless, as mentioned, a common factor did exist among all educational institutions after World War II, namely an emphasis on Belizeanization, linking nationalism to education and the workplace (Hitchen, 2002, p. 248).

The role of the state in championing education for work is made explicit as far back as the Colonial Development Act of 1929 (Hitchen, 2002, p. 198). This stated that Britain could give financial aid to colonial governments for education as long as it was to serve the purpose of developing agriculture and industry with the end goal being to promote economic development in the United Kingdom (Hitchen, 2002, p. 198). Educating in a way that imparted values was nevertheless a common sentiment, as Sir George Steel communicated 22 years later at a conference of West Indian education in December, 1951, “Some, and I am among them believe it to be the one main purpose of education to give future citizens a moral and spiritual background, to assist them in

supporting the burdens of adult life” (as cited in Hitchen, 2002, p. 197). He goes on, however, to mention the importance of technical training to contribute to the community.

In the years closer to Home Rule (1964), the power of the Colonial Government in education gave way to that of the Belizean politicians. While the Protestant churches became more marginalized due to this shift in power, the Roman Catholic Church grew in its influence through its alliance with the PUP and the nationalist movement. Replacing the timber industry, agricultural development, particularly sugar and citrus, received the most attention and investment. The emerging nationalist movement and reorientation of the economy played out in schools. The government opened its first secondary school, Technical High School, in 1952, with its purpose being to align itself with the economic needs of the country (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 88). Technical High School’s curriculum, however, was designed to complement an industrial economy, not the new agricultural economy emerging in Belize at the time. While it was the aim of the Colonial Government to make agricultural training a priority, there was still the obstacle of parents seeking a better life for their children in professional careers (Hitchen, 2002, p. 201). In an examination of the possibility of creating an agricultural school, members of a sub-committee stated, “parents send their children to school not to follow their own unrewarding and backbreaking farming vocation but to pass exams and escape to better things” (as cited in Hitchen, 2002, p. 200).

Rutheiser (1990) noted who attended the first class of the Technical High School in order to show how religion and ethnicity influenced which school one attended. Out of the 41 students who attended Technical High School, 35 were Creole, more than half came from the Anglican and Methodist primary schools in Belize City, with the rest

coming from Protestant schools outside the city or private academies. Only six students came from Catholic primaries in other areas, and it is not documented whether or not the students themselves were actually Catholic (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 89). Those in the upper echelons of society still desired a traditional academic focus and continued to send their children to secondary schools that would impart this type of education (Hitchen, 2002, p. 196).

With the PUP in power, the Department of Education declared a policy of “education for development” (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 90) that translated into a call for universal literacy and an emphasis on the further development of secondary, vocational – technical, and agricultural training (Rutheiser, 1990, p 91). This new practical orientation however, was not implemented due to lack of funding. In fact, the American Jesuits became the main influence over education in Belize, expanding secondary schools into rural Belize as part of a larger effort to train primary school teachers for the Catholic schools (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 91). This expansion into the interior represented an attempt to “...redress the elitist, urban-centered biases of post-primary education that perpetuated not only social inequality, but the historical dominance of Belize City over its primarily rural hinterland” (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 55). Nevertheless, the Jesuits did not neglect St. John’s in Belize City, and expanded it to include a Sixth Form program (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 92).

Anglicans and Methodists sought to increase enrollments at already existing schools, resulting in overall enrollments doubling for all five denominational schools in Belize City between 1945 and 1955 (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 92). Protestants also received the first government grants-in-aid to support financing staff (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 93).

This was followed in 1960 by all secondary schools that met certain government criteria receiving state subsidies, and extended in 1962 to all 15 secondary schools (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 93). Secondary schools almost tripled in number and more than doubled in enrollments from 1955 to 1964, still not meeting the demand for education however (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 93-94). All schools except for one relied primarily on American teachers.

Home Rule and the Road to Independence

On October 1st, 1961, Hurricane Hattie struck Belize City, an event so destructive that it led to the eventual moving of the capital 50 miles inland to Belmopan in 1970. Two years before Belize was granted “Home Rule” in 1964, the 1962 Education Ordinance replaced the Board of Education controlled by the denominations with the Ministry of Education, giving them exclusive rights over the formation of policy (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 96). The Ordinance also declared primary school free and obligatory for children between the ages of 5 and 14, a move Rutheiser (1990) suggested was more symbolic than anything as many parents were not paying school fees anyway. Regarding secondary school, the Education Ordinance stated that while private schools had the right to set their own fees, government schools could do so only with the approval of the Governor in Council (Bennett, 2008, p. 107). Thus, at the advent of independence, the state slowly sought to gain control over the educational system, as “formal control over educational policy and planning passed from metropolitan-born clerics and colonial administrators to metropolitan-trained Belizeans” (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 55). As Bennett (2008) described it, the 1962 Education Ordinance:

was a legal device for the execution of the Government’s educational policy of effecting a national system of education which retained the traditionally accepted

denominational character, but which allowed a greater degree of control by the Government over that system. (p. 110)

In 1964 at the request of the P.U.P., the United Nations completed the UNESCO Education Planning Mission as a part of a larger U.N. Economic Survey Mission (Bennett, 2008, pp. 110-11). Based on a local educational report, the UNESCO report urged more cooperation between church and state, criticizing “the wastefulness of isolated projects, the fragmentation and duplication of facilities, the employment of unqualified heads of schools, and the hindrances to integrated administrative machinery presented by the denominational system” (Bennett, 2008, p. 112). Furthermore, a national Council for Education was recommended to advise the Minister of Education. According to Bennett (2008), nothing novel came out of the UNESCO report, but it did prompt the government to create its own educational plan within the government’s Seven Year Development Plan (1964-1970) (pp. 111). The UNESCO report also emphasized the need to attract foreign investment through improving the qualitative aspects of education (Bennett, 2008, p. 113). The lack of shared standards, trained teachers, relevant textbooks, as well as overcrowded classes and inadequate buildings were all cited as in need of improvement if the “manpower resources of the country” were to be developed (Bennett, 2008, p. 113). Bennett (2008) suggested that the government was “astutely using outside agencies to do its disagreeable work in criticising the church in education by supporting the church but also accepting certain UNESCO observations” (pp. 280-281).

Despite all of this, the various religious denominations still had considerable control over the growth of education, and educational practice did not change much. Demands for education continued to grow beyond the ability of the churches to provide

new and larger schools. Out of necessity, the state finally gained a central role in building new schools and previous competition between churches resulted in greater cooperation between denominations.

As the state gained control over the primary school system, they nevertheless continued to relinquish the establishment of secondary schools to the denominations and private institutions due to inadequate finances (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 97). At this time, the government assisted schools in capital expenditures by matching dollar for dollar. This practice created and maintained inequality in the schools, giving Catholic schools the distinct advantage. As Rutheiser (1990) explained, the Jesuits clearly held sway in the ruling PUP party, while many UDP supporters were the staff and alumni of the Methodist and Anglican schools. Thus, “educational policy and practice cannot be understood outside the context of domestic political conflict” (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 98).

Nor can educational policy and practice be understood outside the influence of the American Jesuits and their own utilization of US educational practice, specifically testing. The secondary school entrance exam utilized by Catholic schools was adopted country-wide by the Belize Association of Principals of Secondary Schools (BAPPS), even in the face of objecting Protestant boards of management (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 99). The American School Testing Service Exam would later be replaced in 1981 by the Belize-designed, Belize National Selection Exam (BNSE). At the same time the American College Test (ACT) was adopted for entry into both the Catholic St. John’s and the government-run Belize Technical College, both having also joined the American Association of Junior Colleges for the purpose of awarding Associate’s degrees (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 100). In addition, a large number of American volunteer teachers

worked in schools via the Peace Corps, CARE, and the Michigan Partners (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 55). Rutheiser (1990) argued that this represented a vehicle for American influence. However, as Hitchen (2002) pointed out in more general terms, it is doubtful that American secular influence was due to teachers, but rather the media, the growing tourist population, and Belizeans returning from the States.

By the 1970s, the government of Belize became more involved with the establishment of secondary and tertiary schools, reflecting their appreciation for education's potential in the quest for independence (Rutheiser, 1990, p.101). School financing increased approximately seven times from the mid-60s to the mid-70s, approximately 90% of which was allocated to teacher salaries. Foreign funding thus remained necessary for building new schools. In 1969, the government founded a three-year junior secondary school, followed by a second in 1972. Both schools had a vocational-technical curriculum and were intended as terminal institutions rather than transitional ones. Instead, these schools ended up serving as transitions to the competitive Belize Technical College and didn't fulfill their intended function (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 103).

In 1979, the first Caribbean Examination Council (CXC) exams were administered to Belizean students. This regional examining council was created in 1972 in an agreement between 15 English-speaking Caribbean territories (Bennett, 2008, p. 126). The exam was intended to replace the British-based GCE "O" level examinations. Because the secondary school curriculum was very much aligned to these exams, it was felt that a Caribbean-based exam and the revised syllabi necessitated by the CXC would allow for a more relevant, Caribbean focus in the curriculum. As Bennett (2008)

explained, secondary school curricula, particularly in Third and Fourth Form, were adapted to these syllabi.

As Hitchen (2002) described, moving the capital to Belmopan was not simply geographical, but also a shift away from the “Creole heart-land to a predominant Mestizo/Maya community” (p. 195). With the move to the new capital of Belmopan, the government created, along with an infant and a junior school, a secondary school, Belmopan Comprehensive, that had a mixed academic and vocational curriculum (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 104). Nevertheless, it also suffered from a lack of funds as well as disfavor as a vocational-technical institution among civil servants who would rather send their children to schools focusing exclusively on academics for later white-collar employment (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 104).

Increasingly, many schools and institutions were merged in an effort to improve efficiency (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 105). This was evidenced in both churches and schools with a building of an Ecumenical chapel in Belmopan and an Ecumenical Commission to bring different denominations together to cooperate for the common goal of education. In the case of schools, growing enrollments and decreasing funds caused some unlikely mergers, such as the Anglican and Roman Catholic secondary schools in Dangriga merging into the Stann Creek Ecumenical High School in 1973 (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 106). Similarly, the Catholic and Methodist secondary schools merged in Corozal in 1971 to form Corozal Community College in 1979, two Anglican secondary schools of Belize City merged, and in 1983, the government built their technical school as a part of the Catholic secondary to form Toledo Community College (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 107).

Lack of planning capabilities within the ministry, political demands, and finances nevertheless hampered many efforts at educational reform (Bennett, 2008, pp. 119-120). As Bennett (2008) explained, schools were funded both by government and church managements, however in the case of the latter, their own external sources were diminishing, causing them to rely more on government funding. Britain's funds in the form of grants and technical assistance continued, but other contributing agencies such as "UNICEF, FAO, CARE, Heifer International, USAID and UWI" provided funding only as long as the life span of a particular project (Bennett, 2008, p. 120).

Beginning in 1980, the fuel crisis of the 1970s caught up with Belize. Combined with the rising number of Central American refugees, Belize's economy saw a downturn reflected in fewer employment opportunities (Bennett, 2008, p. 134). Even so, the government in 1983 was still allocating 21% of its budget to education (Bennett, 2008, p. 134).

Independence and the Post-Colony

On September 21st, 1981, Belize declared independence with the full support of Britain, the US, and the UN in the face of territorial claims made by Guatemala. Around the time of independence, new funds were made available to the Belize government. A series of projects made possible with international funding aimed to improve the quality of education in Belize. The Primary Education Project, funded by the UWI and USAID ran from 1980 to 1984 and focused primarily on reforming, developing, and implementing curriculum (Bennett, 1980, p. 150). The UNESCO Mission of 1983 resulted in and was incorporated into subsequent national education plans. Importantly,

the UNESCO Report (1984) based on this mission laid out the general characteristics of the policy environment within which the Belize government acted to improve education.

As Bennett (2008) noted, the UNESCO Report (1984) listed three main aspects of the policy environment in Belize that influenced educational reform efforts (pp. 188-190). The first was the economy, the growing unemployment, and specifically the necessity for the economy to develop in order for education to do so as well. The second aspect was actual policy and its implementation. The government's advisory board, the National Council for Education (NCE), was considered to be inactive and the government's senior officials in education too busy with administrative duties to give much consideration to educational issues. The third aspect was the church-state partnership, of which the main criticism was the unnecessary duplicating of schools when the scarce resources available should be used more efficiently (Bennett, 2008, p. 191). Bennett (2008), importantly, added a fourth factor influencing the policy environment—the very same international agencies responsible for writing these reports. Bennett (2008) credited them for “pointing out the merits and shortcomings” of the educational system, its policy environment, and significantly, providing technical assistance (p. 207).

Primary Education

Based on the original UNESCO Report of 1984 and following a 1988 World Bank Mission and a change in government in 1989, the Belize Primary Education Development Project (BPEDP) focused on improving the quality of primary education from 1990 to 1998 (Bennett, 2008, p. 135). With a loan of US\$12 million from the World Bank (Bennett, 2008, p. 207), the BPEDP's primary goal was reform at the primary level, and over fifty primary schools were repaired, enlarged, or constructed

(Bennett, 2008, p. 144). Curriculum guides were produced for every class level of primary school, but given limited resources they could only be subsequently revised, and often not implemented (Bennett, 2008, p. 145). Significantly, the Primary Leaving Certificate Examination, a pass/fail exam geared toward measuring the achievement levels of primary school students at the end of primary, was replaced by the Belize National Selection Examination (BNSE) in 1983 (Bennett, 2008, p. 151). As Bennett (2008) explained, it was vague in defining what passing was and many people failed the exam. At the time, a pass was required to become a teacher, a nurse, or a police officer. While improvements had been made to the exam between 1979 and 1983, there were still multiple additional exams required in Std. 6, and thus all became merged in the BNSE as one exam. The BNSE awarded letter grades “based on a systematic profile of the achievement of the candidate in the various aspects and components of the examination” (Bennett, 2008, p. 152). The exam served the “threefold purpose of (i) certification as a school leaving certificate; (ii) selection identification of students of secondary school potential; (iii) scholarship selection of students for the award of government scholarships” (Bennett, 2008, p. 153).

The BNSE was later replaced by what is currently administered in Belize, the Primary School Examination (PSE). Instead of the norm-referenced exam yielding one overall grade, the PSE is criterion-referenced and examines four content areas – Mathematics, English, Social Studies and Science (Bennett, 2008, p. 154).

Secondary Education

The total enrollment in secondary schools doubled from 1970 to 1988, and there were not enough places in schools to meet the demand (Bennett, 2008, p. 157). In 1980,

the transition rate was 55%, but over 40% left school prior to finishing Std. 4. Four new secondary schools with a vocational-technical focus were built in the districts outside of Belize City. Rutheiser (1990) pointed out that it was these four schools, ironically, that remained the most dependent on foreign aid and teachers as of 1987 (p. 110). These schools were meant to alleviate the problem of students having to move away from their communities to attend school. However, these schools didn't fare as well as government-aided secondary schools, which "attracted the best qualified teachers, and enrolled students who ranked among those with the best BNSE results and the best academic transcripts" (Bennett, 2008, pp. 157-158).

Peace Corps volunteers flooded Belize with the UDP victory, creating a backlash among teachers and principals even while most schools accepted them for the financial benefits (Rutheiser, 1990, pp. 112-113). The Peace Corps goal of "meeting skilled manpower needs necessary for development" was coupled with training for the private sector. This was in line with the USAID goal of promoting political and economic ties with the US and other Caribbean nations through their Training for Education and Productivity (TEP) project, which focused on public and private sector management training. As part of this plan, the Ministry of Education was to focus on creating a National Vocational Plan and implementing it in the nine government-run schools with a technical-vocational focus (Rutheiser, 1990, pp. 113-114). The other major source of US influence was the Central American Peace Scholarship (CAPS) program that gave awards for study in the US with the goal being to expose students to "American principles of democracy and freedom" (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 116).

It was not until 1991 that the Ministry of Education developed and ratified a secondary schools curriculum policy, aimed at creating a common purpose and mission for all secondary schools of Belize through finding an acceptable level of standardization (Phillips, 1997, pp. 77-78). Current reform plans continue to have this goal of standardization, although it is yet to be fully realized.

Tertiary Education

Following independence, the PUP planned to merge all post-secondary institutions into a government-controlled Belize College of Arts, Science, and Technology (BELCAST), constructing a campus in Belmopan. The worsening of the economy contributed to the PUP's defeat to the UDP in 1984, however, and this brought about the plan's demise. At the same time, the UDP received loans from the IMF and USAID to stabilize and diversify the economy. The economy continued to fluctuate, however, and the later 1988 World Bank report pointed out the difficulty of financing the educational system within the current economic context (Bennett, 2008, p. 192). The new Minister of Education called the proposed BELCAST a "den of communist subversion" and replaced it with the University College of Belize (UCB) to be established and managed by Ferris State College of Big Rapids, Michigan (Rutheiser, 1990, pp. 110-11).

With each change in government, different policies were implemented, particularly with regards to the different visions held for tertiary education. In 1989, UCB formally broke its ties with Ferris State (Bennett, 2008, p. 178). In August of 2000, what was UCB became the much larger University of Belize with two campuses in Belmopan and Punta Gorda. UB was now made up of the former UCB, the Teacher's

College, the Bliss School of Nursing, the Belize Technical College, and the Belize School of Agriculture (Bennett, 2008, p. 178). This marked a major shift to dependence on the US for educational support and “all forms of financial assistance” (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 111). Thus, as Rutheiser (1990) recognized, just as Belize gained independence and was trying to de-colonize its educational institutions many felt it seemed to be replacing one colonizer for another.

CHAPTER THREE: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Education in Belize is often discussed in tandem with economic development, social cohesion and nationalism, a connection resting on the idea that an economically productive population results from formal education. Unfortunately, education is all too often seen as the scapegoat for *all* of society's economic and social problems. As Mishel and Rothstein (2007) put it, "Education is the answer. But what's the question? Simple: what's the cure for any adverse economic condition?" (p. 32). In the preface to the Belize Education Sector Strategy (BESS), the Minister of Education, Honorable Patrick Faber, questioned why education is not transforming society as expected (MoEY, 2012a). He cited the fact that 25% of Belize's overall budget is allotted for education and yet crime is still rampant, with those in poverty increasing at the rate of almost 1% every year. While Faber admitted that moderate progress has been made, he asserted that education could be more transformative as long as the investments go to changing the "status quo" in education. Concluding, Faber urged, "Let us make this sector strategy about making better schools, better citizens, and a better Belize – it's everybody's business!" (MoEY, 2012a, p. 4).

Education does have transformative possibilities both for individuals and for the society, but all exist within a larger sociocultural, economic, political and historical context that must be considered for anyone interested in fostering these transformations. In this chapter, I examine the challenges that particular forms of globalization in Belize present. Because of its influence on Belize's national education agenda, I will also look

at international education policy, which seeks to reform education as a way of addressing larger development issues. After this I present a brief overview of literature on early school leavers, particularly that which pertains to the findings herein. In addition, I examine the research on early school leavers in Belize. I end with a focus on the importance of including the perspectives of early school leavers in research and policy, and a look at how this can be done through “voiced research” (Smyth & Hattam, 2004).

The Challenges of Globalization in Post-Colonial Belize

The status quo, in the case of the Belizean education system, has a lot to do with the contemporary challenges associated with globalization and the way in which the school system developed within the church-state partnership under British colonial rule. As Crossley and Tikly (2004) explained, “many existing education systems still bear the hallmarks of the colonial encounter in that they remain elitist, lack relevance to local realities and are often at variance with indigenous knowledge systems, values and beliefs” (p. 150). Furthermore, policymakers are at the same time faced with “engaging with the demands posed by rapid globalization,” demands which take their own particular form depending on the larger socioeconomic, cultural and historical context (Crossley & Tikly, 2004, p. 151).

While there are multiple conceptualizations and critiques of globalization, I rely on the ideas of Appadurai (1990, 1996) regarding global ‘flows’ and ‘scapes’ of people, technology, media, ideas and finance. Explaining the meaning of the term ‘scapes,’ Appadurai (2014) noted that it was utilized to insert a perspectival dimension into the “global dynamics” and emphasize “the powerful role played by subjective perspectives in globalization processes” (p. 484). As Heyman and Campbell (2009) discussed in relation

to Appadurai's work, these "global flows" and "scapes" should not be regarded as equal in power, prevalence, or intensity, and often it is economic capital that exerts the most powerful influence. Furthermore, global movements interact with sociocultural, economic and historical processes, which must be taken into account.

Gregory (2014) argued that discourses of globalization often exaggerate the "deterritorialized" status of the contemporary world with respect to the organization of political economies and the reproduction of cultures" (p. 4). As Gregory (2014) explained:

Capital and its production processes may be more portable and increasingly governed by putatively international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the World Bank, but its social division of labor remains firmly anchored in space and importantly, in politics. (pp. 5-6)

In the case of Belize, global flows have many sources and multiple effects, but take their specific forms from their interactions with the historical, political, and sociocultural context of Belize. Furthermore, geographically Belize is differentiated by distinct local economies and thus one community may be interacting with different global flows of people and finance, for instance, than another. While aspects of Belizean history were examined in the previous chapter, Belize has certain characteristics as a post-colony that affect its interactions with processes of globalization. In *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony* (2006), Comaroff and Comaroff noted some commonly shared features of postcolonial societies:

Postcolonial societies, most of them rooted in historically extractive economies, with small bourgeois sectors, low levels of formal skill, and modest civil administrations, have shown varying capacities to profit from mainstream global enterprise. While a few have prospered, many fill a classic neocolonial niche: they are providers of raw materials and cheap labor. But the very qualities that constrain their participation in the world of corporate endeavor—that have

rendered them, as one African statesman put it – “appendages of metropolitan powers” in the global trading regime – have made postcolonies ready and able players in the twilight markets fostered by liberalization. (p. 10)

Borrowing Reno’s (1995) concept of the “shadow state” and Bayart’s (1993) “politics of the belly,” Duffy (2010) has shown how the state in Belize is transformed through its involvement with illicit transnational trading networks, particularly the international narcotics trade. Nations like Belize are linked to the global system, not only in legitimate ways, but also through these illicit transnational trading networks (Duffy, 2010). Bayart’s “politics of the belly” refers to “the way in which political elites use informal and invisible networks to exercise political and economic power” (Duffy, 2010, p. 99). Duffy (2010) argued that “globalization has produced new political, economic, and social forms that interlink local networks with the global economy through an illicit trading system” (p. 97). She looked specifically at “the criminalization of the state, especially the interrelationship between the illicit trade in drugs, offshore banking, and money laundering” (Duffy, 2010, p. 97).

Bordered by countries with “well-organized and extremely violent drug trafficking organizations,” Belize’s vast unpopulated jungle and its hundreds of small cayes make it easy for traffickers to avoid detection by air and sea (US Dept. of State [DOS], 2015b, p. 108). In order to show how the narcotics trade affects Belize, Duffy (2000) argued that Reno’s (1995) concept of the “shadow state” is useful:

Shadow states are constituted by high ranking politicians and a few businessmen without state office (who may be local or foreign business operators) who manage to exercise significant political authority through the private control of resources in informal and illicit markets. Such clandestine circuits sustain powerful political and economic networks, and can be used to manipulate policies designed to attract legitimate foreign investors who then serve to underwrite the emergent shadow state. The informal networks of exchange between these groups cross,

and sometimes shadow, the boundaries of formal state, responsibilities and powers. (pp. 550-551)

Belize has become a popular tourist destination, at the same time that the shadow state has grown through the narcotics trade, money laundering and offshore banking (Duffy, 2000, p. 550). Politically and economically influential people span both the public and private sectors and are involved in protecting and benefitting from their illicit activities. These networks undermine the government's efforts to both implement and enforce legislation to protect the environment, particularly with regards to new tourism developments. Duffy (2010) described a small group of elites, primarily of American, European, Creole, and Taiwanese descent, and their participation in local and global networks, as exerting a strong influence on Belizean politics (p. 100). Both criminal networks and tourism developers, as large sources of external capital, benefit from the deregulation of the international banking system and the growth of Belize as an offshore center.

Much of the violent crime in Belize can be tied to the influx of drugs coming into the country as traffickers are increasingly paid in drugs (Duffy, 2010, p. 105). Belize is no longer a source country for marijuana as it was in the 1980s, although it produces for regional and national use, but it does remain a major transshipment point for illegal drugs and precursor chemicals (US DOS, 2015, p. 109). In 2011, Belize was added to the 'blacklist' of nations considered major transit routes or producers for illegal drugs (Illingsworth, 2015). Counternarcotic efforts are hampered by corruption, difficulties in gathering and analyzing information, and an "ineffective judicial sector" (US DOS, 2015 p. 108). Gang wars in Belize City can account for a majority of the homicides, and in 2012 Belize had the 3rd most homicides, 44.7 per 100,000 people, in the world. Measures

to increase citizen security were implemented in 2012 and are seeing varying degrees of success. These measures were comprised of neighborhood watch groups, community policing, and dividing Belize City into precincts. In 2013, the murder rate decreased by 32% and overall crime went down 11% (US DOS, 2015, p. 108).

Less visible crime exists in the connection between tourism, offshore banking, and drug trafficking, all inextricably linked in Belize:

The US Department of State estimates that at least US\$85 billion in drug profits can be found within the banking system, and the tourism industry has proved to be a place where illegitimate business interests can converge with corrupt public sector managers, because the arrival of tourism is often associated with an increase in crime, prostitution and an expansion in the supply of drugs. Tourism development in Belize has been partially dependent on drug culture in the industrialised world on two levels: recreational drug taking by tourists, and funding of tourist developments by capital derived from dealing and smuggling. The demand and supply routes for drugs, particularly cocaine, have had a significant impact of the direction and rates of development in the tourism industry in Belize. (Duffy, 2000, p. 554)

As Duffy (2010) witnessed, there was a lot of local speculation that “entire resorts were bought with millions of dollars in cash derived from the drug trade” (p. 107). The notion of a Belizean “shadow state” as described by Duffy (2010) is important here because ongoing corruption is not something hidden from the public view and often stories of police, businessmen, and politicians’ involvement in illicit activities make the news. Opinions concerning the situation are often voiced on talk radio and morning television shows. In a report for the IDB entitled *Citizen Security in Belize*, Peirce and Veyrat-Pontet (2013) explained how “rising crime and violence combined with relative inaction and lack of capacity from the state” has affected the public’s trust in both the judicial system (43%) and the police (38%) (pp. 4-5). In a recent op-ed piece to commemorate 34 years of Belize’s independence, Harrison (2015a) urged Belizeans to

get back to their moral and cultural roots, but also drew attention to the lack of role models in Belizean society:

It is hard for young Belizeans to set high ambition when what they experience in their homes, families and neighborhoods amounts to what they consider “failure” in an economic system that is not working for most...where the ones that get ahead are doing all kinds of illegal, unethical and downright unscrupulous things to achieve “success”...where the politically favored with their insider-bloated-un-tendered contracts eat lobster, drink whiskey and travel the world at the expense of the majority that must eat ramen, tacos and meatpies daily to “stretch the dolla” and make ends meet. These become the celebrated hero’s of society that the youth aspire to be like...the example of hard working parents...who toil every day with little to no reward...without “success” in their sights...are having little to no say in what direction their children are taking. (para. 9)

Harrison (2015a) made the important point that adults are not the only ones who perceive corruption among those private and public figures who are supposed to be “playing by the rules” of legitimate business. Children, who are rarely excluded from adult conversations in Belize, grow up hearing about it as well. Not only does this contribute to the idea that it is not necessary to be a law-abiding citizen, but also it can seemingly justify more expedient ways of gaining status and money. Moralizing discourses such as Harrison’s are directed at all levels of society, but the blame, according to Harrison’s op-ed piece, rests on the adults who do not exemplify law-abiding citizens to the youth of Belize. Thus, looking at it this way, crime is not something that goes away with education. Rather, those of higher social status and possibly more education have opportunities to participate in less visible and often more powerful networks. This is not to say, of course, that everyone is involved in crime. Rather the important point is that the perception of corruption’s ubiquity in the government, the police, and among powerful business people, undermines the public’s trust in institutions, as well as in the value of abiding by the law. As Comaroff and

Comaroff (2006) have expressed:

Most postcolonies . . . bear the historical traces of overrule that either suspended legalities or deployed them to authorize predation and criminalize opposition. A decade after the end of apartheid in South Africa, the poor and marginal still look skeptically upon statutes protecting the rich: a large proportion of them see crime as an acceptable means of redistribution (Sissener 2001), even vengeance. (p. 11)

While it is commonly reported that crime is negatively correlated with years of education, it is rarely asked what kind of crime (Näslund-Hadley et al., 2013). As Duffy (2010) has shown, there are many people holding “legitimate” positions in the public and private sector involved in different forms and various degrees of criminality. The public, including those secondary school-aged youth, are not blind to this. While the perception of widespread corruption may inspire utopian visions of a better society in some, for most it seems to generate skepticism and suspicion of the activities of those involved in the public and private sector. As will be discussed, this general perception that there is a lot of underhandedness involved in seemingly legitimate government and business dealings cannot be extricated from participants’ beliefs about school and its purpose.¹⁸

Global Flows: Tourism and Paradise Caye

Belize’s economic future is irrevocably tied up with tourism, which the Belize Tourism Board (BTB) aggressively markets in overseas venues. Because of the multiple protected areas on the mainland and the cayes, Belize rivals Costa Rica as a top eco-

¹⁸ While I do not explore this here, it would be interesting to look at the connections between these moralizing discourses, the public’s perception of corruption and lack of trust in institutions, and character education. Bennett (2008) encouraged policymakers to consult the principles of Belize’s education policy in the *New Education Charter for the 21st Century* (1998). In the charter, character education remains a fundamental goal, “Education must encourage the development of Belizean attitudes and values for productive living, wholesome self-esteem and civic responsibility” (as cited in Bennett 2008, p. 208).

tourist destination. It boasts of both inland jungle destinations, replete with Mayan ruins, as well as sailing, diving and snorkeling along the second largest reef in the world. Some of the first places that tourists visited were the cayes as they visited Central American destinations on the “Gringo Trail” in the 1970s. In the wake of independence, the PUP was not initially interested in tourism as it was associated with neocolonialism and at odds with their goals for post-independent Belize. However, with the UDP victory in 1984 this changed, and developing the country through eco-tourism became a priority (Sutherland, 1996). This interest in tourism development followed a world-wide recession, as well as the IMF and World Bank forcing the UDP government to diversify its economy (Roessingh, Duijnhoven, & Berendse, 2008).

According to Lefebvre (1974), it is necessary to consider places as socially-produced spaces, in which social inequalities are embedded, reproduced and contested through everyday practices. Tourism and the growing presence of ex-patriots in Belize take very different forms depending on the way in which these flows of capital, people, and ideas interact with the local processes of place-making in various locales. The BTB is also in the business of marketing different forms of tourism, particularly the ecology of the mainland and the coast, the ancient Mayan sites, as well as people, who represent either “traditional cultures” or the stereotypical friendly, laid-back Belizean.

In order to understand the way in which local and larger global processes interact, it is important to situate these in the social relations and recent history of the caye. Sutherland’s (1998) work is appropriate here as it focuses on the social and cultural history of the island as told to and observed by her beginning with her visits in the early 1970s. Sutherland (1998) identified two main social distinctions on the caye. The first

distinction was that of islanders and non-islanders, the latter category referring to Belizeans not originally from the caye who began arriving after 1980 (Sutherland, 1998, p. 37). The second distinction was between family members and those outside of the family. As Sutherland (1998) maintained, these distinctions had the economic advantages for islanders of a large social and economic support network of family, a privileged position with regard to land access, as well as membership and credit in the fishing cooperative (pp. 36-37). Furthermore, a new class division emerged between islanders and non-islanders as the “family-based exchange of services” gave way to wage labor in which the newcomers could perform the “most undesirable and onerous labor” that family members used to do (Sutherland, 1998, p. 37).

Many of the earlier newcomers to the caye from within Belize were Creole and Garinagu. While tensions existed between islanders and non-islanders, there was also the division reflected at the national level, that of the “born Belizeans” and non-Belizeans, comprised in part of Chinese, Americans, Canadians, and other Europeans who gained residency or became naturalized citizens (Sutherland, 1998, p. 43). The lowest social group was that of immigrants from neighboring Central American countries. As Sutherland (1998) noted, “islanders viewed these newcomers as interlopers and outsiders, and the newcomers are resentful of the elitist attitude of the islanders, who for the most part, are better off” (p. 43).

Another aspect of social life relevant to this study are the three types of conjugal relationships practiced on the island: Christian marriage, “common-law” unions in which partners live together, and “visiting relationships” (Sutherland, 1998, p. 47-48). This last category is one in which the woman, often living with her parents, has children with only

one man, although the man may engage in other relationships. As Sutherland (1998) noted, if the woman has a child, her partner is pressured to recognize it, and if he can provide a place for them to live, often they will move in together to form a consensual “common-law” marriage (p. 48). Sutherland (1998) also described a common pattern in which young adults start off with a Christian marriage. If a separation does occur, each will find a new partner and live as a common-law union (Sutherland, 1998, p. 48).

It was common for young women aged 15 and over to have visiting relationships. Furthermore, it was acceptable and “although women are expected to form stable unions and have children, the status of a family is not dependent on the sexual purity of its women” (Sutherland, 1998, pp. 50-51). It was not until after the 1980s that women could stay longer in the family locality without being under pressure to find a spouse. With the increasing number of opportunities to work, women were able to work and contribute to the family, even after they entered into a union with their spouse or common-law husband (Sutherland, 1998, pp. 51-52).

Juxtaposed with the larger, more developed neighboring caye, referred to here as San Andrés, Paradise Caye is a distinctly different place, without the large-scale hotels and the large wealthy ex-patriot community, although there is an ex-patriot community. As the first place to be developed by tourism, San Andrés didn’t have the benefit of examples, and many locals sold their properties to foreigners, eventually becoming their employees (Key, 2002, p. 13). On the official website for Paradise Caye, local ownership of businesses is proudly announced:

Despite the growth of tourism, [Paradise Caye] remains a small village with a distinct cultural flavor not necessarily found in large-scale tourist development. Almost all the businesses are locally owned, vehicles larger than golf carts almost never roam the streets, and lodging is small scale and relatively inexpensive

compared to many other tourist destinations. We prefer to keep it this way. We frown upon large-scale development and focus upon the preservation of our unique heritage. ([www.go\[ParadiseCaye\].com](http://www.go[ParadiseCaye].com))

The island's main source of income for years was lobster fishing, and with the formation of the Northern Fisherman's Cooperative in 1960 it became more lucrative. Tourism on the caye, however, has since surpassed lobster fishing as the primary source of income and has certainly shaped the social and physical landscape. While many tourism businesses are locally owned, they nevertheless dominate the landscape, particularly on one side of the southern part of the caye. Restaurants, hotels, B&B's, gift shops, bars, and internet cafes make up this tourist "scape" over a significant portion of the caye.

As a process involving the interchange of ideas, people, capital, and goods, tourism has both intended and unintended consequences. While it can be channeled, taxed, exploited, and marketed by the 'host' state, tourism can never be fully controlled. Tourist encounters, both from the perspective of the "tourist gaze" (Urry, 1990) and the locals' sometimes ambivalent accommodations to tourists, often reshape practices and places in the joint effort of attending to the desires and fantasies associated with "vacationing in paradise." In order to understand how this works, it is worth first looking at what level most locals enter into the tourism industry.

Key (2002), utilizing the framework of dependency theory (Frank, 1967) and seeing tourism as having a three-tiered organizational structure, looked at the transition from a fishing economy to a tourism-based economy in the southern coastal village of Placencia. This has many parallels with Paradise Caye, both affected by the same issue of overfishing, a decrease in profits of lobster and conch after 1990, and a transition to

tourism. As explained by Key (2002), the top of the organizational structure involves the “transport, airlines, tour, hotel and tourism supplying companies” controlled by the developed economies, whereas the middle is represented by “branch offices of the developed countries firms operating with the local tourism counterpart” (p. 5). At the bottom of the hierarchy are the “small-scale tourist enterprises of the destination countries” (Key, 2002, p. 5).

Key (2002) examined social change in Placencia and the way that these larger global flows of people, ideas, money, and goods resulted in both a formal and an informal economy. As Key (2002) explained, “tourism inflicts tremendous changes on the local populations who eventually must adapt to feed, house and entertain tourists” (p. 5). For women in particular, working in the formal economy of tourism is often preceded by activities in the informal sector, such as cleaning, doing laundry, and selling baked goods until they have enough capital to enter the formal economy. These activities in the informal economy exclude those involved from both formal wages and benefits such as social security. In addition, “the informal economy acts as a mechanism to hinder dissent by providing economic opportunities and aids family income” (Key, 2002, p. 3). Tourism “development” does not benefit everyone equally and more often than not it simply proceeds along the lines of already existing social inequalities. As Key (2002) observed, “a developing country seeking to secure foreign exchange, increasing economic independence or trying to promote tourist involvement in poor communities may find their goals impeded” (p. 5).

Tourism in Paradise Caye offers many opportunities for tourist encounters outside of the more structured encounters in the formal economy between tourists and hotel

employees or tour guides, for instance. Many people who come to Belize are there to participate in “eco-tourism” activities. On the cayes, these take the form of sailing, diving, and snorkeling, among other activities. Whether it is in the jungle, along the coast or in the cayes, there is always another set that is interested in indulging their senses in drinking bouts, short romantic liaisons, smoking weed and/or other drugs. It is worth mentioning more recent tourism research in Belize that focused on tourism encounters as performative, and tourist places as spaces of “becoming” (Little, 2010). In Paradise Caye, there are many tourists who have stayed past their return ticket, tour guides who have married women they originally met as a tourist, couples who sold everything back home and moved permanently, as well as business deals and more that make local daily life on Paradise Caye a space of global possibilities. However, as Little’s (2010) work showed, there are undercurrents of a grimmer reality with real consequences for locals in which shady business deals and drug trafficking fracture the images of paradise in which tourists seek to embed themselves.

Although Paradise Caye does not have as stark a contrast between rich and poor as other tourist destinations, tourism as a process often reveals complex inequalities in economic and social capital to both ‘hosts’ and ‘guests.’ Excessive spending by tourists makes “hustling” tourists seem like a just and legitimate enterprise for many. Tourist police are no exception and it is not uncommon for police to bribe tourists who have bought drugs, threatening them with jail time if they don’t pay a hefty fine. Tourists, busy “having fun” in paradise, often engage in activities they probably would not do in other places close to or similar to their home. This can range from simply being very drunk publicly, to the extreme of getting your own nickname on the island as “naked girl”

did when she walked through a back street in the village *sans* clothes. Thus, tourism as performance and as spectacle is apropos here, and if people don't see something with their own eyes, rest assured everyone will hear about it.

