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"YOU’RE LEAVING?"

UNDERSTANDING STUDENT VOLUNTARY ATTRITION FROM A PRIVATE SCHOOL

by

Stephan Michael Grasmück

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education
Department of Theory and Policy Studies
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

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ABSTRACT

"YOU’RE LEAVING?"

UNDERSTANDING STUDENT VOLUNTARY ATTRITION FROM A PRIVATE SCHOOL

Doctor of Education Degree, 1998

Stephan Michael Grasmück

Department of Theory and Policy Studies

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

Concern over student attrition from schools places the issue at the fore of research, especially at the university level of education. Several studies have investigated this phenomenon toward understanding and improving upon student retention in Universities and Colleges. Private secondary and elementary schools, particularly in the United States, also recognize that student attrition issues raise concerns running to the very core of the existence of such schools. In the Canadian context, private school administrators can learn from the United States’ situation so that we may see what lies ahead for Canadian schools.

We know comparatively little about the issues surrounding student voluntary attrition with respect to private secondary schools. From the literature, it seems that
the forces which shape attrition elsewhere arise from a very complex interplay of
issues. It appears that the dispositions of the people who enrol, the character of
their interactions with the institution upon entry, and the external forces which
influence their behaviour in school all play a role in a student’s failure to persist in
her or his school.

Given the apparent complexity of the voluntary attrition process, this study
employed qualitative research methodology to learn more about the issues involved.
Twelve student leavers, members of their families, school friends, and teachers
provided the data gathered through interviews in this case study approach.

This research demonstrates that each of the departing students brought with
her/him at the time of enrolment some personal character traits or issues which
affected the ways in which she/he interacted with internal characteristics of the
school. Once enrolled, these students experienced problems which adversely
affected the students’ ability to affiliate within the school’s culture. Some gender
related issues came to the fore. External forces also played a role in the unique
formula of events leading to each student’s failure to persist.

This research provides a compelling look at the issues underlying the
voluntary attrition process for the student leavers involved. This study enhances
our understanding of private school voluntary attrition and does so from a Canadian
perspective.
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I find it challenging to say thank you adequately for contributions to my work over the course of this dissertation process. Many people have given generously in time and spirit so that I could create this document. It represents a long and arduous journey during which I have needed tremendous support from many people. Without that support, I would not have endured. One must go through this process to really understand that.

Perhaps the best acknowledgement that I can offer here is to say that something of each of the following people whether in the form of their love, knowledge, skill, caring, and/or sheer determination, resided within me as I undertook this project and continues to be a part of me. Experiencing such an intense process with these people transformed me for the better. How could it not?

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Retention is the hottest issue in independent schooling today. There. I've said it! (Hoerle, 1993b)

Statistics Canada (1993) reports that enrolment in Canadian private elementary and secondary schools increased steadily from the school years 1970-71 to 1991-92. That study suggests that whereas an increase in Canadian elementary and secondary private school enrollment of from 2.4% of the total student population in 1970-71 to 4.8% by 1991-92 may appear insignificant, "the increase in absolute terms is substantial, from 143,000 to 249,000" (Statistics Canada, 1993, p. 9). A more recent study (Statistics Canada, 1995) for the school year 1993-94 indicates that enrolment in Canadian elementary and secondary private schools continued to increase after 1991-92. Canadian private schools enrolled 265,321 students for 1993-94. This represents 5% of the Canadian combined elementary and secondary student population for the school year 1993-94 (Statistics Canada, 1995).

Paradoxically, a fairly recent phenomenon appears to have arisen with respect to private, also known as independent, schools. In the United States, for example, elementary and secondary private schools find that many students transfer out of their schools more quickly than ever before (Hoerle, 1993a).

Dalton (1993) suggests that, in the United States, the "attrition [issue] is big. It's do or die" for private schools regarding the necessity for addressing student retention. Dalton (1993) encourages Canadian private schools to look to the United States' attrition situation as a means of anticipating what may transpire in this country with respect to the issue.
Statement of the Problem

The National Association of Independent Schools (N.A.I.S.) in the United States provides a definition of attrition. The N.A.I.S. defines attrition as the number of students who were enrolled in a school who were eligible to return to that school the following year but who did not do so for either voluntary or non-voluntary reasons (N.A.I.S., 1994).

Of the two forms of attrition, non-voluntary student attrition means that a school asks a student to withdraw from the school, usually for academic or behavioural reasons. Voluntary attrition, however, means that a student chooses of her or his own accord to withdraw from the school.

This study investigates the phenomenon of voluntary student attrition. The research problem becomes: why did students voluntarily withdraw from their private secondary school?

Research Questions

Current literature suggests that we must investigate specific aspects of the voluntary attrition process. These include how the personal background characteristics of the leaving students, how the presence of any external factors acting upon those students, and how the school's organizational characteristics may have played a role in the students' decisions to withdraw from their school.