Not only are tourists a part of the landscape on Paradise Caye, but also, as Jackiewicz and Govdyak (2015) have shown, Belize is now a popular place for “lifestyle migrants,” many of whom are retired (pp. 18-19). Capitalizing on this interest, the Belize government created a Qualified Retired Persons (QRP) program for anyone who is 45 years or older who can deposit a minimum of US\$2000 on a monthly basis. Among the many benefits are duty exemptions on imported items, including cars, boats and planes, although the ex-pats are “strongly encouraged” to buy in Belize. As Jackiewicz and Govdyak (2015) explained, internet promotion plays a big role in advertising Belize as a great place to retire.

While the setting of Paradise Caye will be described more in Chapter 4, it is important to emphasize that while I refer to ‘tourists’ and ‘hosts,’ neither are homogenous groups and all individuals experience these encounters differently. Differences in social class, race, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation all shape different realities and are experienced from distinct and varying subject positions. Children and young adults on the cayes also have distinct experiences with tourists. These are influenced by the way their own families and friends are situated with regard to tourism businesses, as well as their own informal work or social lives which either distance or bring them closer to tourists and ex-pats. As such, different locals’ experiences of and opinions about tourists and ex-pats cannot be assumed to be one and the same. Here, then I’ve merely tried to present a picture of the people and some of the forms which tourist encounters take in

order to provide a glimpse into the way in which these flows of people and capital, in interaction with local processes, shape and reshape Paradise Caye.

International Education Policy

Human Capital Theory

McGrath (2010), responding from the discipline of comparative education to various economists' theories about education's role in development, invoked King's (1965) warning about the loss of context and complexity when education debates become captured by economists (p. 248). Educational policy and research in this case suffer, as it is often assumed that social cohesion and economic development proceed in only a positive manner from education (McGrath, 2010). Within development discourses, education and training are considered forms of "human capital," which in its most simplistic form, is supposed to increase a worker's productivity. While the idea of human capital can be traced back to Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776/1976), it began influencing education policy worldwide in the early 1960s (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1972). Economists such as Becker (1964) claimed that one achieves a "net advantage" through education and training, in turn resulting in increased personal income. All together, the individuals are also "human capital," educated and trained to participate in the labor force and increase the economic productivity and competitiveness of a nation.

The idea of human capital gets played out in different ways depending on the context. The report created for Ronald Reagan on the state of education in the US, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative of Education Reform* (1983), warned that the US was quickly losing its competitive edge against Germany, Japan and Korea due to "the rising tide of mediocrity" in education, a loss equivalent to "unilateral educational

disarmament” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Mishel and Rothstein (2007) described a similar concern in the US today. They explained:

...the contemporary cliché is that however good schools may have once been, the 21st century makes them obsolete. Global competition requires all students to graduate from high school prepared either for academic college or for technical training requiring an equivalent cognitive ability. We can only beat the Asians by being smarter and more creative (Mishel & Rothstein, 2007, p. 34).

Ironically, the effort to be competitive in the world market was also the excuse for not focusing on “equity-improving outcomes for disadvantaged students” as it would take away from the technological training of those “primed to succeed” (Mishel & Rothstein 2007, p. 35).

In a similar vein regarding education in Belize, Almendarez (2013) invoked human capital theory to stress the importance of investment in education. Unlike US discourses, which situate themselves against countries like India and China, Almendarez (2013) depicted Belize’s challenge as one of catching up with “developed” and “emerging” economies (p. 26). As Almendarez (2013) argued, “by applying the theory of human capital to educational systems, productivity is enhanced and sustained based on an increased and a diversified labour force” (p. 23). Almendarez (2013) reinforced some of the key concepts criticized by Mishel and Rothstein (2007) when he stated, “the twenty-first century paradigm is shifting towards the enhancement of knowledge as a priority, as states connect their higher educational systems much more closely to their various economic development strategies” (p. 21). Similarly, Gomez (2010) stated in reference to Belize:

When we talk about education as a capital good, we need to make reference to the concept of human capital that emphasizes that skills development is a capital factor in production activities. In our society, we recognize and value education as a means for improving our standard of living because we believe that expanding

education promotes economic development. Therefore, we can only aspire for a positive social change in our country if we ensure that all our people are prepared to become productive citizens. (para. 6)

I bring these up not to discourage investment in education or deny its multiple positive benefits, but to show how human capital theory has been uncritically incorporated into discourses of school reform in Belize leading to the perception of education as a panacea for society's ills.

Looking at the statistics, it seems logical that more education will benefit the individual economically, and this should translate into more economic benefits for the nation as a whole. Currently, 55% percent of Belize's workforce has a primary school education or less (SIB, 2015b). The estimation of the returns to primary education, in terms of its impact on wages, is not significantly different from no education at all. Post-primary education in Belize does pay, however, and for those completing secondary, there is on average an increase of BZ\$458 in monthly salary compared with those who only finished primary (Näslund-Hadley et al., 2013). Vocational education is even higher with an additional BZ\$408 more per month above what a secondary school graduate would earn, with university graduates earning BZ\$1,319 more than those completing just secondary (Näslund-Hadley et al., 2013, p. 17). To escape poverty in Belize, it is concluded that one must have a secondary education. In addition, the higher monthly salary for graduates of vocational education, it is speculated, has to do with Belize's need for skilled labor in areas such as tourism (Näslund-Hadley et al., 2013, p. 17).

Thus, post-primary education is shown to have real economic benefits in Belize. It must be remembered, however, that these figures are averages, and unemployment remained high at 11.1% in April 2014 (21.5% female, 9.6% male). In 2013, it ranged

between 11.7% in April and 14.2% in September (SIB, 2014, p. 19). Even when the idea of human capital was gaining currency, critics from within the discipline of economics noted that wages and success cannot all be accounted for by education (Merrett, 1966). While unexplained variables are often accounted for in the statistical formula, it nevertheless does not explain who is getting certain jobs or why they are getting them. Bowles and Gintis (2002) showed that “the contribution of schooling to cognitive development plays little part in explaining why those with more schooling have higher earnings” (p. 2). Furthermore, as Mishel and Rothstein (2007) argued, “...while adequate skills are an essential component of productivity growth, workforce skills cannot determine how the wealth created by national productivity is distributed” (p. 36). Writing in the US context, Mishel and Rothstein’s (2007) observations are easily transferable to the Belizean context. They explained:

The honesty of our capital markets, the accountability of our corporations, our fiscal-policy and currency management, our national investment in R&D and infrastructure, and the fair-play of the trading system also influence whether the economy reaps the gains of Americans’ diligence and ingenuity.

(Mishel & Rothstein, 2007, p. 36)

Thus, “the biggest threats to the next generation’s success come from social and economic policy failures, not schools. And enhancing opportunity requires more than school improvement” (Mishel & Rothstein, 2007, p. 35).

Educational Superstructure

Bennett (2008) noted the importance of international agencies in influencing the policy environment in Belize since the time of internal self-government (p. 207). Spring (2009), although critical of the assumptions built into world systems theory, nevertheless acknowledged its contribution to the idea of a global “educational superstructure” (p. 7).

Drawing on Appadurai's (1996) work on globalization, Spring (2009) described a global educational superstructure that consists of "global flows of ideas, institutions, and people with dynamic interactions with local organizations and people" (p. 7). For Spring (2009), locals don't participate passively, but rather the influence of these global flows and networks is "determined by the interpretation, adaptation, or rejection by local educators" (p. 7). However, "determined" might be overreaching and as will be discussed, the global agenda shapes to a great extent, through its ideas and its finances, national educational policy.

Bonal (2007) examined the way in which poverty and education are related in the construction of education policy by Latin American governments and international organizations. Like educational discourses in the US, education is seen as necessary to participate in the global "information society" in which knowledge is fundamental for "technological progress, competitiveness and growth" (Bonal, 2007, p. 87). Toward the goal of social inclusion, education is seen as a means to imparting and reinforcing "a set of social values and rules that will help to improve reciprocal relationships, trust, tolerance and social integration" (Bonal, 2007, p. 87). These further reinforce "good institutional practices" and a "democratic culture," as well as have "positive influences on productivity and growth" (Bonal, 2007, p. 87). Thus, what benefits the individual benefits society and particularly a nation's ability to compete economically.

Belize has received foreign aid for the purpose of education and development as deemed appropriate by the various multilateral agencies and in line with the "global agenda" on education (King, 2007, p. 377). In 1990, Jomtien, Thailand was the site of the first World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA) sponsored jointly by the

UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank. King (2007) pointed out that the focus at Jomtien was not primary education for all, but “basic education” (p. 379). Secondary, tertiary, vocational and technical education and training were entirely excluded from the global agenda. As King (2007) reported, those affected by the conference had the most minimal role in contributing to the “Jomtien Declaration and Framework for Action” (p. 381).

In 1996, the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) came up with six International Development Targets (IDTs). The two education goals were that of universal primary education by 2015 and reducing the gender disparity in both primary and secondary education by 2005. While “local ownership” of these goals is emphasized in the DAC Report, King (2007) emphasized the fact that the donors shaped each country’s action (p. 383). In 2000, these goals were expanded on in Dakar by UNESCO. The six IDT’s focused on a more encompassing vision of education – including its “quality,” but again were reduced four months later in New York with the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) to two IDT’s. The two MDG’s focused on universal primary education and gender equality, only this time without reproductive health services and a new emphasis on HIV/AIDS (King, 2007, p. 386).

As discussed by Jules (2005), at the heart of the relationship formed in the name of education reform and development between small nation-states who are the beneficiaries of both grants and loans, and the “financial intellectual complex,” consisting of academics and various bilateral and multilateral agencies (a.k.a. the educational superstructure), is an unequal power relationship (p. 2). These agencies, working

together with universities, have the power to determine “which paradigm gains currency,” making it difficult for small states to negotiate their agendas (Jules, 2005, p. 2). Complex research findings are sometimes oversimplified in order to fit with and legitimize the current prescription for reform. This is most often done by ignoring the “contextual assumptions on which best practice learning is based” causing the measures prescribed to “become weak and their outcomes dubious” (Jules, 2005, p. 5).¹⁹

Reforming Secondary Education in Belize

I have discussed the relationship between international aid agencies and their borrowing countries to highlight Jules’ (2005) point that it is an unequal power relationship that shapes national education agendas. These agendas often neglect the complex sociocultural and economic realities of which the educational systems are a part. As Crossley (2008) has pointed out in the case of Belize, international aid was traditionally limited to primary education, based on the assumptions and goals embedded in these international agendas since the conference at Jomtien. This focus neglected the concern among Belizeans for investing in post-primary education (Crossley, 2008, p. 247), funding instead the Belize Primary Education Development Project (BPEDP), which focused solely on primary education. Ironically, international education policy has

¹⁹ Institutional and individual subjectivity are the two main factors that determine whether or not the prescriptions of the lending agencies in concert with the external consultants are harmful or helpful to the borrowing countries (Jules 2005, p. 6, 7). Institutional subjectivity refers to how much the agency is “listening to local analyses and solutions” as well as the nature of the conditions for aid set out by their own and foreign government and linked to their various political contexts. Individual subjectivity refers to disposition, both in attitude and ideology, of the actual consultant. I would add that it also depends on the disposition, experience, and agenda of the local(s) with whom the consultant is consulting. As Jules (2005) described, “good consultants” not only have a lot of experience to draw upon, but also “listen carefully and digest what the aims and aspirations of the intended reforms are” (p. 7).

been similar to the laissez-faire policy toward secondary schools prevalent under British colonial rule.

In the 1990s, the secondary school-aged population in Belize increased, resulting primarily from a rise in the number of immigrants from neighboring countries, particularly Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras (Bennett, 2008, p. 162-163). However, as recently as the 1998/1999 school year, the NER for secondary school based on ages 13-17 was only 33% (Bennett, 2008, p. 167). Representatives from the World Bank visited in July 1995 to discuss the potential of a secondary education project (Bennett, 2008, p. 204). In an Aide Memoire on the visit, the main problems identified were the lack of place and their allocation, the role that primary school played in access to secondary school, and “late entry, repetition, and dropout” (Bennett, 2008, pp. 204-205). It was also observed that there were no goals for secondary education to guide the Ministry of Education (Bennett, 2008, p. 204). Although interest in improving the quality of and access to secondary schools is by no means recent, it wasn’t until 1998 that the government explicitly laid out its intention for multiple opportunities to be made available for post-primary education, including vocational and technical education, evening classes, and apprenticeship programs (Bennett, 2008, p. 204).

In 2001, the Government of Belize submitted a request for US \$12.4 million from the World Bank for a project entitled “The Education Sector Improvement Project” (BESIP). The rationale for BESIP was to “address existing inequities in education, which are expressed in social, gender, geographical and completion rate differences between the richer and poorer groups of the population and between districts” (Bennett, 2008, p. 205). Equity and “quality of service delivery” were key concepts. BESIP,

however, was not funded. Bennett (2008) speculated that this was due to the recent funding of BPEDP and the fact that another loan was possibly viewed as too much of an economic burden for Belize at the time.

The inequitable access to post-primary education is severe. Only 16% of all high school students in Belize's two poorest quintiles attend secondary school. Combined with vocational, only 23% of 17-18 year olds from these two poorest quintiles attend high school/vocational schools compared to 80% from the highest two quintiles (Halcrow Group, 2010, p. 85). The most recent efforts to improve secondary education, designed to take place between 2011 and 2016, have attempted to address this issue and were detailed in the Belize Education Sector Strategy (BESS). The three main goals of the BESS are about "increasing equitable access to education at all levels, about improving the quality, relevance and efficiency of education and about improving governance and accountability" (MoEY, 2012a, p. 4). At the time the BESS was written, the secondary school NER was at 48.9% (MoEY, 2012a, p. 9). In 2009/10, the transition rate from primary to secondary was 89.2%, but by Fourth Form the total number of students enrolled was only 57% of those in First Form (MoEY, 2012a, p. 10). In respect to secondary education, the BESS policy objectives focused on expanding access to and completion of the secondary level (MoEY, 2012a, pp. 24-26). The other goals relating directly to the secondary level were increasing enrollment at technical and vocational programs and improving the relevance and delivery of the curriculum, with the overarching objective of strengthening governance particularly with respect to student achievement (MoEY, 2012a, pp. 33-36).

With help from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the MoEY embarked on a program to reform the way that secondary school is financed in an effort to make financing more equitable and ensure equal access to a “sufficiently broad and relevant” curriculum (Näslund-Hadley et al., 2013, p. 15). Financing of secondary schools traditionally favored the “affluent areas,” having higher salaries and more teachers than rural schools (Näslund-Hadley et al., 2013, p. 15). The new system is based on “courses offered, the average cost per student, the number of students enrolled, and the number of students with special needs” (Näslund-Hadley et al., 2013, p. 15). Inequalities in per student cost have been reduced and “approximately 43 percent of the schools have experienced a freeze in funding, while 57 percent gained an increase in their grant allocation for a period of five years” (Näslund-Hadley et al., 2013, p. 16).

Within the BESS, the large number of early school leavers and the high repetition rate are noted as problems to solve if policy objectives are to be reached. Notable differences in GERs exist between districts and between rural and urban areas. While most schools are in urban areas, the school transportation program nevertheless provides free transportation to schools from rural areas (MoEY, 2012a, p. 10). Thus, while other equity issues centering around access to secondary school are acknowledged, in the BESS it is stated that:

...the bigger problem is what happens to students during the secondary cycle, so that by Third Form, almost 60% of students are over age, half of whom are two years older than the prescribed age. This is likely to have a significant impact on student attitude to school and explain the resistance shown by older students to what school has to offer – to schools rules and authority. Further research is clearly needed here to understand practices and policies around repetition, and how it is monitored and managed in schools. The new Secondary School Financing Policy can be expected to change attitudes to drop out and repetition in schools. (MoEY, 2012a, p. 10)

Here, it is speculated that one possible cause of students leaving school early is due to the practice of repetition, with overage students having issues with authority (MoEY, 2012a, p. 10). The targets set regarding these goals are to “increase the GER to a minimum of 74% [63% at time of writing] in each district, reduce both the repetition rate and dropout rate by 50% in each district” and “increase by 10% the number of Fourth Form graduates in all districts” (MoEY, 2012a, p. 24). It is noted that in all districts except Belize it will be necessary to create additional places for enrollment. Simply reducing repetition, at 7.7% at the time the BESS was written, would open up over one fourth of the places needed to raise the GER to 70% by 2016 (MoEY, 2012a, p. 25). According to the MoEY, the responsibility to reduce both the repetition and the dropout rates is mainly that of the schools (2012a, p. 25). As noted in the BESS:

Improvements in drop out and repetition rates largely lie in the hands of the schools themselves. Schools need to better understand the causes and put in place actions to address them. Support and guidance will be provided to schools on how to effectively monitor and develop school level actions to reduce repetition and drop out. . . . The ability to reduce repetition and drop out will be very largely determined by improvements to the quality and relevance of education . . . (MoEY, 2012a, p. 25)

Other policy objectives, such as improving school leadership, teacher quality, and the relevance of the curriculum are all expected to contribute in their own ways to reducing the dropout rate as well. While all of these objectives, depending on how they are implemented, might reduce the dropout rate, they do not take into account the reasons why students leave school early. Furthermore, the MoEY feels that “schools need to better understand the causes and put in place actions to address them” (MoEY, 2012a, p. 25). What this “hidden policy” is doing is effectively implementing measures to solve a problem for which the causes are not understood. By placing the responsibility of finding

out the causes of early school leaving on the schools, policymakers are assuming schools can simply introduce dropout prevention and reintegration programs to solve the issue.

This school-based solution is founded on the unexamined assumption that leaving school early is a problem of individual students. Furthermore, its solution is located in the school-student relationship and does not involve the wider society.

As has been demonstrated, human capital theory undergirds the efforts to reform education for its presumed societal effects. However, it is also a theory of action that seeks to explain and predict human behavior. In this assumption, Western values of economic self-interest and bourgeois individualism are projected onto human nature itself. Thus, it is expected that if schools can be accessed, improved and are of a high quality, students will go to school and complete. Underlying this is the notion that attending secondary and beyond is the economically rational thing to do. But individuals do not always share beliefs about school's desirability and purpose, nor do they always act with their best interest in mind, economically or otherwise.²⁰ By considering all behavior that doesn't fit this rational theory of action as mere anomalies, it is easy to dismiss the perspectives of early school leavers when focusing on school reform.

Although focused on the US context, Labaree's (2011) work on two different ideas about the purposes of schools and how they shaped education are worth visiting

²⁰ This fact that people don't act on the basis of individual economic self-interest alone has not escaped economists' attention either, but exceptions made within economics such as altruism (Becker, 1964) still leave us with a theory that doesn't account for culture and is ahistorical. Representing more contemporary work within the discipline of economics, Christoforou and Laine (2014) argued that "there is no point in restricting ourselves to the principle of rational choice, since many economic phenomena obviously are not rational in the strict sense of a means-ends and cost-benefit analysis, yet they have a rationale, a reason or a cause, which requires systematic analysis" (Christoforou & Laine, 2014, p. 4).

here. Two perspectives on the purpose of schooling existed – one as a public good and the other as a private good. As a public good, the purposes of education have been construed differently, goals such as “keeping the faith, shoring up the republic, or promoting economic growth” were common. As a private good, from the perspective of the individual, schooling was seen as a way to “social access and social advantage” (Labaree, 2011, p. 381). Historically, these two competing purposes have interacted and played their roles in shaping the US educational system. Labaree (2011) explained how unintended consequences can result from the interplay of these purposes:

Reformers are intentionally trying to change the school system and improve society through their reform efforts. In contrast, consumers are simply pursuing their own interests through the medium of education. They are not trying to change schools or reform society; they are just trying to get ahead or at least not fall behind. But, in combination, their individual decisions about pursuing education do exert a significant impact on the school system. These choices shift enrollments from some programs to others and from one level of the system to another. They pressure political leaders to shift public resources into the educational system and to move resources within the system to the locations that are in greatest demand. At the same time, these educational actions by consumers end up exerting a powerful influence not only on schools but also on society. When consumers use education to address their own social problems, the social consequences are no less substantial for being unintended. (p. 391)

As has been shown, secondary schooling developed much differently in Belize than it did in the US. For the most part, secondary schools began as elitist and still to this day remain out of reach for many Belizeans. Educational policy directed toward creating equitable financial access is a noble and necessary goal that the current administration is undertaking. However, the educational policy concerning secondary schools, although seeking to make schools more accessible for secondary school-aged youth, ignores their perspectives and influence on the same issues that policymakers attempt to solve. In so

doing, policies and plans for education reform in Belize are made based on unexamined assumptions about the “demand” side of education and student voices are silenced.

Bonal (2007) noted that the two main goals in Latin American educational policy have remained similar since the 1980s and include reforming the educational system itself and targeting poorer populations to help with their educational needs. In Belize, overall poverty and crime reduction is often discussed in tandem with education, which is viewed as a panacea for other social issues in many development discourses. One specific modus operandi for reducing poverty and crime is that of increasing secondary enrollment for Belize (Mendoza & ABEN Consulting, 2009). As Bonal (2007) explained, the conferences in Jomtien, Dakar, and the UN summit in 2000 all considered education to be “one of the key fundamental instruments that is essential if poverty is to be eradicated” (p. 87). Programs throughout Latin America focused on equitable access to school and improving the quality of schools in the poorer, most disadvantaged areas. These policies assume that the *demand for education* is basically inelastic. Policies such as expanding education by focusing on poorer populations and improving the quality of schools in those areas “has run parallel to a process of educational segmentation and polarisation,” and programs that seek to target specific populations have often served to enhance these divisions rather than erase them (Bonal, 2007, p. 97). Because the quality of education varies from school to school, access to what are perceived to be lower quality institutions influences perceptions of their usefulness. Thus, policies which seek to reform education for the public good, through creating more equitable access for instance, without taking into consideration the needs and opinions of those whom schools serve, can have unintended consequences.

In the 1980s, the idea of educational demand by families and their perception of its usefulness first began to be taken into account within educational discourses (Bonal, 2007). In the 1990s, there were calls to take into consideration cultural contexts and “in particular, the need to heed the voices of the excluded in order to provide an effective and cohesive response to their hardships” (Bonal, 2007, p. 96). The recognition of the importance of cultural contexts, as well as how families perceive the usefulness of schooling, however, have to date not had much effect on educational policy (Bonal, 2007, p. 196). Nevertheless, “perceptions regarding usefulness are *fundamental* [emphasis added] to an understanding of the truncated expectations of young people in the schooling system and the different ways in which educational unease is manifested” (Bonal, 2007, p. 97). Reinserting the voices of those whom the schools are intended to serve is of primary importance if one wants to truly understand the phenomenon of leaving school early and create effective policies for educational reform.

Early School Leaving

While there is a large body of research on early school leavers in many parts of the world, the same cannot be said for Belize. In this section of the literature review I will first look at two main ways in which early school leavers have been studied. Because this dissertation focuses on eliciting early school leavers’ perspectives on their beliefs about the purpose of school, their experiences in school, and reasons for leaving, the goal of this section is not to provide an exhaustive review of models for predicting early school leaving. Rather, I examine some main ways in which leaving school early is conceptualized in order to relate these to themes that emerged in the findings. Excluding the perspectives of early school leavers from larger policy discourses is a sometimes

unintentional, often deliberate, act of silencing based on a judgment that their opinions and experiences are somehow inferior to those of adults. Often their perspectives are a mere addendum to a study, and rarely are they placed at the center of research.

Following the section on early school leaving, I focus on scholarship on youth perspectives, the concept of student voice, and finally, Belizean scholarship relevant to the issue of early school leaving.

“Framing Dropouts”

Fine (1991) coined the term “framing dropouts” and showed how youth in an urban high school were institutionally silenced through schooling. The term “dropout” often invokes images of a student who either failed academically or had behavioral issues and could not participate in school successfully. As such, “dropouts” not only had problems but created problems for others. As Fine (1991) wrote, “If youth who drop out are portrayed as unreasonable and academically inferior, then the structure, ideologies and practices that exile them systematically are rendered invisible and the critique they voiced is institutionally silenced” (p. 3). As “exiles,” however, they often have the most critical perspectives on schooling (Fine & Rosenberg, 1983).

As Smyth and Hattam (2004) explained, how the “dropout” problem is named depends on whose problem it is. From the perspective of policymakers, the problem is “falling retention rates,” while from that of teachers and administrators the problem is of “catering for an increasingly diverse student clientele” (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 17). For schools, the problem is keeping the large number of “disaffected pupils whose presence puts an added strain on life in classrooms” in school (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 17).

For parents and students, however, the problem is much more personal and involves risk with one's future – socially and economically. Smyth and Hattam (2004) labeled the problem for parents as one of “angst” and worry for their child's future, specifically their transition to a job market that requires increasingly higher credentials. For students, the issue is one of “navigating a transition to economic independence” (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 17). These transitions, however, are not easily navigable, often no longer there, and are increasingly “read by young people in the light of dramatic changes in the labor market” (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 17). Although writing from the Australian context, the “problem” as named for the student, can also be seen as one of navigating transitions in the Belizean context.

The Individual Deficit Model

According to Clandinin et al. (2013), the term “dropout” in the US did not take on its more pejorative connotation until the mid-1960s when finishing high school was seen by many as a wiser choice than leaving it to seek employment or start a family (Clandinin et al., 2013). The term “early school leaver” emerged in the early mid-60s as an alternative term without all the judgments embedded in the term “dropout” (Clandinin et al., 2013). For my purposes, I prefer to use the term “early school leaver” to allow for the many possible reasons that a student may have left and an overall more complex understanding of the process of leaving school early.²¹ I also agree with Smyth and

²¹ There are other terms besides ‘dropout’ that have distinct connotations and reflect the many complex reasons students may leave school early. The term “opting out” indexes both the fact that a particular school may not serve a meaningful purpose in a student's life, as well as the student's own agency to choose and make decisions (Clandinin et al., 2013, p. 26). A term emerging from a social justice framework is “facilitated out” which draws attention to the school's active role, via policies and practices, in guiding the

Hattam (2004) that in prefacing school leaver with “early,” it illustrates my “commitment to the view that all young people should be encouraged to stay at school to successfully complete the postcompulsory years” (p. 15).

Clandinin et al. (2013) characterized two main ways that studies have framed early school leavers. These are the individual deficit model and the disengagement perspective. Valencia (1997) described the deficit-thinking model as “positing that the student who fails in schools does so because of internal deficits or deficiencies” (p. 2). Research based on this model often centers on identifying students “at risk” of leaving school early based on individual, family, school, and community variables—all assumed to be the primary cause of leaving school early. These risk factors can be loosely categorized into “social factors, socio-political-economic factors, school-related characteristics, and family characteristics” (Clandinin et al., 2013, p.33).

It is important to examine the deficit model not only in its assumptions, but because of its consequences. At first glance, it seems that it is a proactive move to identify certain factors associated with young people that might influence them to leave school early and to address them with the appropriate interventions and support.

However, according to Gorski (2010):

At the core of deficit ideology is the belief that inequalities result, not from unjust social conditions such as systemic racism or economic injustice, but from intellectual, moral, cultural, and behavioral deficiencies assumed to be inherent in disenfranchised individuals and communities (Brandon, 2003; Gorski, 2008a, 2008b; Valencia, 1997a; Yosso, 2005). (p. 4)

student to leave school. The term “push out” has the same connotations albeit expressed in a more blunt manner. This term stems from the “push” and “pull” factors identified as influencing a student to leave school. “Push outs,” for instance, are those students who make it difficult for the school to meet its own goals (Clandinin et al., 2013).

This way of thinking is congruent with negative stereotypes, for example that poor people are lazy and don't value education (Gorski, 2010, p. 6). As Gorski (2010) explained:

It becomes easier, then, to train the mass consciousness to pathologize disenfranchised communities—to, in effect, blame them for their own disenfranchisement. Once that scornful gaze down the power hierarchy is in place, so is established the justification for maintaining existing social, political, and economic conditions, such as gross inequities in access to healthcare or educational opportunity, or the waning of social programs and supports for disenfranchised communities. (p. 5)

The individual deficit model places the phenomenon of early school leaving primarily outside the school's sphere of influence, offering little possibility to examine and critique school practices and policies except in the form of intervention programs for students "at risk." Gorski (2010) cautioned "the suggestion that we fix inequalities by fixing disenfranchised communities rather than that which disenfranchises them" is the "surest sign of deficit ideology" (p. 6).

The Disengagement Perspective

Beginning in the 1980s, the alternative and currently more common way of framing early school leavers was from the disengagement perspective, which saw leaving school early as a long process of disengagement (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Finn, 1989; Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000; Rumberger, 1987, 1995, 2011). As Rumberger (1987) explained, "dropping out itself might better be viewed as a process of disengagement from school, perhaps for either academic or social reasons, that culminates in the final act of leaving" (p. 111). The concept of engagement generally has three facets: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Jimerson, Campos, & Greif, 2003). Engagement is often seen as the mediating factor

between the individual and school achievement as it encompasses participation and time on task (behavioral), identification with school (emotional), and self-regulated learning (cognitive). Disengagement then can be characterized as any behavior that does not reflect “engagement” in all school activities, as well as the degree that the student accepts and identifies with school values and outcomes (Clandinin et al., 2013, p. 25).

Often factors are identified which “push” or “pull” students out of school. Typically, being “pushed out” describes “experiences of youth who have been pressured to leave school by people or factors inside school, such as disrespectful treatment from teachers and other school personnel, violence among students, arbitrary school rules, and the institutional pressures of high-stakes testing” (Tuck, 2011, p. 818). Pullout factors, on the other hand, emphasize the idea that some students weigh the pros and cons of finishing high school and because of their own reasons, decide to leave school early (Clandinin et al., 2013). Outside of school, pullout factors include the possibility of employment or starting a family. Inside the school, pullout factors are issues with the experience of it such as poor relationships with peers and/or teachers, as well as general disengagement.

Rumberger (1995) emphasized that this process of disengagement starts as early as elementary school and yet may not result in formally leaving school until the latter part of secondary school. The disengagement perspective shifted the focus from the individual, family and community level to the institutional level as well, opening up a space for critique of policies and practices in school (e.g., Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002; Rumberger, 1995). For instance, Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, and Fernandez (1989)

looked at school factors in high schools that were successful in retaining students. Both social bonding with others who believe in the value and legitimacy of school and student engagement were recognized as influencing the retention of students.

The disengagement perspective also recognizes that the difficulties that individuals and families experience are embedded in social inequalities reflected and experienced in the school (Cassidy & Bates, 2005). Finn's (1989) model identified two different routes to leaving school early, both beginning as soon as students begin going to school. In the "frustration-self-esteem" model, Finn (1989) saw early academic failure and the frustration that results as causing students to internalize a negative self-concept. This diminishing self-esteem and frustration results in increasing problem behaviors and resistance to school that can culminate in either being removed from school due to behavioral problems or dropping out of school. The second model, called the "participation-identification" model, stems from the home environment not helping or supporting the child enough to participate and engage in school. This lack of a sense of belonging results in lower participation, engagement and achievement. Low academic performance, school withdrawal or alienation results and can lead to dropping out of school.

Furlong (1991) wrote about the need to study "disaffected pupils" as Durkheim studied crime. Durkheim's point was that "rather than understanding [crime] as a pathology one should look at it as behaviour designed to respond to particular social circumstances" (p. 294). In a similar manner, disengagement perspectives avoid focusing blame on an individual for leaving school early, but rather seek to tie that behavior to its school and larger social context. This perspective offers a way for schools and societies

to be critiqued and changed in policy and practice, rather than simply seeing the solution to leaving school early as one of an individual making the appropriate adjustments to finish school.

Social Reproduction, the Cultural Deficit Model and Resistance

Taking into account the larger socioeconomic, cultural and historical context invites a vision of school, following Nesper (1997), as “an intersection in social space, a knot in a web of practices that stretch into complex systems beginning and ending outside the school” (p. xiii). While schools may purport to be and operate as closed institutions, they are not, as Rutheiser (1990) noted concerning the Belizean schools in his study, “total institutions” as in Goffman (1961), but rather “totalizing” (p. 33). As such, “they seek to inscribe in the minds and bodies of students specific ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that extend beyond the immediate spatial boundaries of the institution and over the temporal course of their lives” (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 33).

Social Reproduction

It is important to consider, in any examination of schools, how schools reflect and reproduce social inequalities based on such factors as race, class, and gender, in the larger society (Althusser, 1971; Anyon, 1981; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Social reproduction theories came about in the 1970s and showed how, contrary to liberal educational discourses, schools are structurally organized to reproduce workers to fill jobs organized along a hierarchy for an industrial order (Aronowitz, 1981, p. x). As Aronowitz (1981) explained, Bowles and Gintis (1976) offered the most extreme version of this, alleging that all school improvement efforts would be futile in effecting transformations of schools to function for more democratic ends.

Bourdieu's (1977, 1984) work offered a way to understand processes of social reproduction. In addition to economic capital, which refers to one's financial resources, Bourdieu's concepts of cultural and social capital are crucial for understanding how economic and social inequalities get reproduced in schools. Often the way in which schools are organized, subjects taught, and students related to, deliberately or inadvertently, rewards those with certain types of cultural and social capital. Cultural capital can be embodied - such as a dialect or even a sense of personal space, objectified—such as a Rolex, a chai tea latte, or even a book by Paulo Freire, and institutionalized—such as specific degrees and diplomas, for instance. Social capital, on the other hand, has to do with who one knows and the resources which these relations and networks provide.

Rutheiser (1990) argued that to different extents, Belizean secondary schools all share “an internally-stratified culture of schooling that is grounded in middle class metropolitan norms of bureaucratic order, valued knowledge, and cultural ‘respectability’ (Wilson, 1973)” (p. 31). Thus, following Bourdieu (1977, 1984), Belizean secondary schools reward “those from relatively-privileged backgrounds, while systematically devaluing the experiences of the less-socially empowered” (Rutheiser, 1990, p. 31). Of course, this plays out in different ways depending on a particular school's practices, policies, pedagogies, philosophies, teachers, students, community and much, much more.

Culture and Cultural Deficit

While Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital is useful, one must be careful not to confuse it or combine it with cultural deficit theory, which assumes that certain characteristics inhere in and are simply brought to school by a group of people (Pollock,

2008). Describing herself as one of the rare teacher educators trained both in anthropology and education, Ladson-Billings (2006) highlighted the ways in which our own cultural lenses may alter our perceptions of others, at the same time that we are more than ready to interpret behavior and other issues as cultural phenomena. In the case of pre-service teachers, Ladson-Billings (2006) tied this to teacher education programs often void of anthropology courses, and yet wholly “psychologized” with courses looking at learning and cognition, as well as child and adolescent development, for instance. Often, her pre-service teachers were quick to diagnose students with a “self-esteem” problem if they were not performing successfully in school. In the US, the strength and ubiquity of the narrative of the “individual” is part of a cultural lens that results in locating school success or failure within the individual:

Our supreme reliance on individuals means that we look at students as individually responsible for their success in school. We lack complex understandings of how individual, family, community, school, and societal factors interact to create school failure for some students. It is much easier to explain students' failure by looking at something internal to the students than endemic in this thing we call school culture. (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 106)

As Ladson-Billings (2006) maintained, although her predominately white, mid-western pre-service teachers learned virtually nothing about culture, it was a concept that was shallowly employed to explain “everything from school failure to problems with behavior management and discipline,” particularly for children who were not white (p. 104). The notion of culture is bound up with race, difference, and sometimes deviance, often obscuring issues that would be better described socioeconomically. Ladson-Billings (2006) demonstrated how teachers often work from within their own cultural perspectives to locate school failure in the individual, often as a problem of psychology, or as a matter of cultural difference. Ladson-Billings’ (2006) assertion about pre-service

teachers is not limited to them, and it accurately describes the way in which many researchers and policymakers “frame” dropout.

Pollock (2008) has argued for anthropologists of education to clarify the difference between shallow and deep cultural analyses. As she explained, shallow cultural analyses are:

...explanatory claims that name a group as having a “cultural” set of behaviors and then name that “cultural” behavior as the cause of the group’s school achievement outcomes. (E.g., some argue that “group x” [e.g., “Asians”] employs a “group x behavior” [e.g., “push their children”] that causes “high” or “low” achievement.) Such claims allow people to explain achievement outcomes too simply as the production of parents and children without ever actually examining the real-life experiences of specific parents and children in specific opportunity contexts. (Pollock, 2008, p. 369)

Deeper analyses of culture, however, focus on “the organization of people’s everyday interactions in concrete contexts” to see how different outcomes and achievement patterns are produced (Pollock, 2008, p. 369). Not only is there “extreme diversity *within* any group’s behavior,” but predetermined ideas about what constitutes a “culture” neglect the fact that “every individual participates in *many* cultures that affect, to varying degrees, how he or she ‘achieves’ in school” (Pollock, 2008, p. 370).

Culture, Agency, and Resistance

Erickson (1987) has also drawn attention to the follies of the cultural deficit model, which often attributes low academic achievement to particular beliefs and traits affixed to specific cultures and hence the students who supposedly “bring” these cultures with them to school. Erickson (1987) examined the ideas of Ogbu (1982) concerning minority students’ shared reactions to their perceived structures of opportunities as well as the communication process explanation proposed by Hymes (1972). The communication process explanation focused on cultural differences in the speech

networks of the students and the teacher, which led to miscommunication in the classroom. Ogbu's (1982) argument, in contrast, saw minority student beliefs about school success and their own opportunities as not being enough to lead them out of the poverty common to their ethnic group. Ogbu (1982) compared first-generation ethnic minorities who had not been oppressed in their host country with those who had undergone systemic oppression and thus did not see school as providing opportunities for economic success. Critiquing these arguments, Erickson (1987) showed how while both can account for some cases, there are also many that they can't explain. Because these single factor explanations do not suffice, Erickson sought to reconcile and complicate the two positions.

Erickson (1987) argued that we should "...consider school motivation and achievement as a political process in which institutional and personal legitimacy, identity, and economic interest are central" (p. 343). Thus, the symbolic discourse through which these issues are negotiated becomes of primary importance. For Erickson (1987), resistance theory is the best framework for examining these issues because learning or not learning is political. Erickson (1987) explained, "learning what is deliberately taught can be seen as a form of political assent. Not learning can be seen as a form of political resistance" (p. 344). In other words, according to Erikson (1987) it is "...the politics of legitimacy, trust, and assent" which are the primary factors in school success (p. 354).

Erickson (1987) showed that one all-encompassing theory about school failure for reasons of cultural miscommunication or beliefs will not suffice, nor can certain behaviors, beliefs or traits be assigned to cultures. In synthesizing the views of Hymes (1972) and Ogbu (1982), Ericson illustrated how there is an underlying "politics of

legitimacy, trust, and assent” involved which recasts the students. No longer victims of their parents’ perceptions, the economy, or miscommunication, students in Erickson’s theory have agency. Erickson advocated culturally responsive pedagogy and thus placed the responsibility to engage students on the schools rather than blaming the individuals or factors outside the school. For Erickson, it is the school’s job to be perceived as legitimate by the community, requiring a shift away from hegemonic practices and their symbolism to a more transformative approach that allows the minorities in the communities to identify with and perceive the school as legitimate. Erickson (1987) wrote:

In the absence of special effort by the school, the deep distrust of its legitimacy that increases among students as they grow older and the resources for resisting by developing oppositional identity that the school provides (in the cultural hegemony that inheres in its routine ways of doing daily business) pose serious threats to the school’s perceived legitimacy. (p. 355)

In order to understand legitimacy, trust, assent, and what is legitimate, it is still necessary to investigate these concepts contextually rather than assume that what is legitimate is that which is most like one’s own culture, however that may be interpreted. As Pollock (2008) reminded us, cultural claims about static beliefs toward school “fail to acknowledge that human beings forge responses to actual schools and educators in real time and in ongoing interaction with actual educators and actual school opportunities” (p. 372).

Most famously, ideas about social reproduction and resistance are employed in Willis’s (1977/1981) research on working class ‘lads’ in England. Willis showed how through both the cultural practices of the youth and their beliefs that schooling does not benefit them, they create a culture of resistance to school. In Aronowitz’s (1981) preface

to Willis's work, he explained how "...truancy, counterculture, and disruption of the intended reproductive outcomes of the curriculum and pedagogy of schools yield an ironic effect: the 'lads' disqualify themselves from the opportunity to enter middle class jobs" (xii). Willis's achievement was that he went beyond Marxist theories that "lacked a theory of concrete social relations in the classroom because it was their assumption that the classroom was a dependent variable in the structure of social reproduction" (Aronowitz, 1981, p. xi). In contrast, Willis (1977/1981) looked at relations within the schools as well as how the group of 'lads' organized themselves, what Willis called the "cultural level" of schools, to show the "processes by which 'working class kids get working class jobs'" (Aronowitz, 1981, xi).

While not a story of social change, Willis's work is one of social resistance. It is important to consider as it shows how schools themselves are cultural sites. This is similar to Pollock's (2008) emphasis on the need to look at everyday interactions and practices within schools, as well as outside in the larger social context, instead of making faulty assumptions about cultures and their various traits, for example.

Furlong's Structures & Hidden Injuries

As Weiss and Fine (2013) have explained, "structures produce lives, at one and the same time as lives produce, reproduce, and at times contest these same social/economic structures" (p. 224). As such, "people negotiate, conform, and resist structural constraints within a specific set of historic moments, unequal power relations, and the everyday activities of life" (Weiss & Fine, 2013, p. 224). While Ladson-Billings (2006) has warned against always interpreting student behavior as an individual psychological phenomenon, it is unlikely that she would argue for excluding

psychological understandings all together. In fact, another false projection of a Western cultural lens is to see students as merely rational actors making choices in their social situation.

Furlong (1991) argued that a “sociology of emotion” must be constructed to serve as the starting point for examining the demands placed on students at school (p. 296). As Furlong noted, not only is rejecting school an emotional experience, but also school produces “hidden injuries” (Sennett & Cobb, 1977). The school may be the cause of these for some students, while for others different factors outside of the school may cause emotions that are expressed at school. Furlong (1991) emphasized the importance of not overlooking the emotional demands of schooling, their resulting hidden injuries for some, and how the students deal with these pressures.

According to Furlong (1991), not only do we need to complicate the idea of educational structure—to reflect multiple educational structures, but also we need to bring in the psychological side—unconscious motivation and repression. First, social structures are not one dimensional, nor do children “reject school simply because they are working class or because they find themselves in a secondary modern school” (Furlong 1991, p. 297). Social structures here are defined following Connell (1987) as the “experience of being up against something, of limits on freedom” (as cited in Furlong, 1991, p. 297). The most frequent structures in education are political in which others have power over students. Furlong examined the analogy between law and education much like how Foucault (2000) described power and techniques of power in which we police ourselves. In education, however, unlike law, Furlong pointed out that we are also

trying to change others. Thus, beyond controlling their actions in the daily disciplinary regime, educators want students to think in a certain way.

Furlong (1991) argued that there are at least three main structures in education that students experience. The first is the structure of ability in which students are to 'receive' abilities and as such are produced and sorted along such lines. The second structure is the fact that they are taught values—explicitly and most often implicitly. These can conflict with a student's own values in many ways and affect students differently depending on their gender, race, ethnicity, and class, among other variables. The third is the employment structure in which students are also "negotiating an occupational identity" (Furlong, 1991, p. 303). As a person up against these structures, the student needs to be conceptualized in a less simplistic way. The human personality cannot be seen as a rational actor only—it must be seen as multi-dimensional and emotionally complex, replete with contradiction, repression and unconscious motivations.

Smyth (2006) explained that the reasons for disengaging from school and often dropping out are in the end political reasons— "that is to say, students refuse to make the emotional and relational investment necessary to become engaged with the social institution of schooling in a manner necessary for learning to occur" (pp. 288-289). As Smyth (2006) argued, learning is often mistaken as uni-directional as in Freire's (1970/1994) transmission model of learning. School failure, however, is dialectical and co-constructed by the school, the teachers, and the students, and as such, should not be reduced to the learner's failure.

For Smyth (2006), school failure is linked to students doing identity work, often suppressing their own identities to act "within a narrowly defined and institutionalized

view of what it means to be a ‘good’ student’” (p. 291). Identity formation, or what Smyth and Hattam (2004) called “becoming somebody” (Suarez-Orozco, 1987; Wexler, 1992) has two different aspects worth examining. According to Smyth and Hattam (2004):

The project of becoming somebody has two interwoven strands: how young people navigate an entry into the labor market, and their simultaneous efforts to develop a socio-cultural identity. It is difficult to understand the complex process of youth identity formation without understanding the interplay between young people’s desire for economic independence and their struggles to establish, confirm and in many cases endure a socio-cultural identity. (p. 68)

In interpreting my findings, I use the term “becoming somebody” as Smyth and Hattam (2004) defined it rather than exactly how it was utilized in both the work of either Suarez-Orozco (1987) or Wexler (1992). In Suarez-Orozco’s (1987) description of Central American refugees to the United States, becoming somebody was linked with a motivation to attend school that was tied up with relationships, specifically with duties to parents and other family members who made sacrifices for them to attend. In Wexler’s (1992) work, social class was given a prominent position in understanding youth identity formation, over and above both gender and race. However, as Weis (1995) and Apple (1996) noted in their critiques of Wexler (1992), although social class is a critical part of any analysis, not everything can be reduced to it. Thus, in my study, this term does not connote either the preeminence of social class or the nature of motivation to attend school being bound up in family relationships. Rather, I utilize “becoming somebody” as Smyth and Hattam (2004) do, in order to examine both the sociocultural and the economic aspects of identity formation, particularly as they are reflected in participant perspectives on leaving school early.

For those who leave school, negotiating their identities has become too difficult and their own aspirations no longer line up with what school is offering for their future (Smyth, 2006). Failure thus needs to be situated in the relationship between the school and the student—in a communication breakdown in which schools often operate based on what they believe to be a shared understanding about school and students that is often at odds with the frame of reference of the student. Thus, when students drop out, they are often pursuing what Erickson (1987) called an “oppositional identity” to that which the school is supporting (Smyth, 2006, p. 291).

Calderon-Almendros (2011) showed from a biographical perspective how the identity work that Erickson (1987) discussed played out for one student in opposition to the school. Focusing on a marginalized youth named Medina from Malaga, Spain, Calderon-Almendros (2011) illustrated, through biographical methods, the phenomenon of school failure through Medina’s perspective of his school experience. The data consisted of six biographical, in-depth interviews of Medina, as well as interviews with Medina’s friends, his parents, and professionals in the juvenile delinquent center.

Calderon-Almendros (2011) identified two processes of exclusion at play. The first was the passive exclusion process that the school operated through pedagogy, teacher conduct, and the school curriculum. For instance, there were two curricula in place—one for students who were not posing disciplinary problems and another that was:

dominated by everything that is officially hidden but which is made explicit in these children’s experiences. In this hidden curriculum, discipline tends to push everything else to one side. This may be the reason why they [the youth] almost exclusively emphasize the experiences of punishment at school. (p. 754)

According to Calderon-Almendros (2011), the school focused on the “behavioral taming” of these students in what amounts to “a process of domestication, silencing any dissent

through punishment” (p. 755). The second process of exclusion was an active process characterized by the students themselves maintaining a space in which they were marginalized. These active strategies of marginalization grew as the years progressed and were manifested in resistance to school practices.

As described by Medina’s friends, family, and himself, Medina’s world was characterized by a split between his reality and his imagined, ideal world. He attributed his failure solely to himself, a belief that the meritocracy of the school (Young, 1961) reinforced. This is similar to Foucault’s (2000) technologies of responsabilisation, in which any problem, like poverty for instance, is viewed as solely one’s own failing and not in any way the fault of the state. Following Giroux (2001), Calderon-Almendros (2011) saw Medina’s condition as one in which he was socialized as “poor,” and his fight against the hegemonic system nevertheless still expressed this dominant ideology (Calderon-Almendros, 2011, p. 757). Academic success and failure were created through punishment and the way that influenced students to become either “good” or “bad” (Calderon-Almendros, 2011, p. 758). The “bad guys” created cultures of opposition based on their own codes and saw themselves in opposition to the unfair dominant side.

Calderon-Almendros (2011) demonstrated how poverty was not simply an economic impediment to Medina, but also limited his identity symbolically. Not only are the students labeled bad by others when they do not conform to the expected practices of the school and the larger society as a whole, but in not resisting, their “dreams and hopes are converted into problems” (Calderon-Almendros, 2011, p. 760). Marginalized and silenced, they participated in other ways, creating their own freedom in resisting what others would like to see them do. Calderon-Almendros (2011) explained:

In some way, breaking with the social guidelines is a fight for freedom beyond the physical freedom they are denied. Breaking away means being freer. It is a movement of distinction they have generated that does not change the situation, but which allows them, at least temporarily, to continue being themselves.
(p. 760)

Voiced Research and Student Voice

Researchers, educators, and policy makers can learn from early school leavers' perspectives, not only about issues of early school leaving, but also youth-centered views of school experiences and the purpose of school in Belize. This is not to suggest however, that their voices are all that we need to attend to, but rather that they are a crucial part of the picture. As Nieto (1994) has pointed out, "nobody has all the answers, and suggesting that students' views should be adopted wholesale is to accept a romantic view of students that is just as partial and condescending as excluding them completely from the discussion" (p. 398).

While it is critical to understand student perspectives on why they left school and how they perceive their experience and its purpose in their lives, it must be done in a way that is embedded in their lived experiences and the way that they construct their own subjectivities (Smyth & Hattam, 2001). By calling their research "voiced research," Smyth and Hattam (2001) illustrated their bringing into existence previously silenced perspectives with languages that are context specific (p. 407). Voiced research is both political and pedagogical (e.g., Gunter & Thomson, 2007). It is political in that it seeks to reinsert previously silenced voices into more dominant discourses, and pedagogical in that it offers opportunity for "context-embedded theorizing" (Smyth & Hattam, 2001, p. 408). According to Smyth and Hattam (2001):

Theorising is something in other forms of research that is the sole prerogative of qualified outsiders, once compliant 'subjects' have been conveniently milked.

Where voiced research differs is in the manner in which it is predicated on a degree of sense-making in situ by virtue of the willing participation of the research informant. The give and take of the research opportunity offered invites a certain degree of identity formation previously out of reach. (p. 408)

Bateson (2004) has described how the way in which people reflect on and compose their life stories has a significant impact on how they see themselves and whether they feel empowered or disempowered in life. She wrote that it is not about coming up with a true or false version of one's life, but rather accessing:

the freedom that comes not only from owning your own memory and your life story but also from knowing that you make creative choices in how you look at your life. It can be very difficult to recognize the ways in which one situation or event in your life is linked to others. (Bateson, 2004, p. 207)

Voiced research is necessarily dialogic, pedagogical, and political. By engaging in a dialogue and truly seeking to “make sense” of things in context, such research is geared toward revealing the relationships between the larger socioeconomic and historical context, school policies and practices, and the individual. As such, it seeks to lift the neoliberal burden of self-blaming by engaging in an explorative dialogue to understand better the larger dialectic of which we are a part.

Although this study focuses on early school leavers, the concept of student voice and its associated models and critiques offer many points to consider when working with both students and early school leavers. Articles dealing with the issue of “voice” and more specifically “student voice” (Cook-Sather, 2006, 2007a, 2007b; Fielding, 2004a, 2004b) have necessarily explored issues of representation, authenticity, context—discursive, historical and cultural, as well as the reception of voice, its utilization, and effects. Cook-Sather (2006) examined the relevance of the concept and applicability of “voice” as discussed by Kamler (2001, 2003) in the field of English teaching, for the field

of education and student voice work. Kamler's (2001, 2003) critique of voice warned both against conflating the text with the writer, as well as confusing voice as individual expression with voice as participation. Drawing upon post-structural feminist arguments, Kamler claimed that the concept of voice masks the complexities of subjectivities, power relationships and contextual factors.

Cook-Sather (2006) argued that Kamler's (2003) reason for not using the term "voice"—namely, "the connection between voice and person, between voice and body"—are both reasons to use and not to use it in the field of education (p. 365). While Kamler's (2003) reasons for warning against conflating voice with person are valid, in the context of "educational research and reform [it] *is* still about bodily presence and participation" and sometimes written texts as well (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 365). As such, I utilize the term "voice," albeit keeping in mind the critiques discussed.

The recognition that participation is part of student voice work emanates from Cook-Sather's (2006) three themes of rights, respect and listening. Cook-Sather (2006) argued that the cultural shift necessary in education is one of shifting the power balances so that students exercise their right to speak out for themselves (p. 366). This notion of rights is complemented by the idea of respect. As Cook-Sather (2006) explained, "the centrality of respect for students as knowers and actors is another positive aspect of the term that contributes to the possibility of a cultural shift in educational research and reform" (p. 367). Calls to reimagine students as knowers and actors index prevalent adult attitudes about the validity, or rather lack of validity, of student knowledge and their capabilities. In addition to rights and respect, Cook-Sather (2006) highlighted the importance of listening, claiming that student voice:

insists that if students speak, adults must listen. Constructivist, critical, multicultural and antiracist pedagogies emphasize the importance of listening, arguing that teachers can improve their practice by listening closely to what students have to say about their learning. (p. 367)

The negative aspects of student voice discussed here include over-romanticizing children, using student voice manipulatively, utilizing student voice as mere “decoration,” reifying voice, and using what students say to hold that against them in their own school improvement efforts. All of these practices can lead to reinforcing the status quo as well as ignoring the “intersection of identity, language, context, and power that informs all pedagogical relations” (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 368).

A major emphasis of student voice work is how it both relies on and contributes to a change in school culture in which the attitudes and beliefs that adults hold about students’ abilities and knowledge is altered. Although this change focuses on the school culture it can equally be related to the culture of policymaking. In the case of early school leavers, they have less to lose in speaking more candidly as they reflect on why they left school early. It is up to policymakers and school staff to change their attitudes regarding both the value of qualitative research and the youth in order to make room for these currently silenced voices.

Studies on Early School Leavers in Belize

This section will examine the few studies that both relate to the issue of school completion and early school leaving in Belize and are relevant to this study. A quantitative study conducted by Gillett (2004) based on self-reported data provided by the secondary schools in Belize, such as SES and student archival data of schools, identified several factors which contributed to the completion of secondary school in Belize within the prescribed period. Gillett (2004) also noted that there were factors

which adversely influenced completion; these included 1) being male, 2) poor academic performance in primary school (based on Std.s 4 – 6 and the BNSE), 3) not living with one's immediate family, and 4) attending a denominational school. These will be discussed in relation to my findings. While Gillett's (2004) research drew on data across the country of Belize, the generalized conclusions characteristic of a large-scale, quantitative study provide an overview and leave many questions unanswered. In contrast, the research herein is highly specific to its local context. Although conclusions reached herein cannot be generalized, the qualitative, more in-depth findings provide a nice complement and contrast to those of Gillett and indicate other potential avenues for inquiry.

A study by Anderson-Fye (2002) offers insight into the subjective motivations of young women attending and completing high school on the neighboring caye of San Andrés. The context of this study is similar, the major difference being one of scale, with San Andrés being larger and more developed. As such, her findings will be looked at in more detail as they can serve as a point of comparison for this study. Anderson-Fye (2002) investigated the increasing number of females graduating from high school on San Andrés over the 1990's. From 1996-2001, equal numbers of both genders attended school, but more females completed, with the average attrition rate over the four-year period at 45% for males and 29% for females. (Anderson-Fye, 2002, p. 229).

In an effort to explain why more young women were going to secondary school and completing, Anderson-Fye (2002) looked at structural factors such as the "cost of education relative to family resources, economic opportunity for women, and social and cultural ideas and movements for women's equality," as well as findings based on her

interviews (p. 230). Following is a brief description of the three structural factors Anderson-Fye described. First, small increases in school fees coupled with larger increases in per capita income due to tourism, caused the cost of secondary school as a proportion of household income to fall, although not significantly. Second, tourism had created more job opportunities for women—jobs such as “gift shop attendants, hotel receptionists, and office workers” (Anderson-Fye, 2002, p. 230). Anderson-Fye explained that most of these jobs required a high school diploma and that being “feminized,” women had little competition for them. Third, changing ideas about women’s equality, both in Belizean and Western media through new gender roles and models, were having an effect on young women’s aspirations. Prominent local women in business and politics also served as role models in the community. Anderson-Fye identified the main challenges to staying in school as being the increasing responsibilities in the home taking care of siblings, as well as the need to earn money to contribute to the family income.

Anderson-Fye attributed these three structural factors to globalization and “Westernization.” She argued that “a stimulated tourist economy with concomitant jobs and access to media with cultural notions of gender equity set the stage for the possibility of girls’ secondary education” (Anderson-Fye, 2002, p. 233). Because it takes “tremendous effort” on the part of the students to complete high school, Anderson-Fye (2002) further inquired about their motivation to attend high school and graduate “particularly when their mothers and even older sisters had not done so” (p. 233).

For 59 of the 60 young women Anderson-Fye (2002) interviewed, she found that education was a priority and most wanted an education to get a “good job,” defined by

75% of her participants as an “office job” (p. 234). The office job was characteristically easy when compared with harder jobs, such as being a domestic worker. Because most of the young women had mothers who had not completed secondary, Anderson-Fye asked why they wanted these good jobs. The themes that emerged were to be “economically independent from a man,” to “escape abusive treatment, avoid future potential abusive treatment, or both for themselves and their future children” (Anderson-Fye, 2002, pp. 235-236). While some young women were victims of abuse, others witnessed it in their families or were acquainted with victims. Anderson-Fye (2002) argued that through “cultural globalization, particularly in the symbolic realm of imagination (Appadurai, 1996)” the young women were able to recognize the actions of men as abuse (p. 243). The findings regarding motivations in going to secondary school are consistent with what Anderson-Fye (2002) called the young women’s ethnopsychology of “never leave yourself,” in which leaving oneself “occurs when one does not act or speak in accordance with one’s true thoughts, ideals, or feelings, irrespective of context” (p. 243).

Anderson-Fye (2002) recognized the model of “education-good job-economic independence” to avoid abuse as consistent with the “ethnopsychological need to protect oneself” (p. 244). She concluded that young women were both pushed and pulled toward secondary school completion. Abuse, actual or potential, pushed them to want economic independence, attainable through high school and a good job. In addition, “self-respect, status, and material benefits” pulled them toward completing (Anderson-Fye, 2002, p. 252). Young men, Anderson-Fye (2002) argued, shared the pull but lacked the push toward education because they, unlike young women, can have a job with

“relatively high income” and “social status” without a high school diploma (p. 252). The striking similarities, as well as differences, between my findings and those of Anderson-Fye (2002) will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

In contrast to the work of Anderson-Fye (2002), Arzu’s dissertation *High School Dropouts in Belize: A Grid and Group Explanation* (2012) focused specifically on early school leavers. Arzu’s (2012) qualitative research aimed at identifying what factors led specific students to drop out by utilizing a grid and group theory approach, to be described. In addition, he explained and evaluated this approach, and examined what emerged outside of the grid and group assessment tool (Arzu, 2012, p. 3).

The grid and group approach is based on Douglas’ (1982) work in which grid is “the degree to which a person’s choices are controlled within a social system by obligatory prescription such as role expectation, rules, and procedures” (Arzu, 2012, p. 4). Group, on the other hand, refers to the “extent to which people value collective relationships and the scope to which they are committed to the social unit” (Arzu, 2012, p. 4). Thus, Arzu (2012) examined the “social mind-sets inherent in the schools” in combination with the “individual mindsets” to see how this affected students dropping out (p. 5). The aim was to shift the focus from individualistic explanations for dropping out to examining these within Harris’ (2005) four social mind-sets within schools (Arzu, 2012, p. 28). The four social groups are “individualism, authoritarianism, hierarchy and collectivism,” and each one promotes a different behavior, called “social games,” regarding the group (Arzu, 2012, p. 29). As explained by Arzu (2012), “individualism promotes competition and personal rights, bureaucratic/authoritarianism supports strong role classifications and isolationism, corporate/hierarchical mind-sets promote group

allegiance and social incorporation, and collectivist/egalitarianism encourages free will and equitable opportunities” (p. 29).

Following pre-interviews and having 40 teachers from four different schools in the southern district of Belize complete the grid and group assessment tool, Arzu (2012) selected three early school leavers and three teachers from each of two schools representing “diametrically opposed quadrants” for a total of 12 participants (p. 6). Interviews of each participant, observations and artifact collection pertaining to student data at school, as well as reports on the school itself, were collected.

Arzu concluded that teachers and students differed on ideas about why students left school early. Teachers attributed it to financial issues, peer pressure and negative messages from home—either putting down the student or simply not being involved. Also, academic difficulties were cited. Early school leavers also brought up academic difficulties, but focused primarily on poor relations with teachers or administrators (Arzu, 2012, p. 99). Arzu noted that that both teachers and students agreed that academic issues, rules and regulations, and lack of discipline were contributing factors.

One school, STHS, had a high grid culture that was ‘corporate’ in which the group’s interest was more important than an individual’s interest (Arzu, 2012, p. 104). In this case, Arzu argued that discipline, rigid structure and rules, subservient roles for students and the way they were taught, affected students negatively. Thus, while teachers believed in collaboration, little autonomy was granted to students to collaborate in class or even to build positive relationships with teachers (Arzu, 2012, p. 105). The other school, CHS, was shown to have an individualistic culture, with few rules and minimal role distinctions. Unlike STHS, which had programs to prevent early school leaving,

CHS's lack of structure accounted for little collaboration to solve issues, and "tactless" communication with students on the teacher's part due to low accountability (Arzu, 2012, p. 106). Often a student would remain absent from school due to their teacher bringing up financial difficulties or even personal issues, and eventually the student would leave school. In looking at what factors lay outside of the grid and group approach, Arzu (2012) identified cultural norms or beliefs from ethnic populations, family, and the larger society. He also noted the passive resistance of constituents to a school principal, assumedly for political reasons, which caused many to leave high school early.

Arzu's (2012) study is important here for a few reasons. First, it remains one of the only qualitative investigations into early school leavers in Belize. Second, when looking closer at the individual interviews of teachers and students, his findings, although categorized differently, corroborate many of the findings in this dissertation. And third, while I agree with Arzu that there needs to be more investigation into factors other than those individualistic ones that can be blamed on the "dropout," his study shows the importance of including the larger cultural, social, historical, and economic context in a study of this sort.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined both the context of Paradise Caye and its local, tourism-based economy, as well as the current forces of globalization in which Belize as a country is enmeshed. Education is situated both in the wider context of international development discourses seeking to eradicate poverty and crime, and in the more specific national efforts to reform secondary schools. Although the focus on early school leaving literature was not exhaustive, it was intended to be comprehensive in its purpose of

situating the findings herein. This research is not intended to uncover all the reasons early school leavers left school, as there are many other factors and methods that would have to be included in order to grasp the whole picture. Rather, this is an exploratory study and a critical starting point to understand how those who left school early think about their experiences in the institution of school, its purpose in their own lives, and why they left it. It is hoped that this dissertation will contribute a more profound understanding of the often unheard perspectives of early school leavers in order to help educators, school administrators, as well as education and social policymakers better understand students and their needs.

CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

This interpretive, multiple case study is an exploratory study focused on learning about the perspectives and understandings of early school leavers (Stake, 2005a). The choice of methodology followed from the research questions, which were best addressed through naturalistic inquiry using an inductive approach with qualitative research methods (Stake, 2005b). Each case, as defined by Miles and Huberman (1994), is a “phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context” and serves as a “unit of analysis” (p. 25). Here, each individual participant represents a case. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), multiple case studies offer a “deeper understanding of processes and outcomes of cases ... and a good picture of local causality” (p. 26). The multiple case study as a research design illuminated similar and disparate themes across individual cases. Comparison of these themes further revealed connections between participant perspectives and the sociocultural, economic, and historical underpinnings of their local context.

Setting

This study focused on a small caye, approximately 5 miles long by .15 to 1.2 mi. wide off the coast of Belize City that is referred to here as Paradise Caye. Currently, it has approximately 2,300 residents. At the time that Paradise High School was opened in 2008, the caye had only one Roman Catholic primary school. As of September, 2015, however, another private primary school opened on the caye.

Sutherland's (1998) anthropological work is important here for its ability to help situate this study in the sociocultural and economic history of the caye. Many people who inhabit Paradise Caye today can trace their roots back to the Caste Wars in the Yucatan beginning in the 1840s, and Mestizos have been the dominant ethnic majority on the caye for over a century. In the 1970s there were eight main family localities in which large kin groups lived. As Sutherland (1998) explained, "identification with a family name, participation in a family support network and acquisition of land on [Paradise Caye] are closely connected" (p. 40). Set amidst rich lobster beds, Paradise Caye had a local economy based primarily on fishing lobster and conch. In 1960, a fisherman's cooperative was created which brought economic success to the islanders. Not only was wealth equitably distributed, according to Sutherland, but those "who were willing to work and had some family support system in place could do extremely well" (p. 33).

Sutherland (1998) recognized social relations as a major factor in their success:

Strong nuclear family ties combined with tolerance of individual differences, for example, created support networks of extended family members that were stronger than communitywide organizations. Their refugee origins, fishing mode of production, and isolation from the colonial political center in Belize City helped to create a tradition of autonomy, individualism, and self-sufficiency. (p. 35)

Tourism began in the 1960s, first with a visiting professor and various students, and then in the 1970s with those backpacking along the "Gringo Trail" through Mexico, Central and South America (Jackiewicz & Govdyak, 2015; Sutherland, 1998). Many families supplemented their income with one or more hotels, restaurants, bakeries, bars, and rental houses (Sutherland, 1998, p. 41). As tourism grew more in economic importance and lobster fishing became less lucrative, tourism became the mainstay of the local economy.

As described in the section on tourism and Paradise Caye, the social and physical landscape has changed considerably over the last 50 years. Tourism and its associated employment opportunities has drawn to the island many people of varying ethnicities and backgrounds—Garinagu, Chinese, Maya, other Central American immigrants, and many “ex-pats” from Europe, Canada, England, and the United States. The island now has roughly 90 or more hotels, and real estate companies aggressively market land to foreign buyers at prices that are out of reach for many Belizeans. As Jackiewicz and Govdyak (2015) noted, there are divergent views on the future of the caye, with some lamenting all of the development. In one interview with a local realtor, Jackiewicz and Govdyak (2015) related that Paradise Caye was described as about 80% Belizean, but locals “are starting to sell and cash out” (p. 33). However, given that tourism provides jobs and is the mainstay of the economy, there are also many residents who are not planning on moving anywhere. Furthermore, the locals and long-time ex-pats have a vested interest in maintaining the “laid-back,” local atmosphere in juxtaposition to the more developed neighboring caye. Not only is it in sync with the traditional pace of the caye, but also the easygoing atmosphere is an integral part of the island’s image and attraction as an “authentic” tourist destination.

This setting was chosen for the study because it offered a unique set of obstacles and opportunities regarding access to secondary school. Prior to 2008, those wishing to attend secondary school had to either be of a higher SES or rely on extended family and friends to help with financing school and/or providing a place to live. PHS was built to address a perceived need in the community for a high school on the caye so that those who weren’t so fortunate could also attend. The school itself has founders from outside

of Belize whose mission was universal secondary education for youth on the island. In line with their philosophy, administrators made concerted efforts to secure work-study positions, scholarships, and sponsors for those students who were unable to pay for school. This will be elaborated on further in the findings.

Sampling and Participants

As Miles and Huberman (1994) discussed, sampling requires both setting boundaries to define the case and creating a framework to help reveal the processes underlying the study. In this multiple case study I sampled purposively (Patton, 2002), creating initial boundaries for early school leavers based on geography and age. Participants needed to be residents of the cayes who were between the ages of 15 and 30 and had left school prior to completion. These boundaries were chosen based on my own knowledge of the local context and the influence these two factors, geography and age, had in relation to access to and experience of school. The sampling progressed in an iterative way, via a process of snowball sampling, identifying cases from people who knew about other cases (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Within the boundaries for this multiple case study, I sought maximum variation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). I included participants with different reasons for leaving and all different experiences of and ideas about the purpose of school.

Qualitative studies often involve “continuous refocusing and redrawing of study parameters during fieldwork” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 30). This proved true here as I included three cases outside the periphery of my initial sampling parameters. For instance, one early school leaver was 14 years of age, another later returned to a night school and received her diploma, and one lived between Belize City and the cayes while

attending high school. All of these cases proved relevant to my research questions and were further illustrative of the variety of experiences of these early school leavers.

The sample for this study had a total of 21 participants with 15 females and 6 males. Out of the total sample, 11 attended only PHS, three attended a school off the caye and then PHS, and seven attended a school off of the caye. For both male and female participants, the age for those who attended school off of the caye is higher because prior to 2008 there was no high school on the caye. Table 1 shows the age of participants at time of interview, self-reported ethnicities, and the year they left school.

Table 1
Participant Characteristics According to Gender and School

Characteristics	Females			Males	
	PHS	PHS/Other	Other	PHS	Other
Age					
14-18	7	2			
19-23	2	2		2	1
24-30			2		3
Ethnicity					
Mestizo	4	2	2	1	4
Garinagu	3	1		1	
Creole	1				
Mixed	1	1			
Year Left					
During Form 1	3				2
After Form 1	1			1	
During Form 2	4			1	
After Form 2					
During Form 3	1	2		1	
After Form 3			1		1
During Form 4	1	1	1		

Note. Mixed ethnicity represents two participants, Creole/Garinagu and White/Mestizo.

Recruitment

I began recruiting for participants in March of 2014 by putting up flyers on community bulletin boards and in internet cafes (see Appendix B). Flyers proved to be unsuccessful, but previous knowledge of those who had left school, as well as speaking with people personally about my study, guided me to the individuals with whom I should talk. I approached potential participants and explained to them the nature of the study. I discussed what would be required of them, the small monetary gesture of thanks (BZ\$10) they would receive at the end of the process, and that what they said would remain confidential. Recruiting took place simultaneously with data collection from mid-March through August, 2014. Often a participant I interviewed would suggest another potential participant who met the criteria for the study. Each interview was usually the result of multiple attempts at contacting the participant.

Prior to each interview I went through the appropriate IRB-approved informed consent and assent documents with the participants and the parents and/or guardians (see Appendices A, D, E, & F). In all documents, I explained that I would ensure the confidentiality of the participants. I also verbally explained this, providing detail about how I would report findings such that participant data would remain confidential.

Data Collection

Methods for this multiple case study were shaped by the research questions. Because the research focus here was on perspectives of early school leavers, interviews proved to be the primary method for obtaining data (Merriam, 1998). For this study, I relied primarily on interviews and surveys. While I did not observe individual

participants in a school setting, my full-time teaching position at the local secondary school, PHS, for the year of 2012/2013 provided me with an understanding of the school as a context. Here I had the opportunity to teach six of the participants. Furthermore, I had prolonged engagement in the field, living on the island from December, 2011, through August, 2014. My research interest in the perspectives of early school leavers emerged from my experiences and observations within this school context.

Interviews

I conducted a total of 21 interviews with early school leavers, the majority of which lasted between 20 and 40 minutes. Because the nature of this study was an exploratory and descriptive multiple case study, I utilized a semi-structured interview format. This semi-structured format allowed for cross-case comparisons, and yet the more conversation-like aspect of semi-structured interviewing honored the exploratory intent of the research (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The work of Smyth and Hattam (2001) on early school leavers influenced the design of the interview protocol. Specifically, Smyth and Hattam have drawn on Furlong (1991) to emphasize that leaving school early can produce all forms of emotions for the early school leaver and a researcher must be mindful of this. As Furlong (1991) explained, “rejecting schooling is nearly always a strongly emotional experience. Even the most hardened pupils will experience intense and often contradictory emotions when they are challenging school. Feelings of anger, fear, frustration, elation and guilt may all be present” (p. 296). Recognizing this, Smyth and Hattam (2001) were careful not to ask questions in their interviews that in any way implied failure or labeled participants. Also, so as not to invite early closure of the topic, Smyth and Hattam (2001) inquired about

their central issue with the statement, “Tell us what was happening in your life at the time you decided to leave school” (p. 405). Similarly, I was careful not to ask questions that I believed implied failure or would induce guilt in the participant. I also kept most of the questions open-ended to allow space for discussing what was important to participants. Throughout the interviews, I approached all conversations with respect for the participants’ individual experiences and choices. The overall structure of the protocol itself ended with questions that forced the critique back on schools. In this way, the interviews almost always ended on a positive note and imparted a sense of legitimacy to the participant as one who could analyze school and its role in one’s life because of having experienced it.

I changed my initial interview script twice during the first four interviews as I adjusted questions to be more direct and make more sense to participants (see Appendix G). I made no overall changes regarding content, but rather made general questions more specific and broke up multiple questions into separate ones. An example of a general question is “How would you describe your family’s experience with school?” This question was replaced with more specific questions concerning whether or not parents attended secondary school and how important it was for their children to attend. Because the first four interviews did not follow the same script as the rest, I went back through the transcribed interviews to see which questions had been answered and which ones were missing. During the follow-up meetings with participants, I went over what they had said in the interview and also covered anything that I might have missed.

All interviews began by getting a general idea about the participants’ experiences in primary school. Although primary school was not the focus of the study, it provided

an opportunity to look at differences between secondary and primary school experiences of participants. Specific questions about school experiences focused on describing teachers, the school, oneself as a student, as well as relationships with others in school. Participants then discussed why they left school after having reflected on their experiences of school. They answered questions about their goals at the time they started secondary school and were asked to reflect on whether or not they felt like they needed secondary school for what they were doing then or wanted to do. Participants were also prompted to take into account the local context and reflect on the different meanings secondary school might have to caye residents compared with others living elsewhere. The interview ended with questions about what participants would change in schools if they could do so.

Surveys

Based on themes from the interviews, I generated questions for a survey that participants completed at the second meeting (see Appendix H). One participant had moved off the island and thus a total of 20 surveys are included in the findings. This methodological approach was inspired by Willison and Gibson's (2011) work in which participants were given a list of themes that emerged from interviews and then asked to rank them in importance. The reasoning behind this, according to Willison (personal communication, November, 2013) was to give participants another opportunity to acknowledge the significance of themes that might not have come out in the interview. Creating the survey based on themes from the interviews contributed to new findings as well as corroborated those found in interviews, thus serving as one form of member-checking (Merriam, 1998).

The survey did not contain an exhaustive list of themes found in all interviews, but rather focused on factors identified in interviews that influenced participants to leave school. Based on multiple and close readings of interviews, I selected themes which needed clarification or were only indirectly referenced in interviews. I also engaged in member checking (Merriam, 1998) by going over the summaries of interviews with participants. I revisited any questions that needed clarification or simply didn't get fully answered in the interview. I explained to participants that the survey was compiled from all the interviews and was a list of factors that played a role in students leaving school early.

Prior to participants completing the Likert-scale survey, I explained that they were to mark from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), based on how much a factor influenced them in leaving school early. I was careful to emphasize that they were rating the importance of factors in relation to their own reasons for leaving and not in general. The survey results allowed for additional insights into the factors that played a role in influencing students to leave early. Table 2 (Appendix J) displays the statements in relation to those who strongly agreed with them, including ratings of both 6 and 7 on the Likert-scale.

Data Management

Data was filed both physically and on the computer. It was also backed up on IDrive. Data was grouped based on the type of data it was, for example audio recording, as well as by case. Thus, each participant had a file that contained any and all forms of relevant data, for example, memos, interview transcriptions, and surveys among others.

Data Analysis

Following Smagorinsky (2008) I will attempt to show in detail how the process of data analysis took place. I analyzed data as I collected it and this analysis informed the subsequent data collection. Although interviews, surveys, and member checking finished at the end of August 2014, data analysis, along with writing and researching issues which pertained to my findings, continued long after data collection.

Interviews

I personally transcribed each interview in full following each interview and before conducting the next one. I documented non-verbal speech acts such as pauses and laughter where it affected the interpretation of the verbal communication. As will be discussed, I utilized methods from constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to analyze the transcribed interviews.

Memos

After each interview and prior to the next, I wrote a detailed reflection on the content and the interview itself in the form of a memo (Creswell, 1998). Memo-writing, as Charmaz (2006) has pointed out, is the intermediate step between collecting data and actually writing up the research. It encourages constant analysis and reflection as different ideas come to the researcher, as well as shows the evolution of one's thoughts about the data and the gaps that need to be filled. Memos allow one to compare codes with categories and categories with concepts and to play with these ideas as they develop (Charmaz, 2006). In my case, memos helped me to think about the issues that participants were bringing up in relation to others. Sometimes one participant would allude to something, for instance, not wanting to repeat and be a year behind their friends,

and I would wonder and ask other participants if that was the case. In the case of that particular example, I placed a statement pertaining to the issue of repeating on the survey for clarification.