In this context, several questions arise requiring research:

1. What personal and/or family characteristics, and/or external forces existed in each of the leaving student's background which may have placed that student at risk of withdrawal once enrolled in the school?
2. How have those characteristics interacted with elements of the school's culture such that the students decided to withdraw from the school? With specific regard to school culture:
(a) How have the norms, values, beliefs, and assumptions widely held within the school culture or within subcultures in the school affected the students' decisions to withdraw voluntarily from the school?
(b) How have the qualities of teachers, including relevant personal qualities, the view of a teacher's role, the teachers' disposition toward students, and the teachers' disposition toward collaboration with other teachers affected the students' decisions to withdraw from the school?
(c) How did the school's curricular and co-curricular programming, and physical characteristics of the school environment affect the students' decisions to withdraw from the school?

A Conceptual Framework

The nature of voluntary student attrition assumes very complex dimensions (Allen & Nelson, 1987; Hawken, Kelly & Duran, 1990; Johnson, 1994; Lapidus, Green & Baruh, 1985; Lawton & Leithwood, 1988; Pascarella, 1982; Stith & Russell, 1994; Tinto, 1993; University System, 1994). Developing a model upon which to base this research must take into account an array of themes which assume significance in a student's decision to leave his or her school.

Adolescent students generally possess a strong need to bond with others, particularly with their peers (Arhar & Kromrey, 1993; Eaton, Mitchell & Jolley, 1991; Gallagher, 1996). In the school setting, in order for a student to remain enrolled, that student must establish social bonds within the school (Gallagher, 1996; Tinto, 1993). Certain attributes, however, in the student's personality and
background, the effect of specific external forces acting in the student’s life, and the interaction with elements of the school’s culture can impair that bonding process.

A student’s inherent personal characteristics can figure in the ways in which and the extent to which she or he interacts with the school community once enrolled (e.g. Pascarella, 1982; Tinto, 1993; Waldo, 1982). Personality, for example, in terms of social maturity or gender, and physical attributes such as health, size, or athletic prowess can make a profound difference to a student’s ability to integrate into her or his school community. Other background issues, in the form of family social tensions for example, can manifest themselves in the student’s life such that she or he experiences difficulty in coping in the school environment.

External forces established in the student’s life outside of the school can also become factors which beckon the student away from the school once enrolled (Tinto, 1993). Family issues can act also as external forces in this context. So, too, peer friendships established in the student’s previous school or home town can attract a student back into the supportive social network of people with whom he or she has established very strong, powerful, and emotional ties already.

Characteristics of the school’s culture can figure prominently in the student’s decision to withdraw from the school (Allen & Nelson, 1987; Hawken, Kelly & Duran, 1990; Johnson, 1994; Lapidus, Green & Baruh, 1985; Lawton & Leithwood, 1988; Pascarella, 1982; Stith & Russell, 1994; Tinto, 1993; University System, 1994). Aspects of the school culture which can play a role in the decision to withdraw from the school can include social and academic issues, and even issues pertaining to the physical context of the student’s environment at the school. Social factors can involve the importance of having friends in the school, the ways in which students establish friendships at the school, and the importance given by the students to various activities at the school.
In a residential, or boarding, setting, these factors can assume especial significance in students' lives. So, too, do matters pertaining to roommates and the ways in which bonds become established in such relationships (Carey, Hamilton & Shanklin, 1986; Hawken, Kelly & Duran, 1990; Lapidus, Green & Baruh, 1985; Lovejoy, Perkins & Collins, 1995; Waldo, 1982; Waldo, 1984). In all of these areas, gender differences may play a role in the ways in which students experience the culture of the school.

Interactions with teachers may assume great significance within the school culture as well (Lawton & Leithwood, 1988; Pascarella, 1982; Tinto, 1993). Again, this may be especially important in the residential school setting where students find themselves living away from the normal support systems offered at home from within the family structure.

Academic matters can influence a student's integration with the school community (Johnson, 1994; Tinto, 1993). A student's experience with an academic program as either too challenging or not challenging enough can impact upon her or his happiness with the school and sense of desire to remain enrolled.

Physical characteristics of the school may figure in the decision to withdraw from the school as well (Tinto, 1993; Van Maanen & Bartley, 1985). When interacting with personal background attributes, and especially in the residential school setting, everything from dormitory size to school setting can influence a student’s decision to leave the school.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study centres about twelve students who withdrew voluntarily from their private residential secondary school in one school year. Clearly, the vast majority of students at that school chose to remain enrolled in the school. This research
investigates the complex interplay of issues at work only in the lives of these twelve leavers such that they chose to leave the school prematurely.

Hammersley (1993) reminds us that one must not consider the findings of any single study as representative of other cases, in this instance, of voluntary attrition. In other words, we must not generalize about these findings. Other similar studies can serve to strengthen the findings of this research and enhance its external validity (Woods, 1986). Hopefully, however, this research will speak to others who read this study and learn of the respondents’ experiences. Readers may then relate the respondents’ experiences to the context of the reader’s own knowledge and personal experiences within the private school setting (Woods, 1986).

**Explanations of Terms Used in this Study**

This school from which the twelve students departed is a private, residential secondary school. As a private, or independent, school, it operates autonomously of any public funding. The school receives an annual inspection from the province’s Ministry of Education