Summaries

After transcribing and rereading through an interview, I wrote a summary of each one, noting any further questions to revisit with the participant in the second meeting. These focused on content - what the participant had said and left unsaid, as well as any lingering questions I had after the interview.

Both the reflective memos and the summaries were created prior to the next interview and allowed for critical reflection on the emerging themes, as well as the relationships between themes within and across cases. These also allowed me to reflect on my own preconceptions and biases regarding my research. As Guba and Lincoln (1994) pointed out “what can be known is inextricably intertwined with the intersection between a particular investigator and a particular object or group” (p. 110). Some participants were former students and others I had met only through this research. Thus, a part of writing reflectively about interviews was taking into consideration how the nature of this relationship also influenced the interview itself.

Coding

From the beginning of and throughout data collection, I reflected on the themes that were emerging, the relationships between them, and the potential codes. The interviews and data were read through multiple times prior to engaging in coding. I began coding after the interviews were transcribed and prior to the surveys. To code and analyze data, I utilized the “constant comparative procedure” (Creswell, 2002), which

began with open coding and gradually progressed to a process of axial coding. Throughout, I was looking for categories with internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Patton, 2002). Open, descriptive coding of the interviews utilizing these categories helped refine, expand, and alter these categories to more accurately reflect the data. All of the data were coded in a process of inductive analysis, in which I sought to record the significant categories emerging from the data (Patton, 1980, 2002). The codes were updated and reorganized a total of six times as coding proceeded from open to descriptive and finally to axial coding. Coding began with main themes categorized relative to the research questions I focused on. For example, primary school and high school were two main categories. Within these categories, I had sub-themes: school, experience, course work, teacher relations, as a student, and student relations. These stayed fairly similar through the six different versions of codes, however in the first version I had a list of codes I classified as opinions. These were codes that came up that I didn't originally know where or how they fit in, such as LE – life is easy on the island because of family. By the sixth version of codes, everything was organized along the lines of the three main research questions. The code, LE, was related to beliefs about the purpose of school on the island. I did not finish coding until all of the data was accounted for and “saturated,” with a number of themes and regularities that emerged (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Peer-debriefing

Coded interviews were shared with members on my committee in order to confirm that the codes accurately represented the data. This peer-debriefing process

helped to ensure both validity and trustworthiness. The feedback generated from this also helped to identify larger themes and help organize codes accordingly.

Data Displays

In order to better analyze the data across multiple cases, I organized it into data displays on a case-by-case basis (see Appendix I). I first organized a data display based on the main themes and research questions. While filling these out for every case, I took note of what needed to be changed, as well as what could be reorganized for effective analysis. I then drafted a second version that more accurately and effectively displayed all data relevant to the research questions. There are twenty-one data displays representing each case.

Another display was created to help analyze the survey data (see Appendix J). Participants were stratified according to gender and school. This data display showed all statements that had been agreed to with a 6 or a 7 (*strongly agree*) to indicate that these were factors that influenced a participant's decision to leave.

Participant Confidentiality

My efforts to ensure participant confidentiality were explained in person verbally to all participants and to the parents and guardians of minors. They also read and signed IRB-approved informed consent forms, and the parent/guardian informed consent forms and assent forms for minors where necessary. Throughout the study, I reported the findings in such a way as to keep all identities confidential. I did this by changing all names in the data collected and the reported findings.

In such a small community, however, it is likely that people will find out some of the identities of those who participated in the study - probably from the participants

themselves. However, it was my duty to not disclose the identities of anyone and to avoid reporting the findings in any way that would link participants to what they said. To accomplish this, I specifically chose not to report findings in a narrative format. I explained this to the potential participants by ensuring them I would not tell their story as a whole, but look across the multiple cases to compare themes. I would also use pseudonyms in place of their real names. While there are many benefits to narrative study, in the context of this small community, the use of narratives would present an ethical problem that could potentially allow the identification of participants.

Limitations

This study is limited by its small sample size and the fact that there are more female than male participants. Another limitation of this study is the small size of the community and how that affected the nature of what was said and left unsaid. As anyone knows who lives in a small town, personal lives can be fairly transparent. Thus, whereas in a larger social milieu, a participant might believe in the fact that what they say will remain confidential, there is less confidence in any claims to confidentiality in a smaller town. Sensitive to this, I was careful not to ask what would be consider “prying” questions when references were made to other underlying themes in a way that made it clear they didn’t want to discuss them. Thus, had this research been conducted in a larger context there may have been richer, more informative detail in a couple of the cases. For instance, in one case, there was an allusion to something that I wanted to ask more questions about but did not because I sensed the participant was being discrete about it for the sake of keeping her own matters private. In another case, a participant did not

elaborate on much in the interview, reflecting a combination of both possibly what she expected an interview should be like and her concern for not saying too much.

Additionally, given the small sample size and very specific context, the results are in no way meant to be generalizable. Rather, the findings are related to this specific context at the time the research was conducted. It remains up to individual readers based on their review of the context of my study to decide if it is potentially “transferable” in the sense that aspects of this study might apply to other similar contexts.

Trustworthiness & Reliability

Here, I take Harrison, MacGibbon, and Morton’s (2001) definition of trustworthiness as “the ways we work to meet the criteria of validity, credibility, and believability of our research – as assessed by the academy, our communities, and our participants” (p. 324). Harrison et al. (2001) pointed out the need to think about the researcher “in relation” to those being researched and continually reflect on the idea of reciprocity as central in the research endeavor. Throughout my research I was committed to both creating a trustworthy account of participant perspectives, as well as engaging in dialogue, consulting participants about my findings, and keeping their best interest in mind when re-presenting what they said. In order to increase the validity of this research, I engaged in a variety of practices specific to qualitative research. I triangulated data across interviews, surveys, and documents, as well as wrote reflexive researcher memos and case summaries of interviews. I also engaged in member-checking with participants by going back over the case summaries with them, clarifying concepts that were unclear, and revisiting questions that surfaced or were left unanswered (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I sought to achieve warrantability through both a level of abstraction—in order to

“see more possibilities”— and coherence, to understand how “those possibilities fit together” (Breault & Adair Breault, 2007). Because this is a qualitative study, I achieved conditions of meaningfulness through the different types of authenticity recognized by Lincoln and Guba (1986).

Throughout the research, I was concerned with trying to accurately represent the perspectives of my participants. As such, I searched for “disconfirming evidence” continuously in different ways (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Within my data I revisited my interviews, codes, and themes to search for evidence that might point to interpretations I was not considering. I also actively sought to contextualize the findings in the larger sociocultural, historical and economic context through “thick description” in order to allow readers to form their own opinions about the findings in relation to the description of the context (Geertz, 1973). While this process of contextualization didn’t offer up disconfirming evidence specific to my research, it certainly aided in interpretation by facilitating, for instance, deeper historical and social understandings of the findings. During the time when I was still researching and analyzing, I had many opportunities to have informal conversations with other teachers, parents, and community members about school and life on the caye. Perspectives were always offered on issues related to schooling and these presented opportunities for me to reflect on my own interpretations. I also had an outside, disinterested expert in Belizean education read through my dissertation as an external audit, and discussed the findings with Belizean educators familiar with secondary education and related issues.

Researcher's Role

In any interview, not only are there “interaction effects” (Smagorinsky, 2008) but also as Guba and Lincoln (1994) discussed, “what can be known is inextricably intertwined with the intersection between a particular investigator and a particular object or group” (p. 110). Even engaging in an interview is not a regular or natural form of social interaction, and talking to someone you may or may not trust with your experience can feel risky. Charmaz (2014) investigated the experiences of researchers in utilizing grounded theory methods internationally. Concerning the interview as a method of data collection in her home country of Mexico, Cisnero-Puebla emphasized that the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee is not only a hierarchical, unequal one, but also can be shaped by multiple “distrusts” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 1077). I would agree and extend that beyond grounded theory to most research which relies on forms of human interaction that don't fall under the accepted norm of social relations.

Charmaz (2014) stated that “using grounded theory across cultures and societies can change research relationships. Access may be predicated on becoming an accepted and acceptable member of the studied community” (pp. 1077-1078). My own role as a researcher came after having lived in this particular community for two and a half years when I began research. For the 2012-2013 school year, I taught full-time at PHS. In so doing, I gained a better understanding of the challenges the local high school faced and how school fit in with daily life on the cay. As a teacher, I was exposed both to the issues that teachers and management faced, as well as the day-to-day educational and social experiences of the youth who attended school. I also had the opportunity to participate in and listen to many conversations with adults and youth, both in and out of

school, concerning the educational opportunities available to young people and what it means in their lives. As such, my research was inspired by and grew out of my experiences and relationships within and outside of the school.

Researcher Bias

Being a teacher at the local high school also contributed to my own bias in terms of initial speculations and interest in the research. As a teacher witnessing and being a part of daily interactions at school, I was privy to seeing what will be described in the findings as “the event of leaving” or the “last straw.” As such, I had what Ladson-Billings (2006) warned against – a tendency to seek psychological explanations for individual behavior that seemed irrational at the time. Nevertheless, I did not believe, as discussed in Arzu’s (2012) findings, that students leave school early because parents don’t value their education. To the contrary, I felt most place a great deal of importance on education and make many sacrifices for their children to attend. Another common opinion about why students leave school early throughout Belize was that they could not finance the education. While this is undoubtedly true in many cases, the students that I witnessed leaving early were at PHS, a place that had administrators who actively sought funding for their students through sponsors, scholarships and work-study programs. My own experiences in school and living on the caye made me interested not only in why students leave school early, but also how they described their school experiences and how they saw the purpose of school in their lives.

Six of the participants were former students of mine. In these cases, I actively sought to suspend either interpreting or embellishing their perspectives with my own experiences of teaching them. This was also a lesson in humility for me as I was made

aware as a researcher of all those things I was unaware of as a teacher—experiences students were having that I wish I had known about at the time. The fact that both the participants and I were no longer affiliated with the school most likely allowed for more open dialogue concerning participant experiences and beliefs about the school.

CHAPTER FIVE: PRIMARY SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

This dissertation focused on the perspectives of twenty-one participants on why they left secondary school prior to completion, how they describe their experiences in both primary and high school, and what they think about the purpose of high school. The findings presented herein are intended to shed light on the perspectives of early school leavers in an effort to include the voices of those, for the most part, left out of education research and policy. Based on the semi-structured interviews and surveys conducted with participants, the findings emerged from an analysis of the data sources in context.

The findings will be presented in chapters 5 - 8. In this chapter, I will first briefly examine some demographic statistics of participants and then present the findings on their primary school experiences to contextualize further discussion and interpretation in the final chapter of this dissertation. In Chapter 6, I will present the findings from participant perspectives on their high school experiences and Chapter 7 will focus on their reasons for leaving. Chapter 8 will examine participant beliefs about school, particularly those about the purpose of school in their lives.

Although primary school was not the research focus on school experiences per se, it was helpful to see how participants characterized and remembered those years. Leaving out the primary school years would preclude the possibility of identifying cases that demonstrate processes of disengagement that began in the earlier years of schooling. Additionally, experiences from primary school played an important role in forming participant perspectives on secondary school, purposes of schooling, and reasons for

leaving. Here I present the findings on primary school experiences to contextualize and compare the findings related to the later high school years. Interview questions that focused on primary school experiences were the following:

- Tell me about your overall experience with primary school.
- Describe yourself as a student in primary school. Any grades repeated?
- Describe your school and the teachers. Did you like them?

I divide the findings into overall characterizations of positive and negative primary school experiences. In this way, the types of experiences described, such as relationships with teachers, remain contextualized within and connected to the way overall primary school experiences are described.

Most participants attended the Catholic primary school, the only primary school on the caye until 2015, which will be referred to as Paradise Roman Catholic School (PRCS). Two participants grew up elsewhere, and three participants transferred there from other schools. Like other primary schools across the country, PRCS consists of eight grades beginning with Inf. 1 and 2, followed by Std.s 1 through 6. Because of the small population size on the caye, most teachers and students know each other and their families outside of school. Furthermore, some participants had relatives working at the school.

Positive Primary School Experiences: School was “Awesome”

When asked to describe their primary school experiences, 13 participants, 11 females and two males, felt that their experiences were positive ones. Participants described their experiences with words such as “awesome” (Samantha, 15-1) and their schools as “really good” (Jennifer, 17-1). Positive experiences were characterized by

good relationships with teachers and students, and in most cases, limited academic difficulties in school.

Academics

Three of the females, Sara, Yoli, and Cindy reported always being first or second in their class ranking. All three characterized the academics as easy to the point of being a “breeze” (Sara, 10-1) and used descriptions like “smart” and “top of the class” to describe themselves as students (Sara, 10-1; Yoli, 1-8). Cindy also pointed out that she had a “normal childhood,” something that she juxtaposed to her secondary school experience later in the interview (5-1). Yoli felt like her primary school experience was better than high school, and her parents were more supportive then (1-1). She had good grades, “always coming in first,” and good relationships with the teachers and students (Yoli, 1-2).

Six other participants also reported liking primary school and doing well academically. In various ways, their responses showed that they were interested and engaged in school. For instance, Samantha said she was “into her studies” (15-1). Shirlene considered herself competitive, trying to be at the top of the class, and at the same time trying to be funny (13-2). Linda liked primary school and used to always do her work, although she had difficulty with math (21-1). Brandy said she listened in class and did not like to “play” around (not pay attention) (16-1). Estevan reported getting good grades, and liked doing projects but not necessarily homework. Estevan considered himself talkative in primary but he still did his work and always got good grades (6-2).

Melanie, Elisa, Anita and Luis also reported having overall positive experiences in primary school, but specifically talked more about academic difficulties. Melanie

reported passing Std. 6 but not the subject of Math, a subject Anita also reported as difficult. Anita didn't pass Std. 6 and repeated this grade once. Elisa thought primary school was fun and explained that she "played around" and "scraped" the grades meaning she barely passed but never actually repeated any grades (7-1). Luis said school was fun and the overall experience was a good one but he struggled academically. He repeated Std.s 1 and 3 and did not feel like repeating helped him in any way (Luis, 14-2).

Relations with Teachers

Most participants who characterized their experiences as positive ones overall had good relationships with the teachers. Sara felt like it was a good school and she loved all her teachers (10-1). Regarding her relationship with the teachers, Linda explained, "they were always helping me out and if I . . . go ask them for help they always help me" (21-1). Linda and Jennifer also mentioned "helpful" as a quality of the teachers, with Jennifer, who attended a private primary school in Belize City, happy that they were strict and pushed her to learn (17-2).

Estevan felt like the teachers were "alright" and if they scolded him he deserved it (6-2). Luis considered the teachers, for the most part, helpful and "kind," although there was one teacher whom he stated everyone had a problem with. He felt like she favored girls more than boys and was not helpful (14-2). Samantha "loved" them, but also mentioned that some were difficult and strict. Samantha explained an incident she had with a teacher:

Yeah, I loved them but some of them were, um, you know, a little bit difficult. I mean like they were so strict that sometimes they would like scream at you and I remember one time I was in a, not sure if it was 6th grade, I think it was in 6th grade that um a teacher she scold me and she wanted to, like yeah, she wanted to like spin me with a ruler but then I told my mom and my mom came and she had a conversation with her so... (15-2)

Samantha nevertheless felt that most of the teachers treated her fairly. Unlike the others, Shirlene felt that she didn't really get along with *any* of the teachers. She explained, "I didn't really get none of the teachers. They were like, I was trying to be distant from them because I don't understand them and like, I can't be around them for too long. It gets me crazy" (13-2). Melanie remembered not liking her Std. 6 teacher at first but later realized that she was pushing her because she cared about her (19-1).

Relations with Students

Participants who described their overall primary school experiences as positive, for the most part, also had good relationships with other students. Melanie described her primary school experience as "fun" and she felt like she was more into friends at school than schoolwork (19-1). In terms of student relations, the issue of fighting wasn't directly asked about but was mentioned by Linda, who said that she liked to fight a little bit (21-1). Samantha said she had a lot of friends and was happy. She felt she was sometimes shy and at other times the class clown, and emphasized that she was not self-conscious like later on in high school (Samantha, 15-1). When describing himself, Luis called himself a "bad seed," and said he used to give a lot of trouble, but was always positive and caring toward others (14-2). Luis's self description is reminiscent of Calderon-Almendros' (2011) work showing how disciplinary experiences in school, among other negative experiences which label one as a troublemaker, become internalized as negative self-images and self blame.

Mixed to Negative Primary School Experiences: A "Lotta, Lotta Headache"

Four female participants and four male participants had mixed to negative experiences in primary school. Male participants repeated more and had more negative

experiences in primary school overall. Negative experiences in primary school, for the most part, had to do with social relations, mostly with teachers, but in some cases with students.

Academics

Simone, like Sara, Yoli, and Cindy, reported being at the top of her class rankings (3-2). Tiffany got good grades in primary school and said she always did her work (18-1). Ingrid felt like primary school was stressful, and although she had fun at times, she didn't like it. Janice explained that she didn't necessarily hate or like school, but attended because she had to, and was often absent (20-1).

John's grades were "very high" but worsened beginning in Std. 5 and he didn't pass Std. 6 (9-3). Raul's experience in primary school was so bad that he felt suicidal at one point. He had repeated Inf. 2 and later repeated half of Std. 5, but then was moved back into Std. 6, graduating with his class. As will be explained, this latter incident of repeating was not due to academics but rather to what Raul considered a teacher's personal vendetta against his family (2-1, 2). Manuel felt like school was okay at first but then, as he described, he started "playing around in class"(8-1). He repeated Std. 5 two times and then quit. Frank, who attended school in Belize City, said that he barely finished primary school, and had to repeat Std.s 4 and 5 (4-1, 2).

Relationships with Teachers

Among those who had negative experiences in primary school, about half describe a relationship with one or more teachers which affected them negatively. Some felt like they were being singled out unfairly either for personal reasons or in ways that violated their own privacy outside of school. Many participants reported being slapped

or hit by teachers. Corporal punishment was banned and enforced in schools beginning in August of 2011.

Simone, who grew up on the neighboring caye, did not have good relations with the teachers at her first school. She felt like she was discriminated against because she was at a Catholic school and she was not Catholic. She said, "...I am a lefty... I write with my left hand. So I used to get a lot of um, um whips and stuff on my hand for not, for using my left hand – I start to use my right" (Simone, 3-2).

Like Simone, Tiffany had difficult relations with the teachers and didn't feel treated fairly. She explained:

The teachers didn't really like me because of my mom so I didn't really get that treatment that I was supposed to get. I was always the one they picked on and picked on and picked on. Yeah, that's really bad. (Tiffany, 18-1)

She explained how the teachers would talk about her and her family in front of her and the class and she was even hit by a couple of them. Although Simone was at school before corporal punishment in schools was banned, Tiffany was hit after the law was put into effect. When asked if they hit her on her face, she replied:

Mmmhmm and I had a mark because my skin is very sensitive and I'm very easy to get like red, like bruises so yeah, well the teacher hit me. I had the mark on my face and I went to show my mom and she went to school but nothing really came out of it and then the teacher stand up and told my mom that yes, she said she will slap me and she would do it and she would tell the judge why she slapped me. (18-2)

Ingrid described her relationships with teachers as "strained," but does mention one nice teacher who cared and was always "helpful" (12-1). She characterized the school as a great school and "the teachers are very friendly and nice if you (laughing), if you be nice to them, they'll be nice to you" (12-1). Like Ingrid, Janice had good and bad

relationships with teachers. She said that if teachers come to school with an attitude, then she would return that attitude (Janice, 20-1).

When asked about primary school, John talked primarily about teacher and student relations. He said that the overall experience was just “fine,” but elaborated on that with negative examples. He felt that his teachers favored the students at the top of the class. John reported “getting away” with a lot, and speculated that they must have stricter rules now compared to what they had when he was growing up. He also got “spanked” by the principal. Laughing, he described what he was spanked with, “It’s a big, thick ruler about ... an inch and half by, what, four feet and that broke right on my butt (laughing) personally, so the teacher could not hit anybody else (laughing) in the school, right (laughing)” (John, 9-1).

Raul’s experience with one teacher affected his experience negatively. Raul felt that his teacher took out her own issues with his family on him and caused him to repeat Std. 5 by deducting points from his grades (2-2). When this happened Raul explained:

You know, it took me to a stage that I, um, I became suicidal ’cause I was complaining to my parents and stuff and they like, they didn’t take it seriously, like didn’t show any interest to try to come to school and find out what’s happening, you know, so I felt like I was on my own. But apart from that I got over it and everything was ok and now other than that primary school was very nice. Other than that I didn’t have any, you know, problem. (2-1)

In the middle of the year, the principal looked into the matter and put him back in Std. 6, allowing Raul to graduate at the end of the year.

When asked about the teachers, Manuel said he “can’t complain about them. Sometimes the teacher ... gave me trouble, you know, always calling on me ‘cause they didn’t have my attention in class but, you know, that’s a teacher’s job, that’s what they do” (8-2). Describing the teachers in general, Manuel felt that some were “bossy” and

“grumpy” (8-2). Similar to Luis, Frank called himself a “young, mischievous little kid looking for problems,” a “problem child,” and said that he wouldn’t have finished if it hadn’t been for a few of the teachers and his mother pushing him to finish (4-2).

Student Relations

Five participants described relationships with students that were less than harmonious, some being bullied and others picking fights. Simone felt like she had a lot of bad experiences due primarily to bullying, but after transferring to a different school in Std. 5 things got better. She attributed her being bullied to being more developed physically than other girls who were jealous and would tease her. Simone considered herself a tomboy - adventurous and reserved at the same time (3-2). Like Simone, John primarily had issues with the other students, “I really used to get bullied a lot, ok, it wasn’t really a nice experience growing up in this school right here. Lotta, lotta headache” (9-2).

Tiffany felt like she was unfairly labeled as a troublemaker and had a lot of problems with other students. She described herself as helpful and volunteered a lot in class, but knew that she could also be disrespectful and loud at times (Tiffany, 18-1). Unlike Tiffany, who felt she was unfairly labeled as a troublemaker, both Ingrid and Janice called themselves troublemakers who not only got into a lot of fights, but also liked to pick fights (Ingrid, 12-1; Janice, 20-2). Janice noted that because of the trouble she gave in primary school, she wasn’t allowed to march at graduation (20-2).

For Manuel, relationships with students outside of school caused him to be less engaged and interested in school, similar to the findings of Wehlage et al. (1989) that demonstrated having friends who believed in the legitimacy of the school served as a

powerful motivator for staying in school. Manuel explained, “In primary school I was doing ok until I start going off, meeting friends and started meet bad company, started hanging around friends, start playing around in class and wasn’t paying attention in school” (8-1). Manuel attributed his experience to a gradual loss of interest in school, “I just didn’t like to be locked up in a class, being there, knowing I have friends on the street that are just hanging around and I couldn’t do the same” (8-1). He hung out with his friends a lot, lived the “street” lifestyle and said it was “pretty rough” going through primary school (Manuel, 8-1).

Conclusion

When participants were asked to describe their overall primary school experiences, 13 participants described positive experiences, five described school experiences as more negative, and three had a mixture of good and bad experiences. For those who characterized it positively, 11 were female and two male. Positive experiences were characterized by few or no academic difficulties, good relationships with teachers, and positive relationships with students. Negative experiences, on the other hand, often featured conflicted relationships with either teachers or students, and in some cases, academic difficulties.

When looking across cases at teacher relations, participants were split with some having positive relations with the teachers, while the other half did not. None of the male participants said that teacher relations were consistently good as did many of the mestizo females who “loved” their teachers. All of the participants who were of a minority ethnicity on the island, Garinagu or mixed Garinagu/Creole mentioned having issues with teachers, more than one naming the problem as one of attitude and misunderstanding.

Because this is not an ethnographic study, I will not venture into theorizing this too much, only to say that I had students of the same ethnicities with very different dispositions and ways of interacting. As a student, I have also had teachers with a variety of “attitudes.” Thus, I mention these perceptions because to ignore them would be to silence them, however, further research would have to be done to better understand these as interactions in their school and wider social context.

Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, and Oort (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of 99 studies investigating associations between the affective qualities of teacher-student relationships (TSRs), school engagement, and achievement for primary and secondary students. One of the findings showed that “negative aspects of the TSR have more impact on primary than secondary students” (Roorda et al., 2011, p. 517). In studies that had more boys, the effects were stronger for both positive and negative TSRs and engagement, while for girls positive relationships and achievement were stronger (Roorda et al., 2011, p. 518). Although the number of male participants in this research was small, it is noteworthy that the majority indicated both negative relationships with teachers and a general slide of disengagement in the primary years, as opposed to most females.

Regarding social relations with other students, some participants labeled themselves as troublemakers, and although not asked for directly, a few female participants mentioned that they liked to fight. On the flip side, both John and Simone were bullied throughout primary school. Frank and Manuel, in particular, noted that they had friends outside of school with whom they associated and often got into trouble. As will be seen, many of these relational issues carried over into high school, particularly in

those cases where participants went to both primary and secondary school on Paradise Caye with the same set of students.

Academic achievement is a common predictor variable for dropout studies. Within disengagement perspectives, those “at risk” usually have low academic achievement beginning in the early grades (Suh, Suh, & Houston, 2007). These findings show, however, that many of the female participants reported being good students and ranked toward the top, if not at the top of the class. Even though there was a smaller sample of males, more males than females repeated and had academic issues in primary school. Repetition rates in Belize are high, and consistently higher for boys compared with girls. In the 2013/14 school year, the repetition rate for boys was 7.4% compared with girls at 5.2% (MoEY, 2015, p. 21). The findings herein reflect the larger statistical portrait of repetition in Belize. Four of the six males repeated a grade and one didn’t pass Std. 6, leaving Estevan as the only male participant that did not report having repeated or failed a grade. In contrast, only two of the 15 female participants repeated a grade.

CHAPTER SIX: PERSPECTIVES ON HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

The findings reported in this chapter focus on student perspectives on their high school experiences. As Gudmundsdóttir (2001) emphasized, “most of the goals for people’s activities in classrooms are not their own – they are prescribed and handed to us by our culture through the various social relationships we have experienced in the education system” (p. 228). As such, students’ experiences of school are mediated by their own understandings of what school and teachers should be like. Teachers are in the same predicament, inhabiting a “preculturally defined role” with “specific cultural expectations” (Gudmundsdóttir, 2001, p. 227), at the same time that they have freedom within these roles to express their own individuality.

Interview questions aimed at understanding how participants reflected on their experiences, the people with whom they interacted, and the schools. Furthermore, I wanted to know what participants would change if they had an opportunity to do so in order to give them space for critique and get a sense of how they felt schools “ought” to be. The questions below were only guidelines and the dialogue prompted by these questions often went beyond the scope of the questions. The questions pertaining to secondary experiences were:

- Tell me about yourself as a student in high school.
- Describe your school and teachers. Did you like them?
- Tell me about your overall experience with high school.
- If you were the Minister of Education, what would you change in schools?

In the next three chapters, survey results will be integrated into the relevant themes. The survey was created after reviewing themes that emerged in all of the interview data combined. The survey was thought necessary not only to corroborate what was said in the interviews, but also to clarify the complex reasons given for leaving school. In some cases, themes that didn't arise in the interviews came out in the survey results and visa versa. This was most likely due to the fact that either particular factors might not have played a large role in their leaving, such as an absent parent, or that it was easier to disclose things in an anonymous survey than face to face.

School Descriptions

There are three high schools that are named and described here because more than one participant attended them and they recur often. A total of six participants attended high school off the caye prior to the opening of PHS. In the case of Frank in Belize City this is irrelevant, but for the other five it is worth noting as attending high school required either significant social or economic capital, or both. Those who could afford to commute daily to another high school were of higher SES than most families living on the caye. The only other option to attend was living with extended family or friends off the caye. After PHS opened, many more families were able to send their children to school.

St. Margaret's Academy (SMA)

St. Margaret's Academy is a Catholic secondary school in Belize City for young women. St. Margaret's, due to its alumnae "success stories," CSEC results, association with wealthier families, and competitive entry requirements, is regarded as one of the best schools in the country for young women. Furthermore, there is a long tradition of

young women from prominent families who have attended SMA. It currently serves around 500 students. Two participants lived with extended family in Belize and attended SMA prior to the existence of PHS, while two others attended SMA after PHS had opened, commuting daily.

San Andrés High School (SAHS)

San Andrés High School (SAHS) is a private, government-aided school on the more populated and developed caye, and accepts both young men and women. Its entry requirements are not as stringent as those of St. Margaret's Academy. To attend from Paradise Caye, students would have to commute daily or live on the caye with family or friends. It currently has over 600 students, reflecting the development and population growth on the caye. Because it was founded over 40 years ago, it has all the sports teams, clubs, music and other opportunities one would expect at a large high school. One participant resided on the island during her attendance, and two others commuted daily by boat.

Paradise High School (PHS)

This school opened its doors in 2008 and will be referred to as Paradise High School (PHS). Unlike SMA and SPSHS, PHS has a much smaller population of students to draw from and thus a smaller student body ranging from approximately 70 to 100 students. It is a government-aided, private school, which also accepts tax-free donations from overseas to help fund it. Created to address the need for a high school on the caye, it has an active policy of linking students with sponsors and scholarships on the basis of financial need. Different scholarships, funded often by local businesses and foreign donors, are also given out at the end of the year based on the discretion of the

administrators and teachers. Rather than being solely academic-based, many are designated for specific purposes, for instance, studying marine biology. Financial need and appropriate fit are then taken into consideration when awarding these. Fifteen participants attended the high school on Paradise Caye.

School Reputation: Where Will This High School Take Me?

The prestige of schools, or lack of it, and the way they were perceived by participants played a role in their high school experiences. The prestige of a school is often linked directly to its selectivity, and as Rutheiser (1990) noted, its exam passes (p. 139). School reputations also hinged on perceptions of how academically challenging a school was, but it was also a matter of teacher quality, school culture and the ‘types’ of students who attended. Erickson (1987) recognized legitimacy, trust and assent as key to understanding the political nature of learning or not learning what is deliberately taught (p. 343-5). Institutionally, they exist within the social structure and in “patterns of role relationships that recur over long time spans and are differentially allocated according to access to monetary capital and cultural capital” (Erickson, 1987, p. 345). At the existential level, they are:

...continually negotiated within the intimate circumstances and short time scale of everyday encounters between individual teachers, students, and parents. The institutional legitimacy of the school is affirmed existentially as trust in face-to-face encounters between school staff and students and their parents. (Erickson, 1987, p. 345)

Thus, the perceived legitimacy of a school as well as the interactions which take place in them inform, and to a certain degree, are mutually constitutive of one another. The four female participants who attended St. Margaret’s in Belize City were well aware that it was selective and had a reputation for being an academically challenging school.

Simone was excited to attend this high school because it was competitive and selective. Although she reported not having remarkably high PSE scores, she had won an academic contest at the national level and her grades were high, so she was accepted. She knew that not many students from the cayes got accepted, “I was excited because, I, you know it’s kind of something that I wanted to show off like, hey, look at me!” (Simone, 3-3).

Yoli came in second in her class in First Form and explained proudly,

I know I’m a smart kid from Infant I to high school. I went to one of the hardest schools – that was St. Margaret’s. And people were always like you can’t do that and I’m like yes I can and I know I could and I came in second in my class which, that is REALLY hard in St. Margaret’s. (1-8)

Cindy also explained that she had worked very hard to graduate at the top of her class in primary school in order to get a scholarship to go to this high school. Her parents would never have been able to afford it otherwise (Cindy, 5-2). All of the female participants who attended were definitely proud to be there.

In contrast, Janice attended a technical high school in Belize City. She felt like it was “kind of challenging” but that she “was too smart for it because they do more like slow work” (Janice, 20-1). As she explained, she didn’t like the school mainly because she felt it was too easy:

Well, I didn’t like the school first of all. Because you could say like it’s deep in Belize City and like I took, for example, you’re a dropout you go there but I wasn’t a dropout. I had to go there because it was closer to my aunt. That’s why I didn’t like it. And they don’t give challenging work – they give like easy, easy work.” (Janice, 20-5)

Unlike these two extreme cases, other schools located off the cayes had no main issues attached to them one way or the other concerning the quality of the education.

They were large, well-established high schools and thus, didn't have the issue with reputation that for instance, PHS and the technical school had.

In contrast to the other schools mentioned, PHS was recently built and thus its reputation was still forming when many of these participants attended. Based on what participants have said, during the first two years of the school, there were many practices and procedures in flux, as well as a lot of teacher turnover. PHS's reputation was "in the making," so to speak, and when describing the school, participants often discussed teachers and the way students were or were not disciplined. Manuel, who attended in the first years, described the school:

...it was just opened right, so it wasn't really functioning the way a real high school was supposed to be. Everyone, every student was just doing their own thing back answering the teachers, you know, and all that, 'cause the school was new. (8-4)

Jennifer liked PHS, particularly the first year when she attended Third Form. She said the teachers were helpful. The second year when she repeated Third Form because she was unable to complete it the first time, she complained that the teacher turnover made it difficult to learn, especially Math, a subject in which she felt she was "slow" (Jennifer, 17-4). Manuel felt the teachers were unqualified:

The teachers wasn't all that, you know, like they had all the degrees and things for teaching, you know, they just picked up some teachers from the street. Some people who just volunteered to try and teach so it wasn't all that like a high school but years passed by and they start improving and focusing you know. (8-4)

For those attending PHS after it had been operating for a few years, the questionable reputation continued. Some participants doubted the value of the education they were receiving at this specific school. Shirlene expressed her concern:

...Like to me that high school is fake because they don't really have everything, um, needed for someone to be schooled. Yeah, and then like I feel like I'm not even at a high school. Some time I wonder what will this high school take, where will it take me because I don't feel like I'm getting the great education that I should. (13-3, 4)

Shirlene said that she would feel much better if she were going to a high school in the city. Brandy thought teachers from the mainland would have been better because she felt like they were qualified and had their Associate's degrees (16-10). As will be shown in Chapter 8, perceptions of the specific school students attended affected their overall motivation to attend high school. On the survey, six participants strongly agreed with the statement, "I didn't like the school and wanted to go to a different one."

Perspectives regarding the reputation of the school show that concerns focused both on where the high school will "take" them, as well as issues within the high school, such as teacher quality, the students who attended, and the disciplinary control which, in the case of PHS, was lacking. Although Erickson (1987) focused on looking at reasons that cultural minorities might not succeed in school, he also made the point that students can still succeed despite pedagogy and curriculum that is culturally discontinuous from early childhood experiences. As Erickson (1987) noted, this related to Ogbu's (1982, 1989) observations concerning first generation minorities and shows the power of belief in a school's legitimacy to motivate students to learn *despite* pedagogy and curriculum that is not culturally sensitive or responsive. Importantly, Erickson (1987) pointed out that the power of the belief in a school's legitimacy is not only about culturally incongruous pedagogy, but could also hold for "direct instruction" (p. 354). Erickson (1987) explained:

If instructional patterns are very clear and consistent, . . . the teacher believes strongly in what he or she is doing, and children and parents can recognize the

teacher's unambivalently authoritative style as a sincere attempt to foster minority children's learning, then the children may trust the teacher and assent to learn, even though the interaction style of instruction violates the minority children's norms regarding appropriate communication style. (p. 354)

It could be argued that the colonial vestiges of an authoritarian pedagogy based on harsh discipline and direct instruction were originally alien to most students, regardless of ethnicity. Gradually, this "grammar of schooling" was perceived as the legitimate version of what school is supposed to be like, despite the fact that it still remains culturally at-odds with the majority of Belizeans (Tyack & Cuban, 1994).

Participants expressed strong beliefs in the legitimacy of St. Margaret's based on its reputation for being selective and academically rigorous. However, in the case of both the technical school and PHS, participants did not share this belief about their particular school's legitimacy. As this overall mistrust in their schools was communicated, they also focused on issues concerning the teachers' legitimacy, the lack of control in the class, the disrespect of the students, the scarcity of subjects, and the unchallenging nature of the academic work.

The Role of Scholarships and Social Capital in School Attendance

Nine percent of all currently enrolled students in primary, secondary, and post-secondary combined receive some form of financial assistance. Roughly 4% of primary students (80% of whom are poor) and 17% of secondary students (a little over half of whom are poor) are financially assisted. Slightly more than half receive this assistance in the form of grants, while 49% receive scholarships (Halcrow Group, 2010, p. 98). Many participants would not have been able to attend secondary school if it hadn't been for their accessing help in the form of both finances and living arrangements. Eleven of the twenty-one participants received some form of financial aid from people other than their

parents or through scholarships in order for them to attend secondary school. Some participants were able to attend secondary school by drawing on their social capital—social relationships of their own and their families. This took the form of receiving financial assistance and/or living with others in order to attend secondary school.

Finding a Way to Go to School: Scholarships and Sponsors

Four of the 21 participants were scholarship recipients. The policy at PHS was to try and help as many people to attend as possible by either finding scholarships funded by sponsors or having work-study positions available. These opportunities, however, were not always guaranteed, but students were generally not turned away. Rather, their bill would be waiting for them at the end of their four years and they would not actually receive their diploma until they paid for it. The unique position of PHS set amid a tourism-dominated economy had its advantages in terms of providing more access to tourists, ex-pats, and local business owners who were willing to sponsor students. Furthermore, these opportunities to sponsor were advertised on the internet. Internet marketing for the school is done by one of the founders, who drew on her own social and cultural capital as a foreigner to present the school in an effective manner to those within both a foreign and local audience who would be in a position to help. While I was teaching, there were a number of students who graduated with bills that they couldn't pay. However, these bills were eventually paid by one or more sponsors, which allowed the graduates to receive their diplomas.

Three participants had need-based scholarships at PHS. Regarding the school's goals of turning no student away because of lack of finances, Ingrid explained, "...they

like give scholarships. They're very helpful that's what I can say. It's a non-profit high school but they also find people to, um, help you if you can't really pay" (12-3).

Unlike PHS, scholarships at other schools were more difficult to obtain unless one had high grades and PSE scores. Cindy, who attended St. Margaret's, was the only student not at PHS who had been awarded a four-year scholarship. As discussed previously, she had worked hard to get good grades and score high on the PSE, as she knew this was the only way she would be able to attend secondary school. On the survey, five participants strongly agreed with the statement, "I couldn't qualify for a scholarship."

Other participants, particularly those attending secondary school prior to the opening of PHS, found sponsors on their own - their only option for attending secondary school. Raul had friends from the US who paid for his first year of school, however, he had to live with a relative who was paying for his living expenses (2-6). Similarly, Estevan met someone who made arrangements for him to attend school the first year while he lived with his mother on the mainland (6-2). Manuel, Luis and Melanie attended PHS and had someone other than their parents paying tuition. Melanie explained her situation:

I never would have gone to high school if it wasn't for the guy that I was dating. Um, my mom didn't have enough money to send me there so she, she told me to ask him so I did and he gave my mom a lump sum and that's how I went to [PHS] for first time. (19-2)

The problem with sponsors that were found on one's own was the fact that their financial assistance was not guaranteed for the full four years. For instance, Raul's sponsors only helped with the first year of school and Estevan's sponsor simply

disappeared after the Christmas holidays (Raul, 2-6; Estevan, 6-3). Similarly, Luis's sponsor stopped paying after he had finished three years of high school (14-9).

Living Away From Home to Go to High School

Sanford (1974) looked at child-lending practices in former British Honduras as a “socialization in ambiguity,” in which children were exposed to different social classes and ways of living other than their own. Examining the 1969 census in Belize City and Stann Creek, a full 25% of children were living with people other than their parents. She noted that in 85% of these cases the children were being taken care of by the siblings of the children's mother or father. Historically, children would often be cared for by another while women worked on their farm, but when Sanford was writing, there were also many parents working abroad and sending remittances home. Twenty three of the total 349 “child-keeping” events occurred so that children could attend a better school in a more urban setting. Some were kept up to 10 years for this purpose. Sanford (1974) noted one particular case:

Secondary schooling at this time was a privilege of the elite. The son used this education as a basis to launch what promises to be an outstanding and lucrative career - one which would have been very difficult or even impossible to obtain without his having gone to this keeper. (p. 396)

Apprenticeships were common at the time, and thus other child-lending practices took the form of apprenticeships in which children would help out and learn from those they lived with. This practice of staying with family other than parents in order to attend secondary school still exists today. Taking into account this historical practice in light of the findings herein, it shows that parents valued both formal and informal learning opportunities for their children. Furthermore, it shows that social capital in the form of

extended family was critical, even more so when economic capital was insufficient to take advantage of learning opportunities.

For those attending school off the caye, participants had the choice of commuting daily, the more expensive option, or residing with family elsewhere. Six participants, Simone, Cindy, Janice, Raul, Estevan and Jennifer lived on the mainland to attend secondary school. While Estevan was able to live with his mother on the mainland and attend high school, the other four lived with aunts or other extended family members. Although tuition at PHS was higher than at schools elsewhere, costs associated with snacks, lunch, and the daily commute to another school made PHS a more affordable option. Janice didn't attend PHS because of the tuition and possibly not knowing that she might be able to get a scholarship or at least a work-study position. As such, her only choice, given her academic record and her financial resources, was a school in Belize City that was much more affordable and close to her relative's home (Janice, 20-5). Another participant spent First Form at a boarding school on the mainland.

On Paradise Caye there were three participants who did not live with their parents. One participant lived on the caye with his sponsors, another had parents who had left the island, and one had moved from the mainland to live with a relative on the caye. Thus, out of the 21 participants, nine, at least at one point, were living with people other than their parents in order to attend high school. For those who finished primary school in the prescribed eight years, they would have had to leave home around the age of 12 or 13. The following themes emerged regarding these alternative living arrangements. These themes indicate further directions for research in conjunction with

Gillett's (2004) more general findings across Belize that students not living with their parents were less likely to complete school within the prescribed time.

Adjusting to a New Family: Struggling to Fit In and Homesick

New living arrangements were not easy as participants had to adjust to living with new people in a new home environment, attending a new school, and living away from parents. When asked to describe her experience in high school, Simone replied, "Um, um homesick, a lot of partying, ummm... homesick..." (3-5). Simone explained that part of the difficulty was adjusting to her brother's family, "...I really struggled my first year in high school because, um, I was struggling to fit in, um, I was struggling to fit in with my family in Belize because I didn't really grow up around them – I would just visit a little bit" (3-5).

Another part of the adjustment to living with extended family was the participant feeling like they were a financial burden to the family. For Raul, he felt like it was expensive for his relative to take care of him when she had her own large family and was going through "hard times" (2-6). Anita was also aware of her relative's financial struggles, an awareness that, as will be discussed, played a role in her decision to leave.

No Supervision: "Like Not Having Any Adults Around At All"

Once in secondary school, some students brought up the fact that their parents were not as involved as they would have liked in their schooling experience. Yoli explained that her parents were more supportive in primary. In contrast, when she began high school, the message was "ok now you're big, you're grown up, you gotta do things on your own and . . . they were not that much there like in primary school" (Yoli, 1-1). Raul felt like his father was not involved, but would support him whatever he decided

with regards to school (2-3). Janice, Simone and Cindy experienced a lack of supervision. For Simone and Cindy, this led to them getting into more trouble and in the case of Cindy, paying less attention to her schoolwork. Cindy explained:

After the parents started having problems in Second Form and then when I went to Third Form and then they split up. So even when I came home there's no supervision in the city and then when I came home there was no supervision at home so I was just like, eh... There was no parents around there was no guidance or anything. (5-4)

Cindy explained that living with her extended family in Belize “was really just like not having any adults around at all. They were never active in our daily lives” (5-3). Similarly, Janice was often absent from her high school and mentioned that she and her aunt were rarely home at the same time (20-4).

Because this theme came up with many of the participants, the survey had a statement relating to parental involvement, “My parents were not involved or as encouraging as they could be in high school.” Nine participants strongly agreed with this statement. Six participants did not bring this up in the interview but strongly agreed with it on the survey. On the other hand, three participants who, according to their interviews did not have parents involved in their schooling, did not strongly agree with it on the survey, reflecting their beliefs that it was not a factor in their leaving.

Disengagement and Social Selves: From “Interesting” to “We Really Didn’t Care”

Processes of disengagement happened for a variety of students in different ways and over different lengths of time. A common theme was a trajectory that saw interest in school diminishing from First Form, when everything was new and exciting, to Third Form, when participants became more interested in friends or “partying” than school

work. Only in a couple of cases, did this result in a similar slide in academic success.

Simone described her experience from First Form to Third Form:

In First Form I was just you know a little shy, a child trying to fit in from [San Andrés], a little caye girl and second year I warmed up and I did pretty good, I did pretty good in my second year of high school. The third year I started experimenting with drinking and teenagers you know and I got, me and my sister got our first suspension. (3-5)

For Cindy, her parents started having issues in their marriage and eventually split up, which affected her a lot. Like Simone, going to high school meant a change in residence. Cindy and two other young women lived in the city with her relatives, a time characterized by no supervision at all. Her grades started slipping and she was unhappy. She felt like the other students were “rich” and “stuck-up” (Cindy, 5-3). Here, her relatively lower social class and most likely different cultural capital, which was not that of the Belize City elite, made her literally “hate” the school. She started “partying and hanging out” and was passing her classes until she failed Math in Third Form (Cindy, 5-4). Inequalities in the larger society are often replicated in the school and “experienced” by the student. In this case, the experience of being from another social class was intense for Cindy because of the school’s location and the population it served.

Yoli’s diminishing interest in school had to do with thinking more about boys—“pretending that you’re in love” as she called it (1-5). Yoli explained, “In my case, I was ... at a point, I was even drawing little hearts in my book instead of paying attention and it was like really distracting me because I was going home with lower grades” (1-5). In Third Form, she got more into partying and schoolwork started to seem boring. She saw herself as competitive in the sense that if others were drinking, she could take a drink too,

“I wanted to compete with people. And not in, not in a work way, like in a way that, um, I can be bad. I can be, just cause, I don’t know... (laughs)” (Yoli, 1-5).

Unlike theories of disengagement that emphasize a long process beginning prior to high school, Cindy, Yoli, and Simone did not show signs of disengagement until later in high school. In academics, they were at the very top of their class when they entered secondary school and none of them reported having any problems within or outside of school. For Cindy and Simone, however, having to live away from home with little to no supervision played a part in their growing interest in partying and friends as opposed to school. Furthermore, this disengagement didn’t feature a corresponding academic decline except in the case of Cindy.

Elisa also experienced this slide of disengagement in interest in school. She said that in First Form “everyone was really interesting [*sic*] in school and everything and when we went in Second Form, Third Form, like we didn’t really care” (Elisa, 7-3). For Samantha, things changed over the years but more on an inward level. Describing her experience in high school over time, Samantha felt like the first part of First Form was great but then progressively she cared more about her outer appearance, wanting to fit in with the other young women who weren’t like her (15-2). Samantha’s struggle shared similar features with the others, however, in that her peer relationships, expressed as a desire to fit in, became more important as she got older.

For Melanie, disinterest in school happened much more quickly, over the course of the first few months of Bridge class. Melanie said that she was into her schoolwork at first but then felt “strained” (19-2). She felt like the course work was easy but her friends

in Bridge would want to copy off of her work or they wouldn't be her friends. Melanie started losing interest in school by the middle of the year:

...I was really into school, was moving forward but like middle of the year I was just lost interest in school and I said, I told my mom that I wasn't really liking school like that and she said you gotta finish because I didn't finish so I tried a little bit I got more into my boyfriend and I led, led astray from school. (19-2)

Shirlene talked about how she enjoyed First Form and that she felt "all grown up," but by Second Form she said she "kinda wanted to drop out because I got tired ... of doing the same thing and dealing with the teachers" (13-4).

Luis also described a trajectory of high school experience that involved his friends. He felt like they were a bad influence while they were in school and then slowly they quit school so that by Third Form a lot of them were gone. Luis explained that his friends, "used to always sink in a lot of stuff in my head and let me do bad things" (14-5). He had a lot of demerits and had to do a lot of P/T but was also passing his classes. He was also suspended once for fighting. By Third Form he said a lot of his "boys, my boys was already sleeping, quitting school" (Luis, 14-6). While other participants discussed this gradual disinterest in school and a turn to the social, Luis seemed to experience a cascading of events and stressors that contributed to academic and disciplinary problems. Comparing the case of Luis to the others, it becomes apparent that processes of disengagement are of varying intensity.

For most of the cases described herein, disengagement is characterized by more of an attitudinal shift in which the social dimensions of life take on a heightened importance as academics fade slowly in the background. As participants became less engaged in school activities and academics, they correspondingly became more thoroughly engaged in a process of identity formation through social relationships with peers. Participants

emphasized the importance of friends, wanting to fit in socially, proving who they were in relation to them, as well as being influenced by them, among other things. At the same time, academics became less interesting. This emphasis is consistent with Smyth and Hattam's (2004) strand of "becoming somebody" which highlights the formation of a sociocultural identity. The second strand of becoming somebody, namely navigating one's transition to the labor market, becomes more apparent in participants' reasons for leaving school and beliefs about its purpose.

Discipline and Rules: More Rules Please

Consistently, participants either agreed with the need to strictly enforce rules, or in the case of their absence, felt the need for more. The only exceptions were the rules they felt were trivial and did not warrant demerits. Miles and Huberman (1994) discussed surprises that arise in one's findings as having "more juice than outliers" (p. 270). For me, this call for more rules among those who often experienced the severest, life-altering consequences because of rules was somewhat surprising. However, toward the end of my analysis and as will be discussed, I realized that rules have a special relationship to the perceived legitimacy of a school.

"Instilled" Discipline and Strict Rules

Three of the female participants who attended St. Margaret's had to leave because of the rules of the school. While one lost her scholarship, which made it financially impossible for her to continue, the other two had to leave – one for breaking a rule and another for getting pregnant. Nevertheless when asked about how they felt about the rules, they agreed with them.

In Third Form, Simone was suspended for being seen drinking with friends in a closed club. She said it was not at all uncommon for people to get suspended and instead of feeling stigmatized, it made the person feel somewhat “cool” (Simone, 3-5). At St. Margaret’s, students attended school in their casual clothes and worked in front of the other students. At this school, however, there was no second suspension – the second time anything happened the student was expelled. As will be discussed in Chapter 7, Simone was later asked to leave this school for a similar offense. Simone felt the rules they had at St. Margaret’s were “okay” but today the girls “grow up a lot faster” and the teens are “more rebellious” (3-11). Cindy also felt that the rules were fair at St. Margaret’s, “... I don’t think they had outrageous rules. They just, I think for the most part it was easy to abide by their rules and it wasn’t anything too hard to go along with it. I think it was pretty decent, yeah” (5-4). Having attended both St. Margaret’s and PHS, Sara and Yoli were able to compare the two schools in terms of discipline. Sara explained, “The discipline was very, very instilled. They had strict rules there other than here [PHS]” (10-2). To recall, Gillett’s (2004) research found that it was more likely that those students attending a denominational school would not complete school in the prescribed time. While this research is not directed at that question specifically, it does raise questions and possibly a direction for future research into discipline, suspension, and expulsion policies of denominational schools in comparison with other schools.

Trivial Rules and Their Consequences

At PHS, some rules were not well liked and did not seem justified to participants. Luis felt like there were too many “stupid” rules that were unimportant. He explained:

I would have changed the rules, you know. Rules. You know that’s always, that was the biggest . . . thing you know, rules. But...some rules ... are great, some

rules aren't. You know like . . . you gotta be in a line before you get upstairs, you know . . . stuff like that, and uh rules like them there they don't really count you know. They don't really count. The student like us you know because we don't really, you know, we no dog or anything like that - we have understanding. (Luis, 14-11)

Disciplining was achieved by assigning physical labor, called P/T at PHS for "put to task." Luis felt that the rules were changing while he was there and the teachers were getting stricter in Third Form. He had almost 150 hours of P/T and a lot of demerits. Describing the disciplinary practices, Luis explained how demerits were often given for little to no reason, for example not having your shirt tucked in (14-6). Tiffany felt the same about the small rules, and gave the example of not being able to wear slippers [flip-flops] to school even though they are on a caye.

Keeping "An Eye on the Kids": Uncontrollable Classes and Disrespectful Students

Out of all the statements on the survey, the one which had the most participants who strongly agreed, 11, pertained to rules: "There were not enough rules in school to keep the students under control." This was strongly agreed to mostly by those who attended PHS, but also by Janice who attended the technical school in Belize City. When asked what Yoli would change in schools if she could, she related it to PHS and said:

Having an eye on the kids. I mean at [St. Margaret's] there were always teachers there and there and there and there. We could not get out of the compound at any time....All the time - so there wasn't even time for us to go anywhere. Like here in school there's time that they say, ok, PE time and there are kids that don't show up in PE. They're the kids who're all doing other stuff and not in PE. That's kind of a little thing that I took advantage of. That they said PE so, so I took time to go and see my boyfriend every time instead of going. (1-12)

Reflecting on the schools that she attended, Jennifer said that the first two schools (off the caye) had more control over their classes, and both had strict rules regarding suspensions and expulsions (17-11). When asked what she would change about the

school, one suggestion Jennifer made in relation to PHS was to put more rules in the school, "... 'cause a lot of kids there they don't really abide by the rules or anything and then they just like, for example, like the smoking weed part, they do it right there in the school, in the bathroom and everything" (17-11).

Linda also lamented the lack of rules at PHS. Talking about the school culture, she explained, "The class was totally uncontrollable, kind of, the children keep on doing what they want and they, they leave them to do what they want..." (21-4). For those who went to PHS, more discipline and stricter rules was a concern for six of the participants.

Samantha commented:

I would've want teachers to be more strict with the students because you know most teachers like they fear the students because sometimes students will threaten them and tell them, 'oh if you knock me' or like, if you um 'if you question me I'm gonna punch you' or stuff and I think that if I was the Minister, if I was the Minister of Education I'd have changed the discipline 'cause I'd want the teacher to be more strict and be more focused with the students because most students in Belize are, some, some are really disrespectful and, and they like to be upstart you know and they just have to answer back so I think I would've changed that 'cause I want my, I would've want my Belizean students to be respectful and you know grow up with harmony not, not, not no bad, bad thoughts or stuff. (15-7)

For those who attended PHS this was expressed as enforcing rules, making students and teachers respect one another, stricter teachers, and putting a stop to all of the bullying. Out of her experience at the technical school in Belize City, Janice also felt that discipline needed to be enforced and teachers needed to be stricter (20-8). She said the teachers were very nice but the class itself was not under control. One of the things she would change if she could do so would be to have the classes more under control by having stricter teachers and more rules (Janice, 20-8).

It is worthwhile looking at participants' calls for more rules, discipline, and order in relation to the perceived legitimacy of the schools. With many of the same rules

considered “stupid” at PHS and even though the rules eventually excluded the young women from St. Margaret’s altogether, this well-established, prestigious school’s rules did not come into question. However, in the case of the technical school and PHS, whose perceived legitimacy was questionable, control of the students was lacking and more rules needed to be enforced at the same time that some rules were deemed trivial. Way (2011) examined the relationship between disruptive classroom behavior, school discipline and students’ perception of that discipline. Contrary to the strict deterrence theory, which sees stricter discipline leading to social compliance (Casella, 2003; Stinchcomb, Bazemore, & Riestenberg, 2006), Way (2011) found that stricter disciplinary policies may result in higher levels of misbehavior. She also found that students who saw school disciplinary practices as fair were judged by the teachers as better behaved, in contrast to those who perceived it as unfair. Furthermore, “positive evaluations of teachers by students appear to play a role in the relationship between the fairness of school rules and behavior” (Way, 2011, p. 363). Another interesting finding that came out of this study was that in schools with stricter policies and more severe punishments, those students who believed it was okay to disobey rules and teachers disobeyed more than if they were in a school with more lenient policies (Way, 2011, pp. 363-364). However, a school’s punishment policy was not related to classroom disruptions for those students who had more respect for the school.

Relating Way’s (2011) results to these findings might explain problems of classroom control that participants experienced in PHS and the technical school in particular. While some participants may have resisted school policies more because of their lack of belief in the legitimacy of the school, others may have called for more rules

because of specific students who had lost respect for the school and were acting defiantly. Although perceptions of the legitimacy of a school may affect what happens in the classrooms and the school in general, this influence is not uni-directional. As Erickson (1987) noted, “the institutional legitimacy of the school is affirmed existentially as trust in face-to-face encounters between school staff and students and their parents” (p. 345). Thus, it is possible that the perception of the need for more rules is not only a call for a calmer classroom environment, but also an expressed desire for the increased legitimacy of one’s school.

Relationships with Teachers: Favorites, Favoritism & Conflicts

Out of all the participants, 11 reported having overall positive relationships with the teachers in high school. In addition, four participants had some they liked more than others and mentioned one or more favorite teachers. Two participants were more ambivalent, noting ups and downs with teachers and complaining that some were strict. A couple had issues with a specific teacher and two others didn’t get along or like them in general. Teachers who were mentioned individually were described as either fun, helpful and/or caring, or quite the opposite – they didn’t care, they didn’t “understand,” or they had an ongoing conflict with the participant. For participants who attended PHS, the way that teachers treated participants in relation to other students was brought up frequently as issues of favoritism and fairness. Participants often attributed this to relationships in the community affecting the way students were treated in school.

Favorite Teachers: “Good Angels”

When describing relations with teachers that were positive, many participants brought up the quality of helpfulness. For Cindy, this was a quality of one of her favorite teachers:

A few of the teachers were really nice. I remember my First Form Math teacher Ms. Cooper [pseudonym]. I loved her. She was super helpful and she always came around and made sure that you had all the extra help that you needed if you had to go after class. (5-3)

Melanie described the teachers at PHS, “...the teachers were nice, all of them, trying to help us through, everything was nice” (19-3). This quality of helpfulness was also brought out in their ability to help students understand. Referring to Math, Anita, who had struggled with Math in primary, explained, “Yeah, it was kinda a bit difficult. Math – I couldn’t understand it but when I went to First Form my Math teacher, Mr. Simon [pseudonym] he’s he was a super teacher I ever seen in Math. I was passing my Math with 70’s, 80’s” (11-2).

Concerning PHS, Jennifer felt “It was a really good school when I went there... The teachers were fun, they would joke around with you a lot and everything then after school activities, they were fine too. Everything was good. I didn’t have any problems with any teachers or anything like that” (17-6). Many liked the school and credited this to the teachers. Melanie liked the school a lot, “it was fun, outgoing, it was the best school” (19-3). Yoli liked the teachers at both St. Margaret’s and PHS, describing the ones on the caye as more easy-going (1-4). Anita liked all her teachers and talked about how they were “fun” and “always giving us jokes” (11-4).

Estevan, referring to his school on the mainland, said he didn’t really like most of the teachers, who were strict, but did like his home room teacher, who was more fun (6-

4). For John, his relationships with teachers were very positive and an integral part of his high school experience. Although bullied by other students, John's relationship with his teachers was very strong and he liked to spend time and "hang out" with them (John, 9-5).

Seven of the participants described teachers and/or principals that helped students. The willingness on the part of an individual teacher or administrator to "go the extra mile" to help a student stay in school is mentioned in many of the cases herein in different ways. Often their efforts were directed toward trying to find ways to keep them in school. One description of a particular teacher's help illustrates this well:

She used to always be there on my side always a good angel to say you know ... you could do it you could make it. . . She was the one that that used to see me ... like this bright student then . . .and . . . at 12 o'clock noon time like when I don't have it she used to always . . . buy food for me at noon time and . . . she used to always tell me try stay in mek I no try quit school or anything like that because you never know what you'll find on the street you know. She always bringing the streets to me and all that the streets . . . I tell her you know I can handle it cause I, I been around so and uh I get influenced by she fu stay but I decided not fu stay so you know. (Luis, 14-8)

Some of the other things that teachers and principals did for students were: writing employers to reschedule work time so it wouldn't conflict with school, talking with family members about personal problems, finding and helping with scholarship applications, providing money for personal issues, and helping students plan their academic goals.

Favoritism and Fairness: Getting Teachers from "Far Away"

As a small community where many people are related or at least acquainted, relations were also played out and experienced by participants in the school. As such, participants brought up the issue of favoritism and unfair disciplinary practices. On the

survey, seven participants strongly agreed with the statement, “I was always getting punished unfairly and other students didn’t get treated as badly.” Another survey statement that highlighted “unfairness” dealt with ethnicity and race, “I felt discriminated against at school because of my family, my race, or my ethnicity.” The four participants who agreed brought these issues up in the interview. The remedy suggested was often to have staff from off the caye. Linda gave an example of the perceived favoritism in disciplinary practices:

...‘cause they have kids that go and they smoke at the back of the school there and I don’t see anything ever happen to them. N’even a demerit they get for doing stuff at the school like that. But other than that they pick on other people for other stuff that isn’t even wrong and they give you a demerit and the ones that do wrong they don’t get anything so I don’t find that fair so that’s just, I didn’t find that fair... (21-4)

Tiffany, Brandy and Linda specified that teachers should be from somewhere else besides the caye. For Tiffany and Linda, this was thought to be a remedy to favoritism and unfairness concerning who was disciplined. When asked what Linda would change if she was the Minister of Education, she mentioned that she would get better teachers that treat students with respect. For Linda, they would be from:

...far away because they find teachers that is from the caye and then they have favoritism with the people...I would find teachers from far that the children don’t know and they can’t only be picking on certain people for stuff because they know you, they know your whole life because they live here so they’re gonna pick on you for every little stuff... (21-5)

For Tiffany, it was important to have a counselor from far away so that you could feel comfortable talking about your problems (18-8). She described, “They had this time that me and my teacher we got in a little argument and she start bringing up stuff about my mom that I didn’t think was appropriate for the class to know about so...” (18-4).

Like Tiffany, Linda also had instances in which her personal life outside of school was mentioned in class.

Problems with Teachers: “She Didn’t Want to Teach Us”

Because relationships with teachers were both an issue for high school experience overall and in reasons for leaving, a statement on the survey reflected this, “I had a problem with one or more teachers.” Nine participants strongly agreed with this statement. Estevan’s experience at school and leaving it had to do with problems he had with one teacher and will be described in the following section on reasons for leaving school. Brandy said that in First Form she had high grades and was a good student, not having any problems with teachers. In Second Form, however, she had problems with a specific teacher whom she said didn’t pay attention to the students and would “like just sit down and watch us ... because she didn’t want to teach us” (16-3). She struggled this second year and was angry because she felt like she would pass but then failed two subjects. She felt like the teachers weren’t helpful. She said that even when she would stay after class for help the teachers wouldn’t help the students (Brandy, 16-5).

Tiffany also had conflicts with teachers during her time at PHS, conflicts which often involved power struggles within the classroom. Another general complaint about teachers was that they were too strict but this was almost always qualified with the fact that they were just trying to “do their job” (Shirlene, 13-3). Ingrid had a negative view of the school and the teachers, “I didn’t like the school and so I didn’t even care about the teachers ‘cause I didn’t like the school” (12-2).

As Roorda et al. (2011) have shown, contrary to assumptions that affective teacher-student relationships (TSRs) aren’t as important for older students, they found

that TSRs were even more influential on older rather than younger students (p. 520).

Their findings resonate with themes in this research that show the importance of these relationships and their impact on early school leaving.

Student Relations: Bullying and the “Hassle” of Boys

Bullying and Being Bullied

Issues of social conflict between students were often reported as either fighting or bullying. However, when fighting was mentioned, in the case of both Tiffany and Anita, it was also referred to as either being bullied or being labeled a bully. The use of the term “bullying” has to do with the fact that it has received a lot of attention in the media, and thus the students also employed this frame of reference to look at their own social issues.

McLanahan, McCoy, and Jacobsen (2015) reviewed three aspects that help define

bullying:

. . . the term is generally defined as the deliberate and repeated performance of negative acts by a perpetrator who exerts power over a victim (Due et al., 2005; Guerin & Hennessey, 2002). The presence of a power imbalance is an important factor in determining what negative or aggressive behaviors are considered to be bullying. When two students have equal power in a relationship, an aggressive act may not qualify as bullying because the bully can reciprocate the act or can otherwise defend himself or herself from the aggressor (Natvig, Albrektsen, & Qvarnstrøm, 2001). A bully is defined by action: a student who is a victim in one relationship may be a bully in another relationship, in which case the student would be called a ‘bully-victim.’ (de Moura, Cruz, & Quevedo, 2011). (p.42)

In their examination of Global School-Based Student Health Survey (GSHS) data from 25,000 middle school students in 15 Latin American and Caribbean countries, McLanahan et al. (2015) found that boys and girls experienced different forms of bullying. While there were no statistically significant differences in gender regarding who got bullied, girls were bullied most often for their appearance while boys were the victims of physical aggression (McLanahan et al., 2015, p. 42).

The commonly expressed need for more discipline, particularly at PHS, might explain the prevalence of both negative TSRs and student relationships. As Brandy mentioned about the student behavior at PHS, “They like to tease each other and that’s not good and some of the teachers don’t do anything. They just lef’ it like that” (16-11). For Samantha, PHS had a lot of disrespectful students who would curse and “answer back” the teachers as well as bully other students. Overall, she felt like her experience was a “bit awful” (15-3). Samantha explained:

In First Form it was challenging for me and in Second Form like I started to find myself a little bit and I started to gain confidence but in Third Form that’s when I really experienced like what bullying was and you know the kids were so mean. (15-3)

As in primary school, John continued to get bullied in high school and considered himself a very serious person, “not messing around with nobody” (9-5). When asked what she would change if she were the Minister of Education, Anita replied that she would have people counsel the bullies so that they would stop (11-8). Describing the bullying that went on at PHS, Brandy said it was usually the young men bullying the young women. She explained:

They lie to the teacher that the girls was bothering but that’s not true. Many times I see um the boys telling the girl that they look ugly, fat and they leave ... but the girls just take, they just pay attention to they and they get inna trouble because of that. (16-11)

Although the research of McLanahan et al. (2015) identified appearance-based bullying as the predominant form of bullying experienced by girls, it didn’t focus on who actually did the bullying. In this research, findings indicated that it was often the young men bullying the young women, a form of bullying that persecuted young women for not conforming to the ever-present ideal female body presented so often in the media. Wilk

(2002) has documented both the influence of television on Belizeans as well as the moralizing discourses surrounding television. While it should go without saying that all social ills cannot be blamed on Western media, it should be noted that it is common for parents not to screen movies, music or television shows, resulting in what would for others be considered inappropriate viewing material being shown to everyone in a house regardless of age.

Furthermore, as a teacher I knew that popular television shows among my high school students were “Family Guy” and “American Dad,” for instance. None of these portray women in an empowering way, but rather denigrate their intelligence and see them as sexual objects. These negative images of women in the media coupled with the sand-sun-sea-sex tourism destination that the caye is in many ways, also affects the way in which young women are treated. For female adolescents in the process of becoming somebody, they have to negotiate their identities in and around negative stereotypes of women, which some young men use against them. Thus, for some young women, their lived experiences of school are made substantially worse by these highly gendered forms of appearance-based bullying.

A School Without Boys: No Distractions, No Embarrassment

These experiences of how the presence of males made young women feel are further expounded on in descriptions that the female participants who attended St. Margaret’s had about their school culture. A common theme was that the experience of it being an all-female school was one they preferred. Yoli had good grades at her first school and enjoyed it specifically because it was an all-female school. She explained, “...it’s girls, just girls, you can just freely raise your hand and not be ashamed of anything

and the girls won't say anything 'cause they are just like us" (Yoli, 1-3). She felt St. Margaret's had less peer pressure, less violence, and an overall calmer environment. Yoli stated, "but there we were like one big family of girls. Anything you do was not embarrassing" (1-3). In contrast, at PHS Yoli felt the young men, whom she called a "little distraction," were a problem in that they would laugh and make fun of people (1-3). Like Yoli, Sara also mentioned that she liked the fact that it was an all-female school, "I liked [St. Margaret's Academy]. It was no hassle. It was lone girls, it was, um, only girls so it wasn't hassle with boys and stuff. But then the wrong company can get you into a lot of trouble too" (10-3).

Academics

Academic Performance: Slipping Grades and the Fear of Repeating

Out of all participants, five reported having issues with academic performance in secondary school. Three participants, Brandy, Jennifer, and Melanie strongly agreed with the statement, "My grades were too low to bring up and I knew I would have to repeat." Brandy's academic issues did not necessarily coincide with anything else according to her. However, she felt like she would have done better if the teacher had been willing to help her more. For Jennifer, her low grades primarily coincided with her home situation and her responsibilities as a mother outside of school. This theme did not come up in the interview for Melanie, nor did it play a role in why she left. As has been shown, Luis had many different issues going on in his life. When discussing his falling grades, he noted that he was often hungry and couldn't concentrate. Cindy's slipping grades coincided with her socializing and "partying" more, as well as her growing dislike for and disinterest in school. For Samantha, the constant bullying she experienced made

her depressed and overwhelmed with her studies. In disengagement perspectives, academic difficulties often occur simultaneously with other issues, coming together to eventually influence one to leave school. This will be discussed further in the following chapter.

Reflections on Curriculum

Issues concerning high school curriculum were brought up by a few participants.

Yoli appreciated the different subjects offered at PHS, for example, marine biology, explaining:

We'd study ... like more Caribbean things on the caye, which is really, really good 'cause it, I think it was nice studying those things. We studied a lot of different things. In the city, it was basic stuff you'd study like you know your history, maths, and science. (1-5)

When asked what Elisa would change in schools, she related the question to PHS and said she would have more options available to study, particularly the option to specialize early on like they offer in other high schools (7-6). When asked what Cindy would change in schools, she explained that religion should not be forced on students who aren't of that same religion. She explained, "it's being stuffed down their throats—that Catholic religion—it's a subject that they have to pass and I understand that it's the Catholic, government funded school but it's really not fair to people of other religions" (Cindy, 5-7).

If I Were the Minister: Getting and Keeping Students in School

In order to understand what participants felt schools should or could be they were asked, "If you were the Minister of Education what would you change in schools?"

Some of the responses concerning rule enforcement and classroom control are discussed

in the rules section above. In response to this question, the majority of students wanted either an end to exclusionary policies or the financial inaccessibility of schools.

Rule-Based Accessibility: Doing “Whatever It Takes to Let Students Stay in School”

For Manuel, Elisa, and Melanie changing school rules to allow all students to attend was suggested. Manuel and Elisa felt that everyone should be able to attend school no matter what is going on in their personal lives. Manuel would also do “whatever it takes to let students stay in school” (8-8). Elisa also emphasized that everyone makes mistakes and that young women who get pregnant want to study “because they want a better future for their kids” (7-6). Melanie thought schools should allow young women who got pregnant to attend their full nine months, instead of the common practice of having to leave as soon as the pregnancy begins to show.

In contrast to the others, when asked what he would change, Frank said that the Ministry helps everyone a lot and, “it’s up to the child to do more thinking over it” (4-8).

He explained:

because of the movies and stuff and the television everybody wants to be like this person, you know, and that carries on or gangs and for poor families watching their families growing up or something they wanna be just like you know... so what that tends to do is, uh, they get carried away so instead of thinking more like, ok yeah I wanna be like a president or a prime minister or something like that they just want to be like ya, you know what, look at all the gangs there with all this big cash in front of them and you know, I wanna do that, so they stray from whatever is being out there, educational-wise, that’s the way I see life now. (Frank, 4-9)

Financial Accessibility: Free School and Lots of Scholarships

Many participants felt the financial burden of secondary school and related it directly to their goal to make school more financially accessible. Shirlene, without hesitation, replied that she would make school free. She explained:

Because a lot of people aren't at school because they don't have the money to pay for their tuition, or the fee or whatever and I think if there would be a free school then everyone would probably go back to school and get that job that they wanted because right now life is just getting harder and harder and money is the problem. (Shirlene, 13-7)

Sara would also make school free - if not secondary, then definitely primary school:

...I've had people from the United States come and ask if the school here, if the education here is free and when you say no they're like but in the States it's free. And, I guess primary school I think they should do it for free. I mean high school they have some, they have some private ones that you need to pay in once you want a better education but I think the primary school should be at least free 'cause a lot of people want to go to school and can't 'cause they can't afford it. (10-5)

In a similar vein, Raul said, "...if I had any power or any at all in education I would try to do a program that you know pretty much to help out the people that can't help themselves" (2-9). Raul would give out as many scholarships as he could and after that it was up to them "if they want something or do not" (2-10). Among other things such as cafeterias in the schools and a more diversified curriculum to make school more fun, John also emphasized "free education" (9-12). Janice related this question to her experience, "I didn't have the money to go to school. I would let everyone get their education" (20-8).

Conclusion

Expected categories of high school experience such as perspectives on the school, and teacher and student relations for instance, are all discussed in this chapter. Other unexpected themes emerged as the participants reflected on their experiences. Students had their own opinions about the quality of the school that they were attending, shaped both by longstanding reputations and in the case of PHS, what was happening with

teachers, students, and discipline in the classrooms. Participants often had to live away from their parents in the home of extended family members and depend on unreliable outside sources to fund their education. In these cases, lack of adult supervision, adjusting to a new family, and homesickness were common themes.

The majority of participants felt that strict rules were necessary, and in the case of PHS, that more rules needed to be enforced. Often this perceived need was tied to student relations that were characterized by bullying, fighting, and behavior that was described as disrespectful toward each other and the teachers. Bullying was often directed toward young women, and those who attended St. Margaret's pointed out that they preferred a learning environment without young men. At PHS, trivial rules that did not seem necessary to participants were criticized.

Teachers at all schools who were well-liked had the qualities of being caring, helpful, and fun. Because PHS is situated in a small community, favoritism and unfair disciplinary practices were issues for some. Problems with specific teachers reflected these issues. Unlike what might be expected in a study of early school leavers, more than half of the participants had passing grades or better. However, many students noted a process of disengagement from First Form to Third Form in particular, in which schoolwork became less interesting, while friends and in some cases, partying, became more so. When reflecting on what they would change in schools, most participants would make school more accessible. While this entailed financial accessibility, they also focused on what I'm calling rule-based accessibility, which would change exclusionary policies that had affected both participants and their acquaintances.

CHAPTER SEVEN: PERSPECTIVES ON REASONS FOR LEAVING

Corroborating many studies on early school leavers, the themes that emerged from this research demonstrate that reasons given for leaving school early are complex. Furthermore, these reasons for leaving often encompass aspects of both school experience and beliefs about the purpose of school in their lives. Data pertaining to why participants left school early came from both the interviews and the survey. Interview questions that focused specifically on the reasons why a student left prior to completion were the following:

- What were the main reasons that you left high school?
- How did you make the decision to leave?
- Did anyone or anything influence your decision?
- What happened in school around the event of your leaving?
- If you could have changed something to keep you in school what would it have been?

Because there were often multiple reasons given for leaving school early, this last question was meant to shine light on the biggest factor in their leaving and prompted additional reflection on what was most important at the time. Due to the overlapping reasons, when sub-themes existed for individuals they will also be discussed in that category.

Coming of Age: The Consequences of Growing Up “Too Fast”

The category “coming of age” reflects the struggles that young people go through as they grapple with issues of identity, relationships and the pressure of oncoming

adulthood. Just as Margaret Mead showed in *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), coming of age cannot be extricated from the culture in which it takes place. Although criticized to some degree for romanticizing the Samoans, or as Coleman (1992) pointed out, viewing the Samoan society “through rose-coloured spectacles” (p. 9), Mead’s work demonstrated that transitions to adulthood are not the same everywhere, nor are Western conceptions of adolescence universal. Unlike her depiction of smooth transitions to adulthood in Samoan society, adolescence is, in most places, fraught with tension—particularly over their ambiguous status as either adults or children. Furthermore, as Coleman (1992) maintained, policy concerning youth is often geared toward meeting the needs of adults rather than young people (p. 25).

The process of negotiating identities and ideas about what it means to be an adult are gendered and culture-specific. Sutherland’s (1998) discussion of social practices on Paradise Caye and particularly the early age at which unions are formed demonstrated that issues like teenage pregnancy, living together, and teenage parenting should not be viewed as the end product of a teleological moral decline, but rather practices rooted in the sociocultural history of this particular place.

Pregnancy

Overall, teenage pregnancy rates are high in Belize. While the rate of teenage births per 1000 births in the Caribbean is 65, it is currently 90 in Belize (Polanco, 2015). Six participants in total became pregnant while they were enrolled in school, while one male participant had a girlfriend who became pregnant. School policies often state that the proper procedure is to inform the principal as soon as the student knows so that together they can decide the course of action. The unwritten policy, however, that is still

very much enforced is that once the pregnancy is noticeable the young woman must quit school. However, at the discretion of the administration, she is allowed to return to school and complete after she has had the child. All six participants left the school that they were enrolled in at the time of their pregnancy. One participant, however, transferred to PHS to avoid the daily commute and finished the year there prior to having her child. She returned for a brief time at the beginning of the next year. Three participants had returned to school after having their child. Two left again as will be discussed in the next sections on motherhood and living with one's boyfriend.

Shirlene left high school when she felt like the drowsiness and nausea associated with early pregnancy were interfering with her ability to pay attention in class. The principal assured her she could stay in school until she started showing, but Shirlene left prior to this. At the time, she was aware that others had heard about her pregnancy and were gossiping a lot about her. This, combined with how she felt physically, influenced her decision to leave. Shirlene was determined to return to school and she was planning on enrolling in the new online secondary school in the Fall of 2014.

Melanie wasn't aware of her pregnancy right away, however she said that others around her started suspecting it because she was vomiting and often drowsy. She became scared at her symptoms in school and the suspicions of others, but she didn't tell or speak with anyone about it. One day when she got home from school she found out her whole family already knew. This will be explained in the "Event of Leaving" section below. After that Melanie did not return to school. I asked Melanie why she didn't go back and finish exams and she replied:

I had this little bit of shame in me to go back to school with the belly 'cause the type of kids that I went to school with were bullies. If you did one little thing

they'd tease you for it, right. You only slip or some, some little thing makes you the target at school so I was like I'm not going to be the target, so I'm not going back. That's the reason I didn't go back. (19-5)

She continued to live with her family until two months after the baby was born when she moved in with the baby's father. Although Melanie was considered a minor and her boyfriend was over the age of 18, she only received one visit from Social Services who said they would follow up legally on her boyfriend as well as possibly arrange for the child to be adopted. She protested this and expressed her concern about who would help her take care of the child if the father was imprisoned. They never returned to visit her and he was never charged.

Melanie explained what happened after the baby was born:

...And then when the baby was born my family said like they think the baby should be grown up around his father so they told me to go and live with him so I went. And then leaving the baby at the young age didn't give me time to think about stay home instead of go to school – I would have no one to watch him. Father goes to work day and night so he can maintain his kid and then who is going to take care of the kid when I go to school so I never made it back to school. (19-4, 5)

Melanie also did not want to return and have to repeat the same grade. She knew that her friends had moved on without her and she would have preferred to be in their class. Melanie would have liked to have finished school and would go back if there was a night school. When Ingrid learned of her pregnancy, the principal made it clear that she could come back after having the baby. She also said that her not returning was not due to having to stay at home with the baby, but rather because she simply had no interest in returning to high school. She reported that she has had multiple jobs since then.

Simone left the second high school she attended due to pregnancy. She had taken a year off after leaving St. Margaret's. Although she had wanted to go to school that

same year, the administration waited to inform Simone that she would have to leave until the end of her first week of Fourth Form. At that point, it was too late to enroll in other schools, although Simone tried. Simone is the only participant who, at the time of writing, had returned and finished school. She worked during the week and went to school at night on the neighboring cay. She lived with the father of her child, which she was able to do because the night school, unlike other high schools, did not have a policy against it.

Motherhood and Childcare

As is to be expected, motherhood presented challenges for all participants. At the age of 16, Jennifer left school when she was roughly seven months pregnant. She returned and repeated the year but left again around the same time in Third Form. The main reason she gave for leaving the second time was because her mother could not care for her baby. Jennifer's father was deceased and her mother was living off of a monthly social security check. As Jennifer told it, her mother drank frequently due to her own stress, and this of course, worried Jennifer when leaving the baby in her care.

During the second semester of Third Form her grades started dropping when she started worrying more about whether or not her daughter was okay. When asked about the main reasons she left, the first one she gave was that she had no babysitter. The second, she explained:

Second would be my own kind of fault like I, I had so much worries and everything so it was me that was kind of slacking a lot and everything. In class, I used to talk a lot so that was a next reason too. Um, I, if I could have gone back then you know like right now, I would have the opportunity because like my boyfriend he is there and he can take care of her during the day 'cause I don't work until like five o' clock so but when, the only problems I had were just my mom didn't want to take care of her no more and then I used to just worry a lot if she was ok or she needed anything or like that 'cause one time my mom, I gotta

call from (the principal) downstairs. She told me that I have to hurry go home because my mom ended up leaving my baby alone in the house and my mom went out so I have to go home immediately for her. (17-6)

Although she was living with her mother, her boyfriend would help out when he wasn't working and watch their child at her mother's house when her mother wasn't home. One day her mother came home after drinking and "chased" her out of the house. She rented her own room which proved difficult as now she only had the baby's father to help care for the child, and he worked both during the day and at night. She left school about a week after the move.

One particular teacher tried to help her stay and finish. Even though her grades were low at this point, they wrote out a list of what grades she would have to get to bring one of the subjects she was failing up to the passing mark and complete Third Form. While normally she would have to go to another school because there was a rule against repeating the same grade twice, she felt they would make an exception for her and let her repeat as long as she found someone to care of her baby. Jennifer felt that school was very important and that even with only a high school diploma, she would have more job opportunities. She would go back to school now if it were possible.

Living with Boyfriends and Starting Families

Two participants were not pregnant but decided to leave school to live with their boyfriends. Because it was a school policy that students were not allowed to "co-habit" and had to live with a parent or a guardian, this meant that they would no longer be able to attend school. Based on my examination of school policies in Belize, this is a common policy both in denominational and government schools. Similarly, another participant

returned after having her child over the summer. She, however, decided to try and live with the father of her child and had to leave school.

Yoli left school in Third Form. When asked why, she stated laughingly, “Stupidity....pretending I was in love” (Yoli, 1-6). She was with a guy who wasn’t in high school and as she put it, this was a “big distraction” (1-6). Phones aren’t allowed in school but she would keep hers hidden so that she could text him during class. Yoli said she was “always thinking what is he doing, what could he be doing...” (1-6). She took a year off when she left and then decided to go back. She left a second time, but as she said, “again, fell in love” (Yoli, 1-6). Yoli regretted this decision:

... I don’t say he ruined my life, but (laughing) he just kinda was not really there for me so and ... he was older than me so he was already like going out nights and wanted to party. Says that I want someone who is not playing a kid and not ... I want someone more older and someone not going to be more a chore and I don’t want a little school girl. And I said okaay to make it better I could stop school. So I did. And now ooooh what a regret. (6-7)

The second time that she left, however, she was already living with her boyfriend when the school found out. At this time, the school administrators told her the same thing that they told Elisa, that if she wanted to attend school, she could not live with her boyfriend. She decided to stay with her boyfriend, a decision that made her parents very angry. Unlike Elisa, Yoli had a lot of regret about her decision because, as she explained, she knew her capabilities and wanted to be useful in life. She would go back to school but now she is pregnant so that would be difficult. She also felt like she would have to go somewhere else and get a fresh start.

Elisa left Third Form at age 17 to live with her boyfriend. She said this about her leaving, “Well, it’s not because I didn’t want. I wanted to go but they didn’t want to accept me because I had a boyfriend” (Elisa, 7-3). She said her parents were okay with

her living with her boyfriend and were upset with the school for not allowing it.

According to Elisa, her boyfriend was going to pay all of the tuition. She already had her books, supplies, and uniforms for Fourth Form but was told that she couldn't attend because of her living arrangements. When asked about how she made the decision regarding what to do, Elisa replied:

Well, they told me that if I wanted to go back to school I had to come back here to where my mom, but they don't really know what happened so they don't know people's reasons why they wouldn't want to come back...I said if I was with him I think I would be more pushed to study because I know that he's paying my school and then I have to do good 'cause he is really working hard for the money. (7-4)

Elisa indicated that she had her own valid reasons for living with her boyfriend and felt that moving in with her boyfriend should have been seen in a positive light. Her boyfriend was supportive of her going to school and willing to pay her tuition. She thought she would have been more motivated to apply herself to her studies out of feeling indebted to him for his financial support. Elisa probably won't go back to school, at least for now. She didn't think she needed a diploma to get a job. However, she did feel like she probably would have been finished with high school by now had she gone to live with her grandmother on the mainland.

Sara left St. Margaret's in Belize City when she learned that she was pregnant. She was able to transfer to PHS and finish Third Form before having the baby. At the beginning of Fourth Form, she started school again as she had people who could help her with the baby. While she had broken up with the baby's father, at the time that she began attending school she got back together with him. In an attempt to make it work with him she chose to move in with him. Because of the rule about living arrangements, this decision also meant that she would have to leave school. They broke up soon after but by

then it was too late to return to school. She related that she will definitely return to school as she wants to get her Associate's degree and a good job. She insisted that she would not return until she could pay for it on her own. This theme of living with one's boyfriend was common with other young women not in this study, as indicated by Yoli in her interview (1-7).

On the survey, four participants strongly agreed with the statement, "I would rather live with my boyfriend/girlfriend and that was against school policy." All had discussed this in the interview, however Luis also marked this but it did not surface in the interview.

Self-Reliance and Taking Care of Girlfriend

While all of the above cases have focused on female participants, there were also male participants whose reasons for leaving were thematically similar. In the case of both Manuel and Frank, the immediate reasons they left had to do with their girlfriends, as well as moving into their own homes.

When Manuel's girlfriend, also a student at the school, became pregnant, he was asked to leave his sponsors' house although they agreed to keep paying his tuition if he chose to continue school. Manuel made the decision to leave school when that happened. He thought that he would focus on making money and taking care of his girlfriend and baby. At this time, Manuel was already involved with his older friends who hung out on the streets selling drugs and drinking. When asked about the reason Manuel left, he explained:

Well, the main reason that I left high school is because although I was still in school I was still out on the streets drinking, still on the streets smoking, hanging with friends, still getting into trouble, beside meeting my girl and pregnant her that was all, all that was happening and you know they had me on a, on a short

line 'cause that's part of the rules – you shouldn't be on the streets drinking, smoking, none of that and I was still doing it. I was hanging with friends and all that cause me to end up stop and quitting school. (8-5)

Manuel felt like he belonged there on the streets with his friends and was tired of having to sit in school all day and be treated by the teachers the same way that they treated him in primary.

Frank attended First Form for only a couple of months before leaving. Multiple factors influenced Frank to leave. While he liked high school, his job interfered with his schedule. The principal of the school actually sent a letter to his workplace to see if they could change the schedule. At the same time, he was attending counseling because of being a “problem child” and a few months into high school was kicked out of his house for being “idle on the street” (Frank, 4-4). As Frank described his struggles, “...so I gotta be finding food for myself, pay bills, rent, and I was like 16 years old that was pretty hard at the time” (4-6).

Getting kicked out of his house prompted Frank to leave school to work full time, “I just realized that working full time had a little bit more benefits to it, more money coming in. You just started looking for the money after that. It's like you see money coming through your hand” (4-6). When asked about when he made the actual decision, he described that he had met a girl who became his girlfriend and he wanted to spend time with her. Frank explained, “So, it's like you're like forgetting about everything else around you like...you know you get carried away” (4-7). Because they planned on moving in together, he would need to support her financially as well. Frank felt like finishing high school would have given him more job opportunities, but this belief applied only to the mainland, not the cayes. He acknowledged that it was the hard life

experiences he had outside of school that made him the successful person he is today. For both Frank and Manuel, their reasons for leaving were tied both with economic independence and their wanting to live with their girlfriends. These cases will be revisited in the upcoming section on finances.

Social Conflict

Some participants had issues either with teachers or students that caused them to leave school. In some cases, these were ongoing events with one teacher or the same students or, as in the case of Linda, a general perception of the way in which she was treated. For Samantha and Linda, these experiences culminated in literally walking out of class and not coming back, to be discussed in the event section below.

Problems with Teachers

Brandy's decision to not return to school for Second Form came out of a sequence of events toward the end of the year. She said definitively that the main reason she left high school was because of personal problems with a teacher. Brandy described the first event that led her to skip school for a week:

Yes, well, I always stay for tutoring and I do my [subject] and like she never really checked my homework and then she just tell me it's wrong and I had to do it over and over and over. So one day I get angry and I just tear the paper and I left the school and then she, she told me that she, that I think I been home and I being so disrespectful that she walk. I was so angry that she didn't pay me attention and I always do it... do her homework, just that. (16-5)

Brandy felt like the teacher didn't like her and didn't pay her any attention. She said that the work wasn't that hard, but it was the teacher and the fact that they didn't have that particular subject's class on a regular basis that made it difficult. However, she also said that the teacher would tell lies about her, specifically that she only played and laughed during class. She returned to school to take final exams due to her mother's

insistence. She said the teacher would just look at her and walk away while other teachers were saying things that would hurt her. She did have positive relationships with other teachers, however, as indicated in her wanting to take her math exam to prove to her teacher that she could pass it.

The policy at PHS was to give students a chance to attend remedial classes for two weeks at the end of the year for classes they didn't pass. It was then up to the teachers and the principal to decide whether they have done all the work in such a manner that they don't need to repeat. They must attend all remedial classes if they want this chance. Repeating also depended on the collective decision of the teachers who discussed where to draw the line for certain students. When Brandy didn't pass [subject] or Math she attended remedial classes the first day. She said the teacher told her not to return because she was going to have to repeat anyway. The principal, however, had told her to go to classes even though it was likely she would have to repeat. Brandy decided not to go to the remedial classes at all which basically forfeited her chances for passing to Third Form. Brandy explained that some students fail three or four subjects and don't have to repeat, but the particular teacher with whom she was having a problem had told her that she had to repeat if she failed just one.

By this time, she had shared her story with a relative who said he could find her a scholarship to another high school and have her come live with him. While all of this led up to her decision to leave, Brandy also said, "I don't want to repeat. I don't want to see my friends in Third Form and only me in Second Form" (16-6). Brandy's mother also thought it would be a good idea to send her to her relative's home for school, although

Brandy had a scholarship at PHS and was likely to have one the next year had she wanted to continue.

In high school, Tiffany felt like the teachers picked on her and would come to school with problems that they would take out on the students. She had problems with the same students that she went to school with in primary. Tiffany described these problems as beginning when others bothered her until she finally couldn't take it anymore and she would "burst" (18-3). The first incident that led to her expulsion in high school was a fight in which she fought with a friend against another girl. According to Tiffany, she was suspended because she hit first. She said the other girl was not suspended, something she did not find fair.

Her second suspension was for being disrespectful to a teacher. She said that during the argument the teacher started "bringing up stuff about my mom that I didn't think was appropriate for the class to know" (Tiffany, 18-4). Tiffany felt like the impression her teachers had of her in primary school was shared with the secondary school teachers as well. She explained:

...I think that they already put their mind 'cause I know some of the primary school teachers went there and said oh well you don't have to take all that from Tiffany 'cause she's really disrespectful, and she's this, and she's so negative. (Tiffany, 18-4)

Tiffany said she wouldn't call herself a bully although she might "go over limits" sometimes. After the second suspension, she had to talk to the school board who decided to give her another chance. Another argument with a teacher, however, got her expelled. Tiffany described the incident:

...one of the students kicked down my desk and my teacher told me to pick it up. And I know it was a little bit, I'm telling he I'm not going to pick it up 'cause I wasn't the one who threw it down. And he said if that's my idea, let me get the F

out of his class so I said I'm going to get the F out of your class, and F you and your class too. (18-6)

Tiffany also mentioned certain students being favored over others based on their relationships to staff members. At the time of the interview, she had been attending the school on the neighboring caye for a few weeks. She felt like she would have a much better experience there.

One of the main things going on in Linda's life at the time of her leaving school was the illness of her mother. Linda's aunt had been helping finance her education but when her mother became ill, more finances needed to go to that. However, after having asked Linda in multiple ways about her leaving in order to understand the primary reason, an event at school seemed to have been the main factor over and above her financial situation. She explained what happened that day:

The other reason why I stop was because ...we had the priest that was preaching there [points to church] that is the priest from the church, the Catholic Church. He was teaching us one day and he just came and he like grabbed...my pencil and I got mad and I walked out of his classroom. And then from then the principal, she started to um scold, scolding me and, she started to scold me and tell me a lot of stuff and I got mad and I went, I went, it was like in the afternoon and I just walked out of class and I didn't went back. And I just stop 'cause she was like everything they pick on me and then they rail up. They scold us about it and like I felt like I'm the only one she was picking on most of the time and she was always giving me demerits for stupid stuff like for, if you say somethin..., if they talk to you and then you answer back like say you say something behind me then you get a demerit for that. They give you demerit for every single stuff you do. That's why I left because he um he went and he told the principal lie and I walked out and when she was scolding me I left her talking and..." (Linda, 21-3)

According to Linda, this happened around April. After she went home and told her mother what had happened, her mother went to the school and talked with them. Linda's mother urged her to return to school but she decided not to go because of "the treatment" she received there (Linda, 21-4). She felt like they had "favoritism of people"

and that “they leave you behind if someone is better than you and that, that’s why I thought I didn’t went back” (Linda, 21-4). She declared that if that hadn’t happened that day she would still be there. She corroborated this again when asked what would have had to change for her to stay in school. She replied, “I guess to find better teachers... and people that the teachers had to treat you better with respect or whatever. That was gonna keep me in school but the way they treated you just didn’t have my mind like I was going back to school” (Linda, 21-5). She wanted to finish school but Linda felt like it wasn’t worth the treatment that you get there.

Estevan moved off caye to live with his mother when his parents separated. He was not expecting to go to school at all when he met someone who promised to help him attend based on his being a relative of the principal. Once in high school, he said he was much more serious, paying attention and sitting in the front row of the class. In the case of Estevan, he described himself as taking high school seriously. He explained, “Yeah, um pretty much a front row seat, always paying attention...” (Estevan, 6-3). Estevan attended First Form and returned to the caye on the weekends to work construction. During his first semester, the principal was transferred and he never saw the sponsor again. However, he attended through the second semester as the new principal had agreed to let him continue. Estevan mentioned that his continuing high school was very important to both parents, who had recently separated but were now talking a lot for the sole purpose of having Estevan further his education. He mentioned that things were slow in terms of the economy at that time, and the additional costs associated with high school were still an obstacle. At twelve years old and with one month left of First Form,

Estevan decided not to return to school, even though his mother wanted him to continue.

When asked about why he left high school, Estevan replied:

Um, well, number one it was the finance ... so then the second reason were like we, we needed such a book in class and every week I showed up without that book and the teachers like give me your demerit card and I'm like no you can't give me a demerit every week just 'cause I don't have my book. I'm like I don't have money to buy it so when my demerit card gets full what's gonna happen, you gonna expel me just for not having a book? (6-4)

According to Estevan, the teacher continued giving him demerits each week for not having the book. Estevan decided to leave because of the situation with the book and the demerits. I asked him how often he had the class and he replied, "...every week, the class was once a week so I decided to like, I can't keep up with that, I have to, I have to go to work and try to do something – that's when I came here" (Estevan, 6-5).

At this point, his mother had a meeting with the vice-principal about the matter. According to Estevan, his mother wanted him to continue and the vice-principal told her that they would help them get books for the next school year. However, when discussing the matter about his demerits, Estevan claimed that the teacher denied that she was giving them because of not having a book and thus, the vice-principal didn't believe him. Nevertheless, they were still willing to help him buy the book. But by this point, Estevan had already made up his mind to leave.

I describe this case in detail because it illustrates how there is often more going on than simply financial reasons. Estevan's mother wanted him to continue and the vice-principal was also willing to try and help him with books. This is similar to Linda's situation where her mother actually went back to the school for a meeting and tried to get her daughter to continue. In the case of Estevan, the ongoing struggle with the teacher was also a factor in his decision to leave. When asked what he would have changed to

keep him in school, he stated, “Well, just the teacher, if I had the authority to take her out I would send her home. I mean, yeah, then that would probably keep me there” (Estevan, 6-8). Here, this reason is the first one that he stated regarding what would have had to change and then he added, “...yeah, and if my mom probably had the finance too to keep me going, probably I would continue” (Estevan, 6-8).

Problems with Students: Fighting and Bullying

Anita never returned to school after Christmas break during First Form and gave two main reasons for this. She explained that she left school because she didn't have enough money to attend and she felt threatened by other students who were bullying her during and after school. According to Anita, she had one girl in particular who started “cussing” her on the street and in school. There were multiple times that she would tell her aunt and the police would get involved so that no one would get hurt. There were others at school who wanted her to fight with this particular girl. These students had already been suspended and Anita felt that they were trying to get them in trouble with the school. Anita fought with this other student outside the school grounds after school and both were suspended for only one day. Anita mentioned that this seemed unfair to the other students who, when they had previously been suspended, were sent home for the full ten school days. She said the counselor explained that it was because they were both good students and it didn't make sense for them to miss class. While this is not discussed under the previous theme of favoritism and fairness, this example does reveal how discipline can be unequal depending on who is disciplining and who is getting disciplined. In informal conversations with Anita and her aunt prior to the interview, they communicated that they were also worried for her safety, particularly walking home

from school. The aunt also felt that because she was taking care of her sister's child, she did not want to take any chances.

Over Christmas break, Anita's aunt lost her job. Anita didn't return because of her aunt's financial difficulties and the fact that her aunt had two children of her own to support. At the time of the interview, Anita mentioned that one of the school administrators was encouraging her to apply for a scholarship. This is consistent with PHS's policy to try and find different ways to finance students' education. Anita stated that she would go back to PHS if her aunt had the money.

Samantha's experience of being bullied by young men at the school affected her so much that she saw no other option but to leave school. She described them as more "high class" and said they were bullying people who "looked different" and were "underprivileged and stuff" (Samantha, 15-4). They would call her names and whisper hurtful words at her in class or when she walked by. It started off being just two young men but turned into a whole group of them.

This is the same year that PHS got their first full-time counselor. When asked if the counselor helped her out at all, Samantha replied:

Yeah, I think she helped but I think by the time she helped I was like so emotionally damaged. I was so damaged that I think nothing would have made me change because I, I had her only a month or so and I think if she was there like maybe at the start, at the starting of maybe my, maybe in Third Form, my junior year then maybe I would have continued and graduated but I think I had her too late so I was so damaged and I thought that nothing would have helped... (15-3,4)

Samantha explained her situation as not just their problem, but also her problem as well for not being secure enough to ignore them. She entered First Form at 12 years of age and said it was tough because when "puberty hit ... you're wondering about how you look and you start wondering about your physical appearance" (Samantha, 15-1). She

said that at the middle of First Form when she turned 13 she started caring about her outer appearance. Samantha explained:

I wanted to look like those other girls and I wanted to dress like them and I wanted to be like them and it was really hard for me to fit in because I didn't really find people who was like me so it was really difficult to be a part of the class. (15-2)

When she was repeatedly teased and bullied by the young men in class, she started to believe the things they would say about her:

...Sometimes when they repeat things at you you'll start to believe it and it's it was just repeat in your head over and over like several times. I would even try to do my tests and the first thing the same. The words that they told me like would repeat over and over and over and over in my head so I just got to a point where you know enough is enough. They aren't going to stop – they are going to continue but I'm just going to try and take these months, 5 months, and find myself. (15-5)

Her experiences at school made her grades fall. Furthermore, she had signed up to take eight CXC exams in the spring of Fourth Form, part of the process of continuing on to Sixth Form. She was frustrated and depressed. Like Anita, Samantha also named two primary reasons for leaving – financial difficulties and bullying. Unlike Anita who only attended the first part of First Form, Samantha left at the end of her last year of high school. The day that she decided to leave she was sitting in class writing poetry while the class was discussing the upcoming class trip. The young men started saying cruel things to her again. Samantha explained, “I just decided, you know what, I can't take it anymore. If I continue, I'm gonna put a bullet in my head” (15-5). She also felt like she was going to fail anyway because her grades were low due to all of the stress in school. When she left she said that she had multiple teachers who tried to get her to stay in school and finish. She felt, however, that she was “just so broken” that she needed to take time

to heal. Also, after learning about what was happening with her, her parents didn't want her to return because they felt like she was suicidal. She regretted her "weak mind" and that she didn't feel secure enough with herself to withstand the bullying and finish school (Samantha, 15-7). Samantha had plans to enroll in the new online high school in September, 2014. On the survey, the statement, "I was being bullied and didn't want to be around it anymore" was strongly agreed to by four participants. Brandy and Estevan, alongside Samantha and Anita, strongly agreed to this. Here, it is possible that both Estevan and Brandy are referring to their issue with a teacher rather than students.

Financing School and Financial Self-Sufficiency

Financial issues existed for many students, as has already been discussed in multiple cases. For some, the perceived financial burden of high school on family or sponsors informed their decisions to leave, as was the case for Estevan. For others, like Cindy and John, for instance, attending high school became impossible due to their families' inability to pay for it. Finances also influenced the schools that students attended, as was the case with Janice. Furthermore, the difficulty of paying for school combined with a need to support oneself financially by getting a job influenced participants like Frank, Manuel, Luis, Jennifer, and Estevan to leave school. Across Belize, approximately 27% of school-aged youth (aged 5–17) are attending school and employed. Roughly 36% of females, compared with 24% of males, work and attend school at the same time (International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour [IPEC], 2015).

School Was Financially Impossible

When a relative became ill after John successfully completed Third Form, all funds were diverted to medical expenses and it was no longer possible to send him to Fourth Form to complete. Prior to this, John had attended four years of high school because of having to repeat Third Form. After having completed Third Form successfully and with awards in some of the major subjects, John was unable to finish his last year because of finances. When asked about the possibility of receiving a scholarship or funding from the school, he said that his grades weren't high enough. Reflecting on this, John felt that had he finished he would have one of the top jobs in the country by now. He would go back to school, particularly for an online Bachelor's degree, but he did not currently have the funds.

In Third Form, Cindy failed Math and lost her scholarship. This was the culmination of a longer ongoing process of disengagement from school. However, she could not return without the finances. As she explained, the conditions of her scholarship were such that she was required to pass Math and English every year. Her parents could not afford to pay her tuition and so she did not return to Fourth Form. At this time, there was no school on the caye either and so that was not even an option. When she went back to the caye, she began working full time and never went back to complete secondary school. Cindy would not return to school now as she has a good job, although she regrets that she didn't finish and is sorry she lost the scholarship.

Raul wanted to finish high school and probably learn a trade afterwards. Raul, like many others, left the caye and lived with other family in order to attend high school. In his particular case, Raul went to live with his aunt to attend school in Belize City.

Friends from the US sponsored him for his first year of high school. He completed his first year successfully and was promoted to Second Form. However, the sponsors had only committed to helping him the first year. This fact, combined with the fact that his aunt had a big family and he felt like he was a burden on her, led him not to return to school the following year. Raul also mentioned that he was “giving a little trouble” and that his aunt possibly did not want to support him there any longer. He explained:

My aunt was finding, trying to find other excuse but I was doing good in school and probably I was giving a little, a little bit of trouble but that's with all teenager. I wasn't going to the extent, you know, on drugs or gang-bangin or whatever. I was a decent student...you know but I, I thought it was because, you know, it, it's the finance, you know. She had other children and you know, it was a big family and to continue with me it's hard. (Raul, 2-8)

Raul also didn't have the money for tuition the next year and said that the second year, his aunt would have been expected to pay. When asked about the possibility of a scholarship he said, “...I was good in school but I wasn't that good” (Raul, 2-8).

Reflecting on school, Raul would have liked to have finished but felt that you don't need high school to go for what you want. If he were to go back to school it would be to get a trade. Although he mentioned that if there was a night school he might consider it.

Nine participants strongly agreed with the statement on the survey, “There was no way to pay my tuition.” However, comparing responses with interviews there were three for whom this did not apply or influence their decision to leave—as one had a scholarship and Janice and Manuel left for other reasons. For four participants, Anita, Linda, Luis, and Estevan the financial struggle to fund their education contributed to and combined with their final leaving, whereas for Cindy, John, and Raul they had no choice but to leave because of monetary reasons.

Financial Self-Sufficiency: Choosing Between Going to School and Surviving

Many participants had to take care of themselves financially. While some left school at the time they chose to be financially self-sufficient, like Manuel and Frank, others never had a choice. Because this category is very similar to “Self Reliance and Taking Care of Girlfriend,” I won’t go into detail about those cases here, but will focus more on the case of Luis, who had to be financially self-sufficient throughout his time at school. Luis began high school the year that PHS opened after having been out of primary school for two years. He was sponsored for his first three years of school - Bridge, First Form, and Second Form. He managed to complete almost four years of school but left school just before exams at the end of Third Form. Luis didn’t name money as the main reason for leaving, but given his description of his situation, it certainly influenced his experience. Like most other participants, however, there are multiple factors to consider that influenced the actual departure.

After three years of being sponsored, he was told that he needed to pay for school on his own in Third Form. This weighed on him in the sense that by the time he left, he said his tuition bill was so high he didn’t see how he could pay it. More pressing than a tuition bill, he was having difficulty with basic issues such as food and shelter. In class, he had a hard time concentrating. After school, he worked part-time earning \$BZ10 a day. Luis decided to leave school at the same time that he knew a tour guide class was starting on the island, a chance at a job he did not want to miss. He explained, “I said I’m goin’ for one goal, trying to get this license, you know at the time they had this tour guide course coming up so I said I gotta get this ’cause I want a chance you know” (Luis, 14-6).

Luis had an overwhelming number of demerits which also meant he had to work after school every day cleaning around the schoolyard doing P/T. Luis isn't the only participant who left school right before exams at the end of the year. He described the day he left:

...I had like almost 150 hours of P/T in Third Form and I got my boys, my boys was already sleeping, quitting school like you know, for no reason, some of my friends...they were just quitting school you know like man I'm tired of this, I'm going home. At the time, the teachers started getting really strict on us, you know. Everything was turning upside down for me, you know. (Luis, 14-6)

An overwhelming number of factors influenced Luis's leaving school early. Luis felt like the education he received in high school helped him a lot in terms of Math and being able to deal with money. He won't return to school because he has a good job now. Luis, along with Jennifer and Brandy strongly agreed with the statement, "I had a job opportunity or another course that I decided to take instead of school." Brandy was referring to another schooling opportunity, but both Jennifer and Luis were referring to getting a job at that time.

Another survey statement pertaining to finance was "I was the only one taking care of myself and I couldn't work and pay tuition and rent at the same time." This was agreed to by seven of the participants. Although, three are corroborated in the interviews - Luis, Manuel, and Jennifer (and this was the case with Frank who was not available to take the survey), there were four participants for whom this wasn't made explicit in the interviews. Brandy, Elisa, Melanie and Cindy also agreed with this, possibly indicating the shift they made after leaving school or the growing financial self-sufficiency that was expected of them. Melanie and Elisa both moved in with their boyfriends and Cindy returned to get a job on the cayes after high school.

Disengagement and Social Selves: Forgetting About School

As previously discussed, many students described a trajectory of change regarding their disposition towards school, their friends, and themselves. Common to all of these cases is a disengagement from school following the initial excitement and engagement at the beginning of First Form. For each participant, there are different factors that played a role in these changes. For some, it was a move toward being more social. For Samantha, it was the opposite and by Third Form she felt more insecure than First Form. Her grades worsened not due to a lack of interest but rather the stress of negative social relationships, which made it difficult to cope academically. For most participants, however, the later lack of interest in school is coupled with more interest in friends, partying, or romantic relationships.

As mentioned earlier, once Cindy lost her scholarship she was unable to continue due to lack of finances. Cindy came in to high school very strong academically but she had to adjust to a new family, being away from her parents who were separating, and a new school. Without parental supervision, she said her “grades started slipping big time and then I actually started hating high school because it was an all girl’s Catholic school” (Cindy, 5-2). The focus on Catholicism and the type of students who attended made her unhappy. Cindy explained, “it was also a private school so there was all the rich kids from the city and they were pretty stuck up and I really started hating high school because of that” (5-3). There was a lot going on Cindy’s life outside of school at this time. Her parents were not getting along during Second Form. When she was 15 years old and in Third Form, her parents formally separated. Cindy explained, “I just started partying and hanging out with the wrong friends and I forgot completely all about school – I was still

making passing grades” (5-4). This culminated in her failing Math at the end of Third Form, however.

Simone was able to maintain her grades as she went through high school. Attending the same school as Cindy for the first three years, she described a gradual process of becoming less shy and more social. The first school Simone attended was St. Margaret’s in Belize City, where if you are suspended twice you are expelled. She reported having a good set of friends while there. While she was shy in First Form, she was more comfortable in Second Form and by Third Form, she had started drinking and partying. Her first suspension was due to her being seen in a club with her friends. The second time was a surprise and she was not notified until well into the first week of Fourth Form. Someone had reported seeing her in a club over the summer. Ironically, she was in the club to make sure that her relative was okay and escort her home. They let her withdraw instead of expelling her but by notifying her late in her first week of school she was unable to transfer to another school and had to wait a year to start Fourth Form.

Luis’s grades were also dropping compared with earlier years and he felt that he wasn’t going to be able to catch up. Also, all of his friends had already decided to quit school. When asked about the main reason he left, Luis explained:

Well, I think the main reason is like because all my best, my best friends they end up gone, you know, and at the time only me one stay behind. You know and I feel left out and at the time I no really do good work in school or my grades they started dropping low in Third Form because the higher you go the harder the work, you know... (14-8)

Four other participants also mentioned that their initial interest and excitement in school and schoolwork gradually turned into apathy toward school. For all four participants – Elisa, Yoli, Shirlene, and Melanie, they noted a gradual lack of interest in

schoolwork. All of them also had boyfriends that they were seeing. A statement on the survey reflected this disengagement, “I lost interest in school and got more into partying with my friends.” Interestingly, none of the people who discussed this in the interviews strongly agreed that this played a role in their leaving. However, the two participants who did mark this, Manuel and Luis, had emphasized their friends, particularly outside of school, indicating this had a real influence on why they left.

The Event of Leaving or “The Last Straw”

One theme that emerged from many of the participants’ stories about leaving was that there was often an accompanying event in school that prompted them to leave suddenly. Because of this recurring theme, it was placed on the survey as “I would still be at school if something hadn’t happened in school the day I left.” Nine participants strongly agreed with this statement. These events that took place inside schools are often described by participants as having had enough of being treated in a way that was demoralizing. They involved confrontations with teachers, punishment, and walking out. For a few others, events happened in participants’ personal lives outside of school that precipitated their leaving. Often combined with other factors, attending and paying for school became less logical and desirable in the eyes of participants.

Dupéré et al. (2014) noted that the emphasis placed upon disengagement as a process over time in many studies of early school leaving might account for the fact that often reasons other than those beginning in early childhood are downplayed in the literature (p. 2). Previous calls to look at leaving school early as an event by Willett and Singer (1991) have only been followed up on by a few researchers (Dupéré et al., 2014, p. 3). Dupéré et al. (2014) argued for integrating a life course framework (e.g.,

Alexander et al., 2001; Lawson & Lawson, 2013) with a stress process framework (Pearlin & Bierman, 2013) in order to better understand leaving school early.

The life course framework is similar to the disengagement perspective in that it takes into account experiences over the long-term beginning with early childhood. There are some key concepts in the life course literature that have not yet been utilized in the literature on early school leaving (Dupéré et al., 2014, p. 16). As Dupéré et al. (2014) explained, these are the idea of turning points, “points of rupture and discontinuity in individual trajectories (Crosnoe & Johnson, 2011; Johnson et al., 2011),” the timing of turning points in “relation to developmental milestones (Elder & Giele, 2009),” and the notion of “linked lives” which emphasizes “that adolescents’ lives are shaped by the lives of significant others around them” (Dupéré et al., 2014, p. 17). The other two major aspects of life course theory that work together are agency and the larger historical and geographical context. Defined as a “people’s ability to make choices and deliberately adapt to their life circumstances as a function of their contemporaneous goals and resources,” agency can be constrained by others as well as “important local and historical contingencies” (Dupéré et al., 2014, p. 18). The stress process framework sees stressors as:

problematic external circumstances and experiences apt to challenge people’s adaptive capabilities and to precipitate the onset of adjustment problems (Pearlin & Bierman, 2013). Stressors can take either the form of disruptive discrete events (e.g., a car accident) or relatively prolonged hardships and difficulties (e.g., physical disability following a car accident). The stress process model details how, and under what circumstances, such stressors are associated with the emergence of adjustment problems. It also documents the unequal distribution of stressors and resources among various socioeconomic groups, with people in disadvantaged groups often being particularly vulnerable to certain kinds of stressors, such as income loss or job and family instability. (Dupéré et al., 2014, p. 13).

These stressors also come with secondary stressors related to the main stressor. Combining these two approaches highlights how “long-term risk factors, as well as proximal precipitating stressors and supports, come together to generate the complex outcome of dropout” (Dupéré et al., 2014, p. 23).

This work is highlighted because the findings show that events, circumstances, and situations often occurred just prior to leaving school early. Furthermore, often these are emotional events. As noted earlier, Furlong (1991) explained how students don’t “reject school simply because they are working class or because they find themselves in a secondary modern school” (p. 297). The concept of stressors and accompanying secondary stressors acknowledges that students are indeed up against structures that cause stress and “hidden injuries” (Sennett & Cobb, 1977). The concept also accounts for the multiplicity and degree of stressors, such as was seen in the case of Luis, for instance. Thus, many other factors existed that “stressed out” Luis but his leaving culminated in an event. Luis was in the middle of P/T after school when he simply decided to leave. He had many hours more of P/T to look forward to as punishment for his behavior, a growing tuition bill, and was barely getting by on the food that he had to eat. Luis admitted giving trouble and having fun with his friends, but also lamented the demerit system in which no warning was given but demerits were given out for trivial things. Luis explained:

Sometimes they give demerits for no reasons. You know for like no reason. For example, you just come from recess and ... you just reach in class with your shirt not even tucked in that’s a demerit, you know. You can’t have no excuse for that or anything so...But when you get all those, start seeing all those demerits piling up there you don’t believe them, all the trouble you could cause but to me I don’t see it as trouble, da just simple things you know like tuck in your shirt... (14-6)

Describing the moment he left, Luis recounted, “I just slammed down the rake, throw down the bucket, went upstairs...open my closet, start packing all my books, and I just leave the compound never to be returned” (14-6). Responding to a question in which I asked if his being tired of P/T was a factor in his leaving, Luis explained how he simply felt overwhelmed:

P/T, P/T is another, everything I think everything is just like, you know, like just bad enough because it was ... more than...you’ve already gone through stress at home like I don’t even have no home I sleep in a boat so you know I, I never, I never really well, probably school never meant for boys like me, you know, cause I’m a really, can’t get through it, yep, can’t ... (14-11)

Like Luis, Linda left school suddenly. In her case, she walked out of class when the visiting priest grabbed her pencil. The principal “scolded” her and she got angry and left (21-3). Reflecting on the event, she said she would still be there if that hadn’t happened. At home, Linda had a mother who was ill and thus, she knew that her schooling was becoming less and less affordable. Like Tiffany, she felt like she was singled out and disciplined unfairly. Tiffany’s argument with the teacher led to her getting expelled as it followed two earlier suspensions. Samantha also walked out of class one day in the latter part of Fourth Form. The same young men who were bullying her began to tease her again. As explained earlier, she felt like she couldn’t handle any more of the bullying and she walked out of class. For Estevan, the ongoing conflict with the teacher over his demerits from the book he did not have caused him to leave school. Even though his mother urged him to return, he decided not to go back. Brandy’s conflict with a specific teacher resulted in her tearing up her paper and walking out of class (16-5). Although she returned at her mother’s insistence to take exams, she didn’t

attend the mandatory remedial classes that might have given her a chance at not repeating the next year.

For others, the event that happened occurred outside of school in their personal life. In the case of pregnancies, these were often events of shaming and feeling ashamed associated with the time that the pregnancy was revealed. Thus, most participants left school when it became known that they were pregnant, even if they could have stayed longer until their pregnancy showed. Melanie experienced a traumatic event when her family suspected that she was pregnant, a fact that she wasn't aware of herself. She explained, "I went home – all my family members were right at the gate waiting for me. They let me pee in a cup and they checked me. When they saw I was pregnant everyone was so pissed, so mad at me, they tried to drag me out of my house" (Melanie, 19-4). Melanie is convinced, in retrospect, that someone working at the school shared the suspicions about her pregnancy with the family. This was most likely done informally, without the school's knowledge.

Melanie spent the next day crying in the bathroom at school. A concerned teacher/administrator went to her house after school to talk with the family about the issue, and gave them some money out of her own pocket to help with the prenatal care. Melanie never returned to school. After this she ran to school as a refuge but wouldn't go in the classroom. Except for a couple of participants, those young women who found out that they were pregnant felt embarrassment once they realized that everyone knew—a factor which caused them to leave school sooner rather than later.

This notion of the event of leaving was placed on the survey to clarify reasons for leaving that also involved underlying themes like disengagement or difficulty financing

school. The fact that nine strongly agreed with the statement that they would still be in school had an event not happened shows the strong influence these events had on their abrupt departures from school.

For Manuel and Frank, their leaving was prompted by their desire to take care of their girlfriends combined with moving out on their own. For Jennifer, circumstances in her life made it difficult to continue with school. In the case of Jennifer she had no one to take care of her child and had just been kicked out of the house by her mother (17-6). While there was no “event” inside school, the move toward financial independence and establishing a relationship, sometimes circumstances not of their own choosing, influenced their reasons for leaving school.

Conclusion

As has been demonstrated, the reasons participants gave for leaving school early rarely stood alone and were often influenced and informed by other issues in their lives. Although many participants had financial difficulties and sometimes a complete inability to pay for school, there were often other reasons that actually prompted them to leave. John, Raul, and Cindy had no other way to finance their education. Others, however, like Estevan and Anita knew that it would be a financial burden on their parents and guardian respectively. Combined with school factors like negative relationships with teachers, in the case of Estevan, and bullying in the case of Anita, they elected to leave.

Many of the reasons given for leaving involved issues associated with adolescence, specifically identity and relationships. The growing lack of interest in schoolwork with the accompanying shift toward valuing social relationships was a common theme among participants. In the extreme case of Samantha, for instance, she

left because the bullying she was experiencing daily was no longer bearable. As she felt more and more insecure, her schoolwork faltered. In contrast, others lost interest in academics and got more into partying and/or a romantic attachment.

School boundaries with the outside community are often porous. In the case of PHS, the social conflicts between participants and teachers or other students were more intense and personal because of the school being in a small community. Some participants felt that there was favoritism and unfair disciplinary practices. For others like Tiffany, their problems and their reputations came into the school with them from primary. The lived experiences of participants on a daily basis reflected social relations and inequalities outside the school's walls. Furthermore, information often travels freely in and out of a school. Although St. Margaret's is located in Belize City, people nevertheless informed administration about what students were doing such that in the case of Simone, her actions outside of the school had severe consequences. This porosity allows for what happens inside school to move out into the larger community as well. Melanie felt like her family was inappropriately informed of her pregnancy prior to her even knowing about it herself.

For many students, there was either an event that happened to them outside of school or a "last straw" inside of school that made them finally leave. These were the culminating acts of tolerating bad experiences, disrespect, or as Linda put it, "treatment" (21-4, 5). As in the discussion of trivial rules in high school, Luis claimed that they weren't dogs, indicating a feeling of being dehumanized (14-11). Thus, while it is tempting to explain reasons for leaving school early with statistics such as SES, ethnicity, or pregnancy, for instance, it glosses over the complexity of each case that when taken

together can point to hidden themes that are silenced in research that is embedded in a “culture of positivism” (Giroux, 1997, p. 13).

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE PURPOSE OF HIGH SCHOOL

Themes regarding high school's purpose emerged both in response to direct questions pertaining to the topic as well as throughout the interview. Prior to examining these, it is worth looking at the research of Hickey and Gill (2010) on principal perceptions of educational purpose. While this scholar-practitioner research is focused on principals of primary schools in the Toledo district, it provides insight into the adult perspective on education's role in Belize. The research took place over a four-day training session involving 30 principals that were divided into five focus groups. Each group wrote up their consensus on what a school's mission should be and the success characteristics for both a student completing Std. 6 and later, a former student at age 25. All of the principals utilized the word "holistic" to describe the mission of the school, and referred to "teaching to the spiritual, physical, emotional, and social needs" (Hickey & Gill, 2010, p. 63). Two out of the five groups saw the characteristics that the Std. 6 graduate was to have as simply moving on to secondary school or learning a trade. The other three noted qualities such as decision-making, critical thinking, being respectful, having pride and love for country, demonstrating high self-esteem and independence, developing life skills, having aspirations and good social skills, and being career-oriented (Hickey & Gill, 2010, p. 67). At age 25, a former student would be able "to cope in society," make good decisions, function well, and contribute to society. Hickey and Gill (2010) noted that an interesting finding was that no principal thought that passing the PSE was a characteristic of success (p. 64).

These findings are not surprising as they are rooted historically in the purposes associated with education in Belize, principals are exposed to these ideas in professional development workshops, and they have their own opinions concerning “holistic” education and critical thinking as well. Not mentioning the PSE as the mission or goal of a school does not deny its important role in what they did recognize as significant – namely, the ability for the Std. 6 graduate to continue on to secondary.

While principals see the importance of their students continuing to secondary and eventually contributing to society, the findings herein will focus on the participants’ motives for going to high school, an often overlooked topic. The first three interview questions listed below addressed how they and their parents felt about the need and reasons for attending high school, as well as goals they might have had following high school. The last four interview questions investigated how participants discussed the purpose of school, personally, in general, and as related to the caye.

- When you left primary school, did you know you wanted to go to high school? Why did you go?
- Was it important to your parents that you go to high school? Did they go?
- Did you know what you wanted to do after high school? What were your goals?
- Do you think high school is important for what you are doing now or what you wanted to do?
- What do you think is the point of going to high school?
- Why do you think people on this caye go to high school?
- Do you think high school is worth the money?

Because the local job market is based on tourism and the caye is very different overall from the rest of Belize, participants were also asked to relate the purpose of high school to Paradise Caye and speculate on why or why not people attend on the caye. The

last question about high school's worth was intended to allow participants a chance to integrate their beliefs about the purpose of school with the financial sacrifice made to attend.

The Role of Parents and Motivation for Going to High School

Because the makeup of one's family and the educational level of parents are often taken to indicate both a belief in the value of school as well as support for and access to school, among other factors, these will be briefly examined here. These statistics are of interest as a point of comparison with other studies that look for correlations between them and leaving school early. Within the individual deficit model of school dropout, demographics are often utilized to predict early school leaving. I will look at the nature of single parenting in Belize as well as parents' completion of high school among participants. It is worthwhile to look at these in regards to the participants in order to situate and understand them in their larger sociocultural and economic context.

Single Parent Families

Out of the 21 participants in this study, only six participants lived with two parents while growing up. Distinctions were not made for stepparents although it is known that at least two of these six participants were living with stepparents. As Pagani et al. (2008) explained, "being from a single-parent family represents ... an independent indicator of access and control over wealth" (p. 177). As such, it is often used as a predictor variable:

This variable is predictive of child achievement (e.g., Carlson & Corcoran, 2001), behavior problems associated with primary school failure (Pagani, Boulerice, Tremblay, & Vitaro, 1997), delinquency (Pagani, Tremblay, Vitaro, Kerr, & McDuff, 1998), and educational attainment (Biblarz & Gottainer, 2000). Its association with achievement is often explained by its association with poverty (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997) and other variables of social address (Biblarz &

Gottainer, 2000). Nevertheless, its effects upon psychosocial development are mediated, in large part, by the parent– child relationship (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). (Pagani et al., 2008, pp. 176-177)

Single parenthood, however, takes on different forms in different places. In Belize, it is not necessarily, or in any straightforward manner, an indicator of less access to or control over wealth than being from a two-parent family. According to the *Belize Country Poverty Assessment* (BCPA), 60% of households in Belize are nuclear, two-parent families (Halcrow Group, 2010). Nuclear families with young children have a poverty rate of 39%, while those with older children have a higher rate of 47%. Twenty-seven percent of households in Belize are single-parent households with children under 18 years old, the majority of which are female-headed. Higher poverty rates are seen in all household types that have other adults present. However, single, female-headed households are less likely (29%) to be poor than male-headed households (32%)(Halcrow Group, 2010, pp. 72-73). In reference to the lower poverty rate among single-parent households, it is explained in the BCPA that, “this implies that these households exist because the single parent has the financial support necessary to be essentially self-sufficient” (Halcrow Group, 2010, p. 74). Thus, single parenthood, in these cases, is not necessarily associated with poverty the same way it might be in other contexts. Rather, single-parent households may indicate, in some instances, that the single parent is economically self-sufficient, rather than the opposite, that the single parent has less access and control over wealth. Thus, it would be a mistake to assume, without further investigation, that because many participants are from single-parent families, that this might be causally related or correlated with their early school leaving.

Parents' High School Completion

Out of all the participants, four had one parent who had completed high school and three participants had both parents complete. While the level of parents' education, and particularly maternal education, is often correlated with early school leaving (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, Yeung, & Smith, 1998; Lundetræ, 2011), secondary schools in Belize have traditionally only been accessible to those who were of a high socioeconomic class and thus could afford to attend. High levels of maternal education, in this context, most likely indicate high SES, however lower levels cannot be assumed to correlate with indigent poverty or parents not valuing or seeing the utility of education for their children. Currently, 55% of the working population in Belize has only completed primary school or less (SIB, 2015b), and thus not completing secondary does not necessarily exclude one from viable work. However, as has been mentioned, attending secondary school is correlated with higher income than those who attend only primary.

The Value of High School for Parents

When participants were asked if it was important to their parents that they attend high school, the majority of participants said that it was very important. They also often communicated that the reason it was so important was specifically because their parents didn't get the chance to attend or were unable to complete. Eight participants—Brandy, Samantha, Shirlene, Melanie, Ingrid, Linda, Janice, and Cindy—all brought up their attendance at high school as important for their parents because their parents had not been able to attend themselves.

For Shirlene, she felt a personal responsibility to go because no one in her family had yet completed high school. As she explained:

I wanted to make my mom proud because I was the, in my family no one graduated and I was the only one that actually went to high school and was that far and so she was looking up to me to be the one for her to wear that dress to go to the graduation. (Shirlene, 13-2)

Those participants with parents who had attended high school also had a sense that it was important to their parents that they attend high school. While Jennifer's mother did not attend high school, her father did. Jennifer explained:

My dad used to push me a lot to like get good grades and everything. He said he wanted me to get a good job and have a good education so that when I get older I don't have to struggle or anything. He said that because when he was younger and he had nobody putting him through high school he put himself, he had to work during the day and then for a year before he could actually go to high school. He had to make enough money and everything. (17-2)

Jennifer's mother didn't push her as much but did want her to go:

My mom, she didn't really like push me that much like my dad. Like my mom said that if I wanted to go I could go, like that. But my mom wanted me to finish because she didn't finish high school because her parents they were poor and my, um, grandmother had like fifteen children so all of them couldn't go to school but my dad pushed me a lot to go. (17-2)

Others like Luis, Anita, Manuel, and Raul did not have either parent really encouraging them to go to high school. Historically, however, Hitchen (2002) noted that parents of multiple ethnic backgrounds across Belize made sacrifices for their children to attend and placed great importance on school as a vehicle for individual progress (p. 352). This is in contrast, however, to the beliefs of some teachers in Arzu's (2012) findings, as well as past education officers' beliefs that poor academic performance of students could be blamed on "parental indifference" (Hitchen, 2002, p. 356).

Participant Motivation to Go to High School

Regarding participants' motivation to attend high school, all but Linda, Janice, and Luis wanted to attend high school after graduating from primary. Both Linda and Janice did not want to go to high school originally but did so because of their mothers' encouragement and, in the case of Janice, insistence. As Janice related, "...my mom said if I don't go, she would send me to a girl's home because I should go to school. That's the reason I went so I had to go" (20-3). While it was not his idea, Luis was encouraged to go by his sponsor, who offered to pay for the tuition. While the question was never asked whether or not they wanted to go to the specific high school that they did, some brought that up. Both Tiffany and Ingrid did not want to attend PHS from the start (18-2, 12-2). The same was true of Janice and the technical school in Belize City (20-3).

Manuel went of his own initiative, asking a sponsor to help pay his tuition. He explained that he was "hanging out in the streets" and getting into trouble for two years before PHS opened (Manuel, 8-2). When asked why Manuel went to school, he stated, "I ended up wanting to go 'cause you know always trouble, trouble everywhere so..." (8-2). As for goals that participants had at the time they entered high school, categories that emerged here were educational and/or job related. More than half of participants didn't state a specific goal. Both Brandy and Shirlene had goals they knew would require a lot of education, namely to become a doctor and a lawyer, respectively. Samantha wanted to go to the US and get into acting, something she liked to do here in Belize. Elisa knew she was interested in science but had no specific goal in mind except getting a job involving science. Jennifer wanted to go so that she could have enough money to provide for her family in the future. Anita and Cindy both thought they might want to be

policewomen (or also a lawyer in the case of Cindy). Tiffany wanted to be a cosmetologist and Frank wanted to be a fireman. Most stated that they would have either continued studying prior to getting a job or they would have gotten a job straight out of high school.

Beliefs About High School and Its Purpose

Beliefs about high school and its purpose are reflective of what Smyth and Hattam (2004) identified as one of the two interwoven strands of becoming somebody—specifically “how young people navigate an entry into the labor market, and their simultaneous efforts to develop a socio-cultural identity” (p. 68). Beliefs about high school concerned its role in helping participants, immediately or eventually as one step in a longer schooling process, to get a job.

Tiffany’s answer is similar to most participants, namely, “for getting an education and to be someone in life like and have a really good job” (18-7). Most responses focused on personal accomplishment, some included further studies, and almost all included jobs. Many focused on degrees and jobs without noting the education that the degree is meant to signify. Older participants reflected on the way that they use their formal education in their jobs, particularly math for business. One participant, Anita, stated that high school is so that people won’t “take advantage” of you and you can start, run, and own local businesses (11-4, 5). This sentiment is similarly expressed by Tiffany, who stated that by studying Business and Math, “you can know exactly what to do so people just can’t cheat you out of your money” (18-7). Both Sara and Simone noted that high school is the time that you learn about what you like and figure out what you want to do. When asked about the purpose of high school in general, female participants

overwhelmingly emphasized themes such as achieving goals, getting the diploma, moving on to a higher degree, getting a good job, and having financial freedom. Four male participants linked high school's immediate purpose to getting an education, while John and Estevan saw its purpose as job-related. Some beliefs concerning high schools, diplomas, degrees and jobs emerged.

The Easy "Office" Job

The type of job which came up repeatedly in the interviews was the so-called "office job," otherwise known as a "desk job." This is similar to Anderson-Fye's (2002) findings on the neighboring caye approximately 15 years ago. Another theme that emerged was what a good job looked like. This was never asked directly of the participants but was brought up on their own. The job was described as one in an office, at a desk, and was considered to be easy. Furthermore, if you were lucky enough to get the office job, it would pay back your high school expenses many times over.

A High School Diploma is Not Enough

One theme related to participants' beliefs about high school was that a high school diploma as a terminal degree was not enough to attain a job. Along with noting that finishing Fourth Form is not enough to get a job, many emphasized that one must continue their education for two more years to get an Associate's in order to qualify for a good job. Cindy expressed this sentiment:

For me I think primary school and high school, it's like I said, it should be the least, like you can't even really get a career coming out of high school anymore. You need to go on and get your Associate's and that stuff. (5-5)

When Sara was asked if high school was important for what she wanted to do, she replied, "Yes. Very important. Now you need a Sixth Form to get a good job with good

pay. Without that then you just get anything that pops up you grab it” (10-4). Frank felt the same way:

Growing up, growing up now, jobwise I’ve found out that it is very hard to get a job, well, a proper job without a, a high school diploma which is not really needed now but more, more like an Associates. So the level of education for you to get a job right now is mostly, or minimum of an Associate’s degree which high school does not really play a role at this time... (4-3)

The link between the diploma or degree and the office job was strong for everyone. As John related, not having those credentials excludes one from those types of jobs:

Most things would require, to say like an Associate’s right, degree, right. Especially if you’re in an office, right. And I like to say like if you did not graduate like me, right, it helps you in certain forms but certain types you can’t really do anything. Like, I can’t work in an office right. (9-8)

Some participants expressed a hopeful attitude that if they put forth the effort to go to high school, they would find a job because people would appreciate their effort even if they couldn’t afford to go on for an Associate’s (Melanie, 19-7; Shirlene, 13-6).

Learning a Trade Less Risky

While no female participants mentioned learning a trade, it was a common theme among male participants. Some male participants expressed ambivalence toward the worth of the high school diploma in the sense that they felt learning a trade would have been more valuable. As John explained, it was also still an option, “...if you did not finish like me you can actually go back to get trades instead of going to high school which to me it makes more sense afterwards as you get out you get a job” (9-8). Raul also felt that you were more likely to get a good job if you studied for a trade. When asked what the point of high school was, he explained:

..nowadays to me . . . it doesn't even make sense to go to high school. Because it's a lot of money and to the end you're not sure if you're gonna, have a job . . . you know, so I pretty much believe you go after what you like, you take a trade of what you like, or what you think you're good at. (Raul, 2-5)

Particularly in retrospect, John and Raul felt that if they did go back now, they would go back to learn a trade.

Purpose of High School on the Caye

When the question about the purpose of high school was brought home to the cayes, participants responded in a way that related high school to the local economy by way of the diploma. The idea that high school was for a "higher" job located in an office prevailed. Related to the local context, however, high school, for many, became irrelevant as most participants explained that there were limited "office" jobs on the cayes such as the bank. Some went so far as to say that no one cares about high school diplomas on the cayes, and others reported that you get a job based on who you know. The common belief was that most jobs on the cayes don't require a diploma and there is more opportunity for better jobs off of the cayes.

The Caye as a "Chill" Place: Knowing People and Not Needing Much

Paradise Caye's easy-going atmosphere was complemented by the idea that high school is not necessary. According to John:

Reason is they don't want to leave the cayes because this is home. It's more easier here, right. It's more, it's more chill, it's more mellow, it's more calmer, it's more easy, easy to work with, right. Than if you go somewhere and you don't know the people, you don't have that much family in the, around where the area is or anything like that. (9-9)

This idea is corroborated by Raul, who explained that after he had to leave school he came back to the cayes. Raul described it:

... and life on the caye is pretty sweet...you know, every, all of my family's from here so I don't pretty much have a hard life here so it's just, you know, gotta make a little money on the side just to survive, have a little pocket money. (2-9)

Jennifer also mentioned that if you were planning on staying on the caye that there was a lot to do without a diploma:

You can either ...do underhanded stuff or you can do stuff like ... work 'cause there's lots of restaurants and bars you can work at if you don't want, if your goal is not to go off to a different place and ... 'cause a student was there one time I forgot his name, he said that why should we be sitting down in here spending our money to go to school when we could be out there doing a job, making money and that's when I, uh, found out that he stopped school. (17-9)

Thus, living on the caye is seen as desirable and many participants expressed that for those who live on the caye, there are ways of making money without having a diploma. Furthermore, even though it is a small island, the tourist-based economy offers possibilities for making money in the formal economy, the informal tourist economy, as well as illegally.

High School is for a Diploma and a Diploma is for an Office Job

In general, getting a diploma was thought of as the way to get a good job, support their families, and run businesses. Those who felt that a diploma was necessary, in most cases, limited their usefulness to getting office jobs. There were exceptions—Elisa mentioned it was necessary for fishing and tourism (7-7), and Samantha felt it was needed for every job, even for cleaning hotels (15-6). Ingrid's view, however, was consistent with most, and she believed that the diploma was needed for a "higher" job:

Actually here ... you do need to graduate in order to work at like a higher place and end up being like a, a, instead of working at a bar, you can just, you can either work in a office, you really need to graduate in order to work in there instead of just dropping out. (12-4)

Similar to Ingrid, Brandy saw the utility of the diploma in its ability to help one work in an office at a desk. She explained, “Well, one day they will need it because like if you want to do work in a desk job you will need it, you will need all your papers then you can get the job” (Brandy, 16-10).

The majority of participants agreed that on the caye, you do not need to go to high school because you don’t need a high school diploma to get a job. It was largely agreed upon that one didn’t need it to work in hotels or bars. John explained that many people who have high school diplomas go back into fishing anyway, a job that doesn’t require one (9-9). While some stated having a diploma was unnecessary because there are a limited amount of “office jobs” that would require it, there were others who felt you didn’t need a diploma at all– even for the office jobs.

Getting a Job Based on Who You Know: Pulling Strings

Many participants felt that getting a job was based on who you know and who your family was and had little to do with a degree. As Sara explained, “Almost everybody is related here so pretty much they just don’t go to school because they have someone they can depend on to get a job” (10-4). Participants also felt that employers didn’t care about the diploma, a sentiment expressed by Jennifer:

...like out here you got some businesses that want a high school diploma and everything but you got a majority out here that doesn’t really need it. So that’s why they, they don’t really take the high school part serious here – they just finish like whatever they finish and then they stop and then they find some job and that’s it. (17-9)

Janice felt like you could get a job by “you know, pull strings...it’s like say for example you own this big business and I know you I’m sure I can get the job, like that” (20-7).

The Gamble of High School and Missing Out on a Job

There are a couple of aspects that arose with the perception of high school being a gamble. Multiple examples were offered to support the idea that no job was guaranteed with a diploma or even a higher degree. Thus, there were two opportunity costs, to use an economic term, of not only missing out on a job at home while away at school, but also wasting the money spent on tuition. These ideas were specifically related to the cayes.

Luis and Raul felt like high school wasn't worth it because no job was guaranteed. When asked what Luis thought about the purpose of high school he explained:

...but I think it's kinda waste of time because you know, um, well no really a waste of time but most people come out of like UB and I think they no even have a job. So I just come out of Third Form and I'm on my, my foot right now then. And I never gone, I never went to, uh, Sixth Form or anything like that. (14-10)

Here, Luis explained that not only does he have his job without having finished high school, but he felt that most people who have a Bachelor's don't even have a job. In this case, Luis's example illustrates how staying in school could cost you a job, particularly if you are returning to the cayes. Similarly, Yoli explained how she had the same job prior to her friend, who finished Sixth Form. Yoli concluded, "So you don't even need education ... look at she has Sixth Form..." (1-4). When asked whether high school was important for what she was doing at the time or what she wanted to do, Ingrid replied, "No, not really. 'Cause like I'm still, I still like, I had like jobs, I still work and ... because I work with my cousin graduated and she's doing the same thing that I was doing" (12-3). Elisa offered a similar example:

... I had a job and they had this man that he has a Sixth Form degree and he's working at this place and he's raking. He's doing everything like he didn't get no studies. So from then I saw that it really doesn't matter to get a Sixth Form

degree because he should be working like in the bank but he's raking, picking up garbage. Everything they told him to do he has to go do it like he, like he didn't even go to school. (7-5)

Raul explained how he felt, "Well, like . . . nowadays to me . . . I see it like it doesn't even make sense to go to high school. Because it's a lot of money and to the end you're not sure if you're gonna have a job" (2-5). Estevan felt like you have to be lucky to get a job, "...if you're not I mean 'cause I got some friends that they went to university and they working cement work I mean...they didn't study for that but they have to do it" (6-7).

On a Personal Level, High School is Important

In my efforts to find disconfirming evidence of larger themes amidst my own findings, it is noteworthy that when participants were asked to reflect on whether or not high school was important for what they are doing now or what they wanted to do, many participants felt like it was important.

While the diploma was not seen as necessary to get a job by many participants, some reflected on the utility of a high school education. Cindy felt like many didn't see the need to complete high school to go into tourism (5-6). However, she explained that while the diploma is not required for tour guiding, the course is difficult and having the education one gets in high school definitely helps one to pass the course. She added:

... at least you learn how to deal with people and you're smart. You need math and you need proper English just being in the tourism industry you need to know how to communicate with people and high school is the least that you should be able to do..." (Cindy, 5-5).

Likewise, Luis felt that while he didn't need the diploma that he has now, his education through Third Form helped him with Math and things he needed for his job

(14-9). John also explained that because he completed Third Form, he actually has the education for an office job, but unfortunately, not the degree to get it. Both Anita and Tiffany linked high school to how education would help them run their businesses. Anita felt high school was specifically so that people don't take advantage of you and Tiffany explained that it was so people can't "cheat you out of your money" (Anita, 11-5; Tiffany, 18-7).

More than half of the participants shared that they would return to high school if they had the chance. Most would prefer a different school, however, and for some this is probably related to the undesirability of being a year or more behind all of their friends. On the survey, the statement "I didn't feel like I needed a high school diploma" was only strongly agreed to by two participants, Elisa and Manuel. This is interesting in light of the fact that so many felt like in the context of the caye one did not need a high school diploma to get a job. This indicates that this belief was not a strong influence in why they left school early.

Why Others Go or Don't Go to High School on the Caye

For a couple of participants, high school was described as an opportunity to get off the caye and one participant speculated it was used as an "excuse" to do so. Shirlene felt that many young men on the caye went just for fun (13-5). While many participants brought up the fact that people might feel they didn't need to go to high school, actual obstacles to attending were also given. Reasons given were not having enough money and having to add to the family's income by helping out with small jobs. Jennifer offered the example of her relatives who had stopped school, not because of having to be completely self-sufficient financially but so that they could add to their mother's income.

Also, she mentioned that many just get tired of school and would rather be out on the street (Jennifer, 17-9). Repeatedly, it was mentioned that PHS was very expensive. Just like many mentioned leaving school for monetary reasons, it can be assumed, some don't even start high school because of the finances needed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, for most participants the purpose of school was to receive the diploma and get an office job. While many discussed how an Associate's degree or higher was necessary to get an office job, they often simultaneously qualified this with the observation that no job was guaranteed even with an Associate's or a Bachelor's. When related to the cayes, a common belief was that there was not much need for high school because there were a limited amount of office jobs. Thus, high school and the high school diploma, for the most part, weren't seen as necessary to get a job. Furthermore, the easygoing lifestyle of the cayes, strong family networks, and not needing a lot to live on influenced the perspective on the need for a diploma and an office job. Beliefs relating to the purpose of school and the usefulness of the diploma on the cayes were directly related to the local tourism-based economy and the types of jobs available in the formal and informal sector.

In a study focusing on Cayo and Belize City comparing women's employment in alternative-based tourism versus that in mass-based tourism, Gentry (2007) demonstrated that both sectors hired women with little education at the entry level, with foreign-owned alternative businesses hiring women with the lowest education level (p. 487). In fact, in this foreign-owned alternative business sector, which is most similar to that on the cayes, women also had fewer professional positions, the lowest wages, and were often employed

on a seasonal basis (Gentry, 2007, p. 492). However, these businesses provided opportunities for work that would otherwise not be there, “offering them an alternative to the norm, which was helping out at home or getting married” (Gentry, 2007, p. 487). In the case of mass tourism, however, entry-level workers had higher education levels, although still not as high as the average for employees in the non-tourism sectors (Gentry, 2007, p. 487).

Anderson-Fye’s (2002) work on San Andrés identified one factor that influenced more young women to complete high school as being the large number of office jobs that were available, jobs she claimed required a high school diploma. The limited size and number of these jobs on Paradise Caye, however, clearly had an effect on the perception of the need for high school that was tied to its purpose being linked to the diploma. Gentry (2007) noted that tourism needed to be looked at more carefully in terms of how it “impacts various portions of the population. Not only does the type of tourism play a role, but the background of the employees also impact the extent to which they [employees] are able to profit” (p. 487). Gentry (2007) found that Belizean-owned businesses in the alternative tourism sector offer the best possibility for earning higher profits for Belizean women, off-setting the trend for gender segmentation and low-wage paying jobs in all sectors of the Belizean economy (p. 490). However, Gentry did not perform her study on Paradise Caye. Based on my experiences living there and knowing many in the tourism industry, it is well known that foreign-owned businesses often do pay well. Nevertheless, Gentry’s findings that many entry-level positions in tourism work do not require a high school diploma are consistent with participant perspectives on Paradise Caye.

Thus, with fewer office jobs and the tourism industry accounting for the majority of jobs, which do not require high school diplomas, the local economy of Paradise Caye was one that, for some participants, made high school seem irrelevant. While these beliefs may not have been the reason they left school early, knowing that it would not be difficult to obtain a job without a high school diploma certainly influenced their leaving in some way. The perspectives of early school leavers concerning the purpose of school are not only important for a better understanding of early school leaving, but because they focus on the transition from school to work, they also draw attention to issues in the local economy that need to be taken into account when formulating both education and labor policies.

CHAPTER NINE: DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I will both summarize and synthesize the different findings regarding the perspectives of early school leavers regarding their school experiences, reasons for leaving high school, and beliefs about school and its purpose in their lives. Following this, I will discuss the contributions and implications of this research, as well as potential directions for further research.

Summary and Synthesis

Experiences

Prior to the opening of PHS, high school was only accessible to caye residents who had the necessary economic or social capital. Relying on extended family or friends for financial support or living with them was often the only way to attend school. Scholarships were usually limited and only available to those who had both high grades and high PSE scores, and only one participant received a scholarship to a school other than PHS. Living away from one's immediate family had definite repercussions on the emotional well-being of the students, who experienced homesickness, and had issues adjusting to a new home, family and school simultaneously.

Many participants, both those attending PHS and schools off the island, reported a gradual disinterest in all things academic alongside a simultaneous engagement in peer relationships. This disinterest in academics, however, did not always entail that grades actually worsened. Rather, the focus on social relations became more prominent—as manifested in descriptions of partying, romantic attachments, and friendships in general.

These are consistent with Smyth and Hattam's (2004) recognition that youth are forming sociocultural identities through interactions on a daily basis. These processes of identity formation had ramifications for students both inside and outside of school, as they were often in direct contradiction to the school's practices and policies.

Inside the school, social relations outside the community were reflected in the experiences described in both primary and secondary school. Concerns about favoritism and unfair disciplinary practices were brought up by many of the students. In primary school, the majority of those who professed love for their school were female participants of Mestizo descent, reflecting their ethnic majority status on the island, and in some cases their relationships to family and friends working in the school. Because of the small size of the community, reputations in primary school travelled with students into high school, as exemplified in Tiffany noting that she felt unfairly labeled as a "bully." Furthermore, the small size of the community meant that anonymity was impossible, and personal lives were often very soon public. In both the primary and the high school, teachers brought up personal issues about a participant's family in front of other students. This was also mentioned in Arzu's (2012) research. Thus, the borders between school and the community were fairly porous, affecting the experiences of participants in the schools.

Many participants reported having a negative relationship with one or more teachers. These relationships often culminated in a precipitating event in which the participant decided to leave school and not return. This shouldn't minimize the fact that there were also accounts of favorite teachers who went out of their way to help students.

While fighting was alluded to by a couple of participants, negative peer relationships were also labeled as bullying. The difference between fighting and bullying

is subjective, and depending on one's perspective, disciplining those involved can be seen as unfair. While one male participant, John, experienced bullying at SAHS, in the case of participants at PHS, bullying was mostly directed at young women. Furthermore, it was not only young women fighting amongst one another as in the case of Anita, but also males bullying females. This was commonplace, as Brandy noted, and took the form of appearance-based bullying, calling young women "ugly" or "fat"(16-11). When participants described St. Margaret's they brought up the fact that they liked not having young men in the classroom and didn't have to worry about the distraction or the fact that they would be embarrassed in front of them.

These findings are worth juxtaposing to Anderson-Fye's (2002), which emphasized the growing sense of equality between men and women. She argued that more local women in high positions and changing ideas in Belize and in Western media regarding women's equality with men, both provided more positive women role models and influenced young women's aspirations. What the findings herein add to this, however, are the perspectives of the female participants concerning their lived experiences of gender in school. Thus, this time of becoming somebody is difficult for young women not only negotiating their identities amongst multiple negative stereotypes, but also dealing with the direct attention of adolescent boys who are either attracted to them, making fun of them, or both. Thus, as Cassidy and Bates (2005) have emphasized, social inequalities are embedded in and experienced in the school. In the case of Samantha, for instance, this resulted in bullying that was severe enough to make her want to leave school.

Participants who attended PHS and the technical school felt like there needed to be more rules in school to control the students. For the most part, this was reflected in their descriptions of teacher-student relations and student relations. Other complaints about rules focused on the triviality of rules at PHS dealing with uniforms, shoes, tucking one's shirt in, and lining up at the door prior to entering the classroom. Those who attended the more prestigious St. Margaret's, however, which had the same or stricter rules, felt like the rules were justified. All of the participants at St. Margaret's were very excited to be there and yet eventually, because of school policies, they had no other choice but to leave. Like many schools in Belize, St. Margaret's discipline applied to the actions of their students outside the school walls. This practice had its roots in the church-state system in which the church was a moralizing force and the state gave its teachers and administrators the power to discipline not only in school but also in relation to a student's actions in the community. These practices were meant both to ensure that the majority of students acted appropriately by expelling those who did not conform to the rules, and to maintain the reputation and legitimacy of the school.

Thus, one way to understand these beliefs about rules is in their relation to the school's institutional legitimacy (Erickson, 1987). Both the technical school and PHS suffered from a crisis of perceived legitimacy. The technical school had a reputation for serving "dropouts" and being easy, while PHS was a new school, struggling to establish itself on Paradise Caye. For some students, not seeing the school as legitimate gave them a green light to engage in inappropriate classroom behavior, or as participants called it, "give trouble" (Luis, 14-2; Raul, 2-8). However, as seen in the case of Luis, the punishment for doing so could be an excessive number of demerits. With their genuine

desire to see everyone complete, PHS was much more reluctant to expel students. Lack of strict rules and too much disruptive behavior, at least as perceived by participants, however, further eroded the perceived legitimacy of the school.

Reasons for Leaving

Many of the school experiences just described played a role in why participants left school, some more than others. There are a few main themes that reasons can be grouped under – coming of age, social conflict, financing school and financial self-sufficiency, disengagement and social selves, as well as the event of leaving or “the last straw.”

Many participants reported a gradual decline of interest in academics with a simultaneous concomitant rise in the importance of all things social. Participants like Simone, Cindy, and Sara, however, graduated at the top of their class in primary school, reported “loving” school and had good relationships with teachers and peers. This is uncharacteristic of many disengagement perspectives that emphasized the early beginnings of a much longer disengagement process (e.g. Finn, 1989; Rumberger, 1995). Furthermore, the notion that academic failure contributed to low self-esteem in a cycle of frustration-self-esteem (Finn, 1989) is not the case for most of the participants. However, in the case of Luis, this model might be partly applicable and explain his own self-blame, calling himself a “bad seed” and feeling like school wasn’t for people like him (14- 2). This self-blame is reminiscent of Medina in Calderon-Almendros’ (2011) study, in which he is described as having internalized a negative self-concept. In both cases, Foucault’s (2000) ‘techniques of responsabilisation’ are at work as individuals interpret their own failings through hegemonic ideologies.

This growing importance of peer relationships and “fitting in” was not always spoken of in a positive way either, as in the case of Samantha, who felt more insecure and alienated from her peers. In her case, Finn’s (1989) “participation-identification” model might apply to describe her growing alienation from her peers. However, in the cases of both Luis and Samantha, there were many other factors that played a part in their leaving which cannot be reduced to issues of academics or lack of engagement in school. This also overlooks, in the case of Luis, the fact that he had made it for four years *despite* the overwhelming odds against him. In the case of Samantha, the extreme bullying she experienced had its own roots in social inequalities, gender stereotypes, and the lack of intervention to stop the bullying. To explain Samantha’s leaving by the participation-engagement model, even though school factors are being considered, is still partially laying the blame on her rather than seeing her situation as one emanating from within a much more complex dialectic.

The disengagement noted in the findings, for the most part, did not have a corresponding slide in academics. However, in some cases, in different ways, it played a role. Often the academic disengagement was an underlying issue but not a cause for leaving. Those who did leave because of academics had a combination of other factors affecting their leaving. For example, in the case of Cindy her failing Math led to her losing her scholarship which ruled out school since she had no way to pay for it. For Brandy, her academic troubles were exacerbated by conflicts with one specific teacher and the miscommunication about what was required of her at the end of the year. For Luis, his grades were slipping in Third Form along with all of the other “stressors” that he was experiencing.

The issues of social conflict discussed in the previous section between students, as well as between teachers and students, caused many participants to leave. Often a culminating event of social conflict led to students leaving school. In these cases, the lived experience of school was not worth what they felt they would eventually get out of school, or in some cases, was just unbearable.

Pregnancy, motherhood, living with their boyfriends, and young men moving out to live with and take care of girlfriends were many of the coming of age issues which were not in line with the expectations or policies of the schools. Thus, many found themselves having to make hard choices, or in other cases, not having any choice at all but to leave school. As a main reason and an underlying factor, financial reasons also made school inaccessible for many. While some were able to get need-based scholarships through PHS, others drew on their social capital and either lived with extended family or had financial help that they found on their own.

Beliefs about School and its Purpose

Although most parents of participants did not attend high school themselves, the vast majority of the participants cited this very reason in explaining why it was important to their parents that they attend high school. This is evident in the fact that parents, extended family, and sponsors made many sacrifices for participants to go to school. However, once in high school most participants felt that their parents could have been more involved. Yoli explained that this was the case with her parents because they saw her as more mature and responsible now that she was in high school. This shows how the ambivalent status of an adolescent, as both adult and child, played out and was experienced by participants as a lack of parental involvement (Coleman, 1992). In this

case, parents may be giving their children more independence and autonomy at a time when they would benefit from more parental involvement in their lives. Ironically, the school seems to step in as ‘parent’ by disciplining students in a way that often has severe consequences for the rest of their lives.

Participants’ motivation for attending high school, and the degree to which they were motivated, was very much tied in to their perceptions of particular schools. In general, participants saw the purpose of high school in relation to its utility in granting a diploma that would eventually lead to a job. Among many participants, there was still an underlying belief in the meritocracy of the school. This belief, however, was qualified with so many other beliefs about school - for instance, about how one obtains a job and the credential one needs to get a job, that this more general belief in the idea that school can lead one to a better life held true only in particular circumstances. For instance, many participants believed that a diploma as a terminal degree was not enough to get a job. In fact, most felt that an Associate’s or a Bachelor’s was needed.

The type of job that high school and beyond was seen as leading to was referred to as an office or desk job and was overwhelmingly characterized as easy. Furthermore, if one was lucky enough to get this job, it was believed that high school would have been worth it, as the expenses would be paid back. Some participants mentioned that school was for education but ultimately, throughout their interviews, the utility of school was shown to be in its ability to land an “office job.”

Once the purpose of school was related to the caye and the local economy, many participants believed a diploma was not needed to get a job. Because high school’s purpose was so closely tied with this credential and specifically to getting an office job,

the relevance of high school to the life plans of many participants didn't seem so pressing due to the limited number of available office jobs on the caye. Furthermore, perceptions of the way that a job was obtained on the island undermined the need for a diploma. Most got jobs through friends, family, and "pulling strings" (Janice, 20-7). In addition, most participants brought up the fact that even with a higher degree, no job was guaranteed. Multiple examples were given of friends and people who came back to the island to work cement, to rake, or simply to work the same job that they themselves had also worked without a high school diploma. Going to high school and even pursuing higher education was often seen as not only as a gamble with no guarantee of a job, but also as incurring an opportunity cost. Ironically, one might actually miss out on getting a job by going to high school or pursuing a higher degree.

Synthesis

In this study I have attempted to show how the church-state partnership, the colonial laissez-faire policy toward secondary schools, and the continued focus on primary schools by the international education community have shaped the system of secondary education today. Furthermore, the contemporary local context of tourism in its particular form, coupled with perceptions of the local job market and the way in which one obtains a job influenced participants' beliefs about the purpose of education in their lives. Educational reform policies, however, neglect the perspectives of young people and instead assume that policies to improve schools and make them more financially accessible will "fix" the dropout problem.

Erickson's (1987) focus on legitimacy, trust, and assent are an appropriate lens to better understand the findings herein. The real and perceived inequalities between

secondary schools in Belize, replete with either long histories of success and prestige, or more dubious reputations as schools for “dropouts,” influenced perceptions of their legitimacy. This was evident in participants’ initial motivation to attend particular high schools, and most importantly it affected their experiences of school and their beliefs about the school’s ability to “deliver” on its purpose. Contrary to the belief that parents whose children don’t complete high school do not value education, most participants explained that it was very important to their parents that they attend high school, as demonstrated by the many sacrifices parents, friends, and families made.

The experiences of high school described by participants are most similar to what Smyth and Hattam (2004) recognized as two strands of becoming somebody—navigating the transition into the labor market as well as developing a sociocultural identity (p. 68). To recall, they wrote, “It is difficult to understand the complex process of youth identity formation without understanding the interplay between young people’s desire for economic independence and their struggles to establish, confirm and in many cases endure a socio-cultural identity” (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 68). By looking not only at participants’ perspectives on why they left, but also their experiences and beliefs about the purpose of school, the findings show how both of these aspects of becoming somebody interacted for the participants.

Participant perspectives on experiences yielded themes such as “coming of age” and “disengagement and social selves.” These are processes and practices of growing up that reflect their historical and sociocultural origins, and are influenced by the contemporary local context. The policies and practices of the schools were also consistent with their own historical origins within a church-state partnership and the close

relationship between imparting morals and disciplining that reached beyond the school walls. What happened inside the school with many of the participants who either “misbehaved” or were “disrespected” was labeled as a theme, “social conflict.” Conflicts between teachers and students were often the product of contradictory practices. On the one hand, students were involved in a process of becoming somebody, particularly forming a sociocultural identity through peer relationships (Smyth & Hattam, 2004). At the same time, the schools were busy trying to “make somebody,” or rather, shape their students to be successful and independent in the future by means of having them conform to rules and learn what they are taught during their time at school.

Participants often described their school experiences in ways that depicted how social inequalities in the wider society became part of their lived experiences within school. In the case of Cindy, for instance, her social class, that had not been apparent to her on the caye, was now made apparent in difference, juxtaposed to those more affluent young women at her new school whom she felt were “stuck-up” and “rich” (5-3). Experiences of being bullied were also gendered in that young women were often bullied for their appearances, which didn’t conform to some ideal type seen in the media, for instance. Often those who were of the ethnic majority and even more so, “islanders” as opposed to more recent immigrants, reported loving school, whereas others reported not having good relations with teachers. These experiences have to be interpreted as reflecting differences in social and cultural capital that resulted in what Smyth and Hattam (2004), borrowing from Freebody, Ludwig and Gunn (1995) called “interactive trouble” (p. 290). This describes a communication breakdown resulting from students

and teachers operating within two different frames of reference and understandings concerning school. As Smyth and Hattam (2004) explained:

Interactive trouble names what is going on in the relationships between students and teachers. Interactive trouble is a way of understanding what is happening when cultural discontinuities are given expression in the everyday experiences of school, its students and the curriculum. (p. 291)

As such, these instances of conflict cannot be interpreted simply as resulting from what a specific culture or ethnicity “brings” to school (Pollock, 2008), but rather they emerge in daily interactions and in the lived experiences of social inequalities which change and take on different nuanced forms depending on the circumstances.

Overwhelmingly, participants who attended PHS, as well as Janice, who attended the technical school, called for more rules and stricter teachers, while those at St. Margaret’s agreed with the same policies that eventually excluded them from school. In the case of the former schools, this desire for more rules was most likely informed by participants’ notions of what schools should be like, a.k.a. “the grammar of schooling” (Tyack & Cuban, 1994), in combination with the fact that many students were causing a disruptive atmosphere out of lack of respect for the school and the authority of the teachers. Perceptions of the school’s legitimacy gave rise to more disciplinary problems like bullying and student-teacher conflict, at the same time that these conflicts further undermined the school’s legitimacy. Trust in the teachers and in the ability of the school to serve its purpose was likewise undermined.

The other strand of becoming somebody recognized by Smyth and Hattam (2004) was that of negotiating one’s way to economic independence. Although the purpose of school was also tied to an education, the majority of participants saw its value in the credential they would receive. The end result of school was supposed to be a job – not

just any job, but an “office” job. Beliefs about school were not abstract and decontextualized, but rather directly informed by their perceptions of the purpose of school, their own economic opportunities, and beliefs about how one goes about getting a job. Often, the need for higher education in Belize is linked directly to tourism. However, many jobs in tourism do not require post-primary education, and tourism also brings with it many opportunities for work in the informal economy. This observation, coupled with the belief that one gets a job through family, friends, and “pulling strings” makes leaving school early that much easier. Thus, these interwoven strands of becoming somebody, both in relation to forming a sociocultural identity and the move toward economic independence shaped participant experiences within schools as well as their reasons for leaving school early.

Contributions of the Research

The goal of this research has been to include the perspectives of early school leavers on why they left school, how they experienced school, and their beliefs about its purpose in their lives. Theoretically, this research has demonstrated that it is difficult to explain early school leaving without reference to both the perspectives of those whom schools are meant to serve as well as the larger sociocultural, historical and economic context.

Many cases herein are congruent with Erickson’s (1987) recognition of leaving school as a political act, in which school legitimacy, trust, and assent are critical to understanding school leaving. The notion of legitimacy indexes the wider context and the need to understand beliefs about school’s purpose. Smyth and Hattam’s (2004) two strands of becoming somebody, focused on a sociocultural identity on the one hand, and

economic independence, on the other, proved to be appropriate concepts for understanding interactions between the participants and teachers, as well as why participants left school. Within school, the ongoing processes of identity formation often clashed with teachers who sought to teach and discipline through the more authoritarian roles that were customary in Belize. The lived experiences of the participants in school were shaped by both the way in which school policies and practices emerged historically, as well as the contemporary sociocultural and economic context. Perceptions of a school's legitimacy or the lack thereof fed into the trust and assent given to or withheld from teachers (Erickson, 1987). These often culminated in events that, at first glance, could simply be attributed to social conflict within school, but were actually influenced by multiple factors. Outside of the school, this strand of becoming saw its manifestation in many participants' transitions into living arrangements, predicaments, and behaviors associated with adulthood. However, as Sutherland (1998) has shown, it was customary, even in the 1980s, for "adult" life to begin at a fairly young age. In these situations, schools that are today still guided by their moralizing aims, did not recognize issues associated with the "coming of age" of participants outside of school as appropriate for their students, and thus they were formally excluded by school policies.

While this multiple case study is clearly highly specific to this local context, it in itself is disconfirming evidence of theories that seek to limit explanations of leaving school early to shallow cultural analyses and/or the individual deficit model. Furthermore, while processes of disengagement were recognized as themes, these were often secondary to other more primary factors in leaving school early. The point is not to discount all models of early school leaving, but rather to utilize some of them as guides,

paying particular attention not to silence those whom one is studying, nor to assume that local historical, social, and economic forces can be ignored because leaving school early is simply a matter that takes place between the student and the school. Including the voices of early school leavers and directing more attention to what is happening in specific schools and their particular wider sociocultural, historical, and economic contexts is necessary if one hopes to show, as Erickson (1987) has described, how school success or school failure is co-constructed.

As a methodological contribution, to my knowledge, this is the first study in Belize that focuses on the issue of early school leaving solely from the perspectives of the early school leavers themselves. In addition, by taking into account their perspectives on their experiences as well as their beliefs about school's purpose, the research opened up a space of critique within which participants could "speak back" to policies. This dissertation has hopefully shown the value of qualitative research in educational policy where there is often room only for measurable results that are easily packaged into a statistical brochure. Without more complex investigations into early school leaving by including the perspectives of those who left school, policies that genuinely seek to make schools of higher quality and better places overall might result in unintended consequences that make matters worse.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings herein illuminate different issues in schools, educational policies, and the wider societal context that can be further examined and improved upon to make staying in school a more desirable and possible option for many. Reasons for leaving under the theme of "coming of age" were pregnancy, motherhood, living with boyfriend,

as well as self-reliance and taking care of girlfriend. All of these themes represent behavior often deemed appropriate for adults, regardless of the fact that adolescents often find themselves in these circumstances. Schools, emerging from within the nexus of Christianity and colonialism, enact moral judgments on this behavior through their exclusionary policies, creating severe consequences for those who are affected. While for many it may seem that all of this “growing up” should take place in a different way and at a later time in their lives, does denying an education to those who “grow up too fast” really encourage others not to do so? Or is it simply a way of maintaining the image and legitimacy of a school? It is helpful to see this from an early school leaver’s perspective, like Elisa’s, who said that she had moved in with her boyfriend and still wanted to go to school but as she put it, *they wouldn’t accept her* (7-3).

The findings herein suggest a need to re-examine policies that do not take into account the challenges and realities associated with adolescence and emerging adulthood in Belize. For many young women who became mothers, making them choose between starting a family with their boyfriend or staying at home with their parents meant they had to leave school. Contrary to research utilizing the individual deficit model, which often mentions the “fact” that pregnant teens would have dropped out anyway, most participants who left reported being academically successful. Furthermore, the participants discussed how motherhood made them want and need to go to school even more. In fact, Simone graduated as valedictorian from the night school that accepted her both as a mother and while living with the father of her child.²²

²² As I did this research, the first online school in Belize had finished its first semester. I heard about it from one of the participants who had already made up her mind to start in

Another reason that students left was because of conflicts within the school. These are more complicated matters in that relations within the schools are mutually constitutive of the school's perceived legitimacy. In "out of control" classroom environments, it is more likely there will be negative relations between teachers and students. As was shown, these ways of relating often culminated in a final emotional act of leaving the school. Importantly, Pollock (2008) pointed out how everyday interactions in schools are "moments of opportunity provision" that can have serious consequences for student achievement, or more specifically in this case, whether students complete or leave school early (Pollock, 2008, p. 374). Smyth (2006) argued that relations should be at the center of school reform, investing students with what Warren (2005) has named "relational power" (as cited in Smyth, 2006, p. 292). Building trusting relationships that lead to cooperation is at the heart of relational power, a power that focuses on collective action, confronts inequalities, and is inclusive of everyone and their needs in a learning community. Furthermore, a focus on relationships also entails giving students a more equal footing in contrast to the subordinate position they normally occupy. Relational power is not something that is supposed to develop outside of class time, but rather should be integrated into the fabric of learning, in a way that encourages dialogue and respect. Smyth (2006) concluded that we must start with relational reforms "that have a commitment to dignity, humanity, belongingness, and connectedness, while acknowledging the importance of rigor, relevance, and relatedness" (p. 296). The issue

the Fall. When I administered the surveys I also passed out information on how to sign up for this school and many participants, particularly those who had left school more recently, were genuinely interested in signing up.

for policymakers is one of deciding which policies promote and allow space for this relational power to develop in schools and which do not.

Another theme that emerged in reasons for leaving, although it often played a contributing role and was not the main reason in most cases, was the affordability of secondary school. Current educational policy seeks to make schools more financially accessible. However, educational policy and reform plans should not rely solely on quantitative studies, nor should they incorporate international education reform agendas without critically analyzing them and relating them to the local and national context. Interestingly, focusing on the perspectives of early school leavers invited a widening of the focus to the larger sociocultural, historical and economic context, whereas educational policy often narrows the focus, seeing the issue of early school leaving as one located between the school and the student. Educational policy, whether directly or indirectly seeking to solve the “dropout problem,” is often grounded in economic discourses based on assumptions of human capital theory. These not only do not problematize the lack of a smooth education to work transition for many, but also see the “demand” side of education as static. Thus, the belief that translates into policy is that improving the quality and relevance of schools, their governance and accountability, and most importantly, financial accessibility, will result in more and more students completing secondary.

In the BESS, falling retention rates in schools are considered primarily the responsibility of schools and teachers, who it is supposed, can understand and address the causes of why students are leaving prior to completion (MoEY, 2012a). However, this neglects the fact that students’ understandings and beliefs about school are not the same

as adults, and are not only informed, but also perhaps more strongly influenced, by the wider social and economic context of which they are a part. As this research has demonstrated, there is a need to take into account beliefs about schools, and particularly their legitimacy, in the eyes of potential students and families. Even if all schools become financially accessible, that does not necessarily mean that potential students will want to attend *all* schools. Perceptions about the quality of a school, its legitimacy, and the local economy affect a student's motivation to attend school, school experiences, as well as beliefs about the school's purpose in a student's life.

In the case of Paradise Caye, the need for high school was seen in relation to the local economy. Because participants saw high school's purpose as largely tied to the diploma, and the diploma as tied to an office job, the limited number of office jobs on the island diminished the importance of completing high school. However, these initial beliefs were not enough to keep participants from transitioning from primary to secondary, nor were they the reasons that participants left school. Instead, these beliefs informed and combined with other factors to result in participants leaving school early. Perceptions such as these, however, should never be used as an excuse not to address issues that surround and contribute to early school leaving. Rather they can inform a deeper understanding of early school leaving on which to base policy and school practices.

For instance, schools should make time and space to explore and discuss with students their possibilities for employment and higher education after high school, as well as identify the resources they can draw upon in their journey. As adults, we can also learn from participant perspectives which very clearly pointed to issues in the wider

society—for instance, the perception that one obtains a job by personal connections alone or that jobs aren't even available with a university degree. Research into hiring practices and whether they reflect familial relations and cronyism or are actually based on the qualifications of applicants could illuminate this issue. Furthermore, it is commonly assumed that jobs in the tourism industry require a high school diploma. However, according to participants, many jobs do not require secondary education, and in the case of Luis, one “pull” factor for him to leave school was actually the tour guide course. The fact that students feel that they might miss out on a job while in school, and thus leave school in order to secure a job, shows the need for not just educational reforms but the need to look at secondary education's relationship to the local economy.

As cultural sites where interactions take place, schools are places where, as Erickson (1987) discussed, school success or failure is co-constructed. Honoring what students are going through—their identity making processes as social beings and their impending move toward economic independence—should be reflected in the way schools operate, school culture is cultivated, and students are engaged in the classroom. In some cases, personal matters about a student were brought up in front of the class by a teacher. Intentional or not, this is a form of disrespect that does not honor or engender relational power in a school. In addition, the way in which a school officially or unofficially communicates with a student needs to be examined and clear communication policies established. As this research has shown, the ways in which issues were communicated to participants had severe consequences for them. For instance, Simone was expelled in the middle of the first week of Fourth Form for something that could have been dealt with earlier and allowed her, at the very least, to go to another school that same year.

Communicating with students in a haphazard way about issues that are very important to them is not responsible or respectful. Often participants were unintentionally given mixed messages regarding their possible need to repeat a year or the status of their scholarship. School-based and online options for summer school should be more readily available. As some participants related, repeating was not desirable and would make them a target for teasing. Creating alternative options such as summer school honors this sentiment and would likely keep a number of students in school.

Schools need to make space for students to dialogue about and come to an understanding of purposes of education other than obtaining a job and making money. While obviously these are important aspects of school's purpose, the purpose of education should not be reduced to either economic development on a national scale, or as Tiffany expressed, so "people just can't cheat you out of your money" (18-7). Not only would this give students a broader understanding of what it is they are doing in school, but it would help them situate their lives in the particular history of Belize and its future. Rather than schools simply being seen as the gateway to jobs and money, schools should be a place where young Belizeans can better understand their history and the larger socioeconomic relations in which they are embedded in order to empower them to read their world – and act in it (Freire, 1970/1994; Freire & Macedo, 1987). However, action and opportunity should not reside only in the future at some later date. Rather, students should be given opportunities and responsibilities within schools – to not simply be quiet, follow, and obey, but to lead, engage in dialogue, and take risks within an environment of mutual respect. The culture of a school should be given priority, as

relationships and experiences within school played a large role in participants' reasons for leaving.

There is much more to say here, but it is only appropriate that one of the participants have the last word. To recall, most participants said they would make school free and change the rules to let everyone go to school. When asked what Manuel would change if he were the Minister of Education, he said:

I would do whatever it takes to let students stay in school . . . I would put their personal life behind, not, you know, just for their benefit but for everyone's benefit too . . . I would think and see what students are going through in their lifetime not just judging them . . . cause . . . it's hard you know, they just can't do it. . . they just don't have the money some of them, you know, I would try to look at the ones that doesn't have the benefit to go and try to help them in any way I can. (8-8)

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APPENDIX A

IRB Approval Letters



BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY
RESEARCH AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Date: October 22, 2015
To: Bevin Etheridge cc: Jennifer Snow
From: Social & Behavioral Institutional Review Board (SB-IRB)
 c/o Office of Research Compliance (ORC)
Subject: SB-IRB Notification of Approval - Renewal - 108-SB13-139
Experiences of Early School Leavers

The Boise State University IRB has approved your protocol submission. Your protocol is in compliance with this institution's Federal Wide Assurance (#0000097) and the DHHS Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46).

Protocol Number: 108-SB13-139 Received: 12/5/2014 Review: Expedited
Expires: 1/12/2016 Approved: 12/12/2014 Category: 8

Your approved protocol is effective until 1/12/2016. To remain open, your protocol must be renewed on an annual basis and cannot be renewed beyond 1/12/2017. For the activities to continue beyond 1/12/2017, a new protocol application must be submitted.

ORC will notify you of the protocol's upcoming expiration roughly 30 days prior to 1/12/2016. You, as the PI, have the primary responsibility to ensure any forms are submitted in a timely manner for the approved activities to continue. If the protocol is not renewed before 1/12/2016, the protocol will be closed. If you wish to continue the activities after the protocol is closed, you must submit a new protocol application for SB-IRB review and approval.

You must notify the SB-IRB of any additions or changes to your approved protocol using a Modification Form. The SB-IRB must review and approve the modifications before they can begin. When your activities are complete or discontinued, please submit a Final Report. An executive summary or other documents with the results of the research may be included.

All forms are available on the ORC website at <http://goo.gl/D2FYTV>

Please direct any questions or concerns to ORC at 426-5401 or humansubjects@boisestate.edu.

Thank you and good luck with your research.

Dr. Mary Pritchard
 Chair
 Boise State University Social & Behavioral Institutional Review Board

1910 University Drive Boise, Idaho 83725-1139

Phone (208) 426-5401 orc@boisestate.edu

This letter is an electronic communication from Boise State University

APPENDIX B
Recruitment Flyer

APPENDIX C

Recruitment Script

IN PERSON OR ON THE PHONE:

“Hello, my name is Bevin Etheridge. I am a researcher at Boise State University. I am conducting a research study on student perspectives about why they left high school early. I am calling to ask if you would be willing to let me interview you. It should take about an hour to complete the interview. About two weeks after the interview I may contact you again with any questions I have which should take no more than 30 minutes.

If you would be interested in participating in this interview, we can set up a time now or you can let me know when a good time would be to schedule it. You can also choose to have the interview at your house, mine, or a place of your choosing.”

If interested, investigator will set up date, time and place with the participant and will provide participant with investigator contact information. Investigator will then reconfirm the time, date and place. “I have you scheduled for an interview on _____ at _____. If you have questions, I can be reached at 636-1349 or bevinpring@yahoo.com. Thank you for your help.”

If not interested, investigator will end the call: “Thank you for your time.”

APPENDIX D

Informed Consent

INFORMED CONSENT

Study Title: Experiences of Early School Leavers **Co-Principal Investigator:** Dr. Jennifer Snow
Principal Investigator: Bevin Etheridge

Hello. My name is Bevin Etheridge and I am a doctoral student in the Curriculum and Instruction program at Boise State University. I am conducting a research project for my dissertation. This consent form will give you the information you will need to understand why this study is being done and why you are being invited to participate. It will also describe what you will need to do to participate as well as any known risks, inconveniences or discomforts that you may have while participating. I encourage you to ask questions at any time. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and it will be a record of your agreement to participate. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

➤ **PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND**

As you know, going to high school is not required by the Belizean government. However, in Belize almost all students from primary (89%) begin Form I but by Form IV only 57% of those same students are still in high school. This study seeks to understand better students' perspectives on why they attended and left high school early. As part of my dissertation, I would like to interview former students who attended high school and for any reason, left high school before graduating. This research will hopefully give educators, administrators and policymakers a better understanding of student needs so that schools can be improved to address those needs.

➤ **PROCEDURES**

To participate in this study, you will need to be able to meet at two different times, approximately 3 weeks apart. The first part of the study consists of a one hour-long interview. During the interview, you will be asked about what was going on in your life at the time you left school, why you left school and what happened in school at the time you left, relationships with others that influenced you, your experiences in school, and how you see high school as important or not in your life. The second meeting will include a short survey form to fill out and any follow up questions I might have from the first interview. At that point, I will go over your responses with you and you can make any corrections that you think necessary to better reflect your beliefs and opinions. This second meeting should take less than 30 minutes. The interview will be audiotaped but your identity will remain anonymous in the work and no names or ways of identifying participants will be included.

➤ **RISKS/DISCOMFORTS**

If you feel uncomfortable being interviewed or participating, you can stop participating at any time or reschedule for another time.

➤ **EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY**

Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in the research record

private and confidential. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Direct quotes may be published in the research but just like the rest of the information, will not be linked to any participants' names. The members of the research team, and the Boise State University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) may access the data. The ORC monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants. Your name will not be used in any written reports or publications which result from this research. Data will be kept for three years (per federal regulations) after the study is complete and then destroyed.

➤ **BENEFITS**

There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, the information gained from this research may help education professionals better understand why students choose to leave high school early and how to improve high school so that it better meets the needs of its students.

➤ **PAYMENT**

There will be a payment of 30 Bz that you will receive upon completion of the second meeting in which we will go over your interview and you complete a short survey.

➤ **QUESTIONS**

If you have any questions or concerns about participation in this study, you should first talk with the investigator Bevin Etheridge at 663-6899 or her advisor Dr. Jennifer Snow at (001) 208-426-2260 or at jennifersnow@boisestate.edu.

- If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Boise State University Institutional Review Board (IRB), which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. You may reach the board office between 8:00 AM and 5:00 PM, Monday through Friday, by calling (001) 208-426-5401 or by writing: Institutional Review Board, Office of Research Compliance, Boise State University, 1910 University Dr., Boise, ID 83725-1138 USA, or by emailing: researchcompliance@boisestate.edu.

DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible risks have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand I can withdraw at any time. I have received a copy of this form.

Printed Name of Study Participant

Signature of Study Participant

Date

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date

APPENDIX E

Assent Form

ASSENT FORM

Study Title: Experiences of Early School Leavers

Principal Investigator: Bevin Etheridge

Co-Investigator: Dr. Jennifer Snow

Hello. My name is Bevin Etheridge and I am a doctoral student in the Curriculum and Instruction program at Boise State University. I am conducting a research project for my dissertation. This form will give you the information you will need to understand why this study is being done and why you are being invited to participate. It will also describe what you will need to do to participate as well as any known risks, inconveniences or discomforts that you may have while participating. I encourage you to ask questions at any time and to talk to your parents about participating. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and it will be a record of your agreement to participate. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

➤ **PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND**

As you know, going to high school is not required by the Belizean government. However, in Belize almost all students from primary (89%) begin Form I but by Form IV only 57% of those same students are still in high school. This study seeks to understand students' perspectives on why they left high school early. As part of my dissertation, I would like to interview former students who attended high school and for any reason, left high school before graduating. This research will hopefully give educators, administrators and policymakers a better understanding of student needs so that schools can be improved to address those needs.

➤ **PROCEDURES**

To participate in this study, you will need to be able to meet at two different times, approximately 3 weeks apart. The first part of the study consists of a one hour-long interview. During the interview, you will be asked about what was going on in your life at the time you left school, why you left school and what happened in school at the time you left, relationships with others that influenced you, your experiences in school, and how you see high school as important or not in your life. The second meeting will include a short survey form to fill out and any follow up questions I might have from the first interview. At that point, I will go over your responses with you and you can make any corrections that you think necessary to better reflect your beliefs and opinions. This second meeting should take less than 30 minutes.

- The interview will be audiotaped but your identity will remain anonymous in the work and no names or ways of identifying participants will be included.

➤ **RISKS/DISCOMFORTS**

If you feel uncomfortable being interviewed or participating, you can stop participating at any time or reschedule for another time.

➤ **EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY**

Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private and confidential. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Direct quotes may be published in the research but just like the rest of the information, will not be linked to any

participants' names. The members of the research team and the Boise State University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) may access the data. The ORC monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

Your name will not be used in any written reports or publications which result from this research. Data will be kept for three years (per federal regulations) after the study is complete and then destroyed.

➤ **BENEFITS**

There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, the information gained from this research may help education professionals better understand why students choose to leave high school early and how to improve high school so that it better meets the needs of its students.

➤ **PAYMENT**

There will be a payment of 30 Bz paid to you on completion of the second meeting in which we go over your interview and you complete a short survey.

➤ **QUESTIONS**

If you have any questions or concerns about participation in this study, you should first talk with the investigator Bevin Etheridge at 663-6899 or her advisor Dr. Jennifer Snow at (001) 208-426-2260 or by email at jennifersnow@boisestate.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Boise State University Institutional Review Board (IRB), which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. You may reach the board office between 8:00 AM and 5:00 PM, Monday through Friday, by calling (001) 208 426-5401 or by writing: Institutional Review Board, Office of Research Compliance, Boise State University, 1910 University Dr., Boise, ID 83725-1138 USA, or emailing: researchcompliance@boisestate.edu.

DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible risks have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand I can withdraw at any time. I have received a copy of this form.

I understand that I can choose not to participate in this study, or to withdraw from participating at any time.

Printed Name of Study Participant	Signature of Study Participant	Date

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent	Date

APPENDIX F

Parent / Guardian Informed Consent

PARENT/GUARDIAN INFORMED CONSENT

Study Title: Experiences of Early School Leavers **Co-Principal Investigator:** Dr. Jennifer Snow
Principal Investigator: Bevin Etheridge

Dear Parent/Guardian:

My name is Bevin Etheridge and I am a doctoral student in the Curriculum and Instruction program at Boise State University. I am asking for your permission to include your child in my research. This consent form will give you the information you will need to understand why this study is being done and why your child is being invited to participate. It will also describe what your child will need to do to participate as well as any known risks, inconveniences or discomforts that your child may have while participating. I encourage you to ask questions at any time. If you decide to allow your child to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and it will be a record of your agreement to allow their participation. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

➤ PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

As you know, going to high school is not required by the Belizean government. However, in Belize almost all students from primary (89%) begin Form I but by Form IV only 57% of those same students are still in high school. This study seeks to understand better the students' perspectives on why they left high school early. As part of my dissertation, I would like to interview former students who attended high school and for any reason, left high school before graduating. This research will hopefully give educators, administrators and policymakers a better understanding of student needs so that schools can be improved to address those needs.

➤ PROCEDURES

To participate in this study, your child will need to be able to meet at two different times, approximately 3 weeks apart. The first part of the study consists of a one hour-long interview. During the interview, they will be asked about what was going on in their life at the time they left school, why they left school and what happened in school at the time they left, relationships with others that influenced them, their experiences in school, and how they see high school as important or not in their life. The second meeting will include a short survey form to fill out and any follow up questions I might have from the first interview. At that point, I will go over their responses with them and they can make any corrections that they think necessary to better reflect their beliefs and opinions. This second meeting should take less than 30 minutes.

- The interview will be audiotaped but their identity will remain anonymous in the work and no names or ways of identifying participants will be included.

➤ **RISKS/DISCOMFORTS**

If they feel uncomfortable being interviewed or participating, they can stop participating at any time or reschedule for another time.

➤ **EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY**

Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in the research record private and confidential. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Direct quotes may be published in the research but just like the rest of the information, will not be linked to any participants' names. The members of the research team, and the Boise State University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) may access the data. The ORC monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

Their name will not be used in any written reports or publications which result from this research. Data will be kept for three years (per federal regulations) after the study is complete and then destroyed.

➤ **BENEFITS**

There will be no direct benefit to your child from participating in this study. However, the information gained from this research may help education professionals better understand why students choose to leave high school early and how to improve high school so that it better meets the needs of its students.

➤ **PAYMENT**

There will be a payment of 30 Bz to your child as a result of your child taking part in this study. The payment will be given after the second meeting in which we go over their interview together and they complete a short survey.

➤ **QUESTIONS**

If you have any questions or concerns about participation in this study, you should first talk with the investigator Bevin Etheridge who can be reached at 663-6899. You may also contact her advisor Dr. Jennifer Snow at 001 (208) 426-2260 or at jennifersnow@boisestate.edu.

- If you have questions about your child's rights as a research participant, you may contact the Boise State University Institutional Review Board (IRB), which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. You may reach the board office between 8:00 AM and 5:00 PM, Monday through Friday, by calling 001 (208) 426-5401 or by writing: Institutional Review Board, Office of Research Compliance, Boise State University, 1910 University Dr., Boise, ID 83725-1138 USA, or by emailing: researchcompliance@boisestate.edu.

DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT

I have read this form and decided that my child will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement and possible risks have been explained to my satisfaction. I will discuss this research study with my child and explain the procedures that will take place. I understand I can withdraw my child at any time.

Printed Name of Child

Printed Name of Parent/Guardian

Signature of Parent/Guardian

Date

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date

APPENDIX G
Interview Script

Interview Script

Investigator explains consent form and collects after it is signed (as described in IRB application).

Thank you so much for being willing to participate in this study. The purpose of this interview is to understand your perspective on school and the reasons you left high school. Often students leave and the schools, teachers, and policymakers don't know why or what they could have done to make the school experience one that was better and more worthwhile to them. Also, students don't often have a chance to tell "their side of the story" and by participating in this interview your story will help others learn more about how students experience school.

As I mentioned earlier I will audio record this interview. After that I will be able to type out what we have said here and you will have an opportunity to check your responses and add to them or change them if you wish during our next meeting. When I begin recording I will first state your name, the time and place and ask you if I have permission to record this. Once you say yes then we will begin with the questions. Any questions before we start? If not, we start. If yes, I will answer the questions.

I am here with (participant's name). It is (time) in (place). Do I have your permission to record this? Participant will answer "yes" and we will proceed.

Age:

Occupation:

School Attended:

Age you left and Form:

1. Tell me about your overall experience with primary school.
2. Describe yourself as a student in primary school. Any grades repeated?
3. Describe your school and the teachers. Did you like them?
4. When you left primary school, did you know you wanted to go to high school? Why did you go?
5. Was it important to your parents that you go to high school?
6. Did you know what you wanted to do after high school? What were your goals?
7. Tell me about yourself as a student in high school.
8. Describe your school and teachers. Did you like them?
9. Tell me about your overall experience with high school.
10. What were the main reasons that you left high school?
11. How did you make the decision to leave?
12. Did anyone or anything influence your decision?
13. What happened in school around the event of your leaving?
14. Do you think high school is important for what you are doing now or what you wanted to do?
15. What do you think is the point of going to high school?
16. Why do you think people on [Paradise Caye] go to high school?

17. Do you think high school is worth the money?
18. If you could have changed something to keep you in school what would it have been?
19. If you were the Minister of Education, what would you change in schools?

Thank you so much for your time and sharing your story. I will contact you once I have transcribed these answers to paper and we can go over them again. At that time, I will also have a small survey for you to answer that also relates to the same topic we discussed here. In the meantime, if you have any questions, please feel free to contact me. My contact information is on your copy of the consent/assent form you signed at the beginning of this interview. Thank you!

APPENDIX H

Survey

Please check how you feel about each statement as it relates to why you left school early and your experience of school.

	Question	Strongly disagree			Neither		Strongly agree	
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	There was no way to pay my tuition.							
2	I didn't feel like I needed a high school diploma.							
3	I didn't want to repeat and be the target of other students teasing me about it.							
4	I would rather live with my boyfriend/girlfriend and that was against school policy.							
5	I was being bullied and didn't want to be around it anymore.							
6	I lost interest in school and got more into partying with my friends.							
7	My grades were too low to bring up and I knew I would have to repeat.							
8	I couldn't qualify for a scholarship.							
9	I had a problem with one or two teachers.							
10	I was always getting punished unfairly and other students didn't get treated as badly.							
11	I felt discriminated against at school because of my family, my race, or ethnicity.							
12	My parents were not involved as encouraging as they could be in high school.							
13	I was the only one taking care of myself and I couldn't work and pay tuition and rent at the same time.							
14	I would still be at school if something hadn't happened in school the day I left.							
15	I didn't like the school and wanted to go to a different one.							

16	There were not enough rules in school to keep the students under control.							
17	I had a job opportunity or another course that I decided to take instead of school.							
18	I got pregnant or got someone else pregnant and had to leave to deal with that.							

APPENDIX I

Data Display Template

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION	PRIMARY SCHOOL	BELIEFS ABOUT HIGH SCHOOL
<i>Name/Interview No.</i> <i>Gender/Age</i> <i>Form/Age When Left</i> <i>Funding</i> <i>Repeated Grades</i> <i>Parents Marital Status</i> <i>Parents' Attendance</i> <i>Living Situation</i> <i>Survey Answers</i> <i>High Schools</i>	<i>Relations with Teachers</i> <i>Relations with Students</i> <i>Self Description</i> <i>Academics</i> <i>School/Experience</i>	<i>Point of HS in general</i> <i>Attendance on Caye</i>
REASONS FOR LEAVING	HIGH SCHOOL	
	<i>Relations with Teachers</i> <i>Relations with Students</i> <i>Academics</i> <i>School(s)</i>	<i>What Should Change</i> <i>Worth the Money</i> -
<i>Main</i> - <i>Secondary</i>	<i>Self Description</i>	REFLECTIONS
THE EVENT OF LEAVING	<i>Experience and/or Chron. Description</i>	<i>Desire to Attend/Goals</i> - <i>Return or Not Return</i> <i>Significance of HS</i>
WHAT WOULD HAVE HAD TO CHANGE	<i>Role of Parents</i>	<i>Regrets</i>
<i>External Reasons</i> - - <i>Personal Reasons</i>		

APPENDIX J

Survey Results

Table J.2

Survey Results of Statements “Strongly Agreed” with Based on School and Gender.

Statement	Females			Males	
	PHS	PHS/Other	Other	PHS	Other
There was no way to pay my tuition.	3		2	2	2
I couldn't qualify for a scholarship.	3			2	
I was the only one taking care of myself and I couldn't work and pay tuition and rent at the same time.	3	1	1	2	
I had a job opportunity or another course that I decided to take instead of school.	1	1		1	
I didn't feel like I needed a high school diploma.	1			1	
I didn't like the school and wanted to go to a different one.	3	1	2		
There were not enough rules in school to keep the students under control.	6	2	1	2	
I felt discriminated against at school because of my family, my race, or ethnicity.	3				1
I was always getting punished unfairly and other students didn't get treated as badly.	5			1	1
I was being bullied and didn't want to be around it more.	2	1			1

Statement	Females			Males	
	PHS	PHS/Other	Other	PHS	Other
I had a problem with one or more teachers.	4	1		2	2
I would still be at school if something hadn't happened in school the day I left.	6	1		1	1
I didn't want to repeat and be the target of other students teasing me about it.				1	1
My grades were too low to bring up and I knew I would have to repeat.	2	1			
My parents were not involved or as encouraging as they could be in high school.	5		1		
I lost interest in school and got more into partying with my friends.				2	
I would rather live with my boyfriend/girlfriend and that was against school policy.	1	2		1	
I got pregnant or got someone else pregnant and had to leave to deal with that.	2	2	1	1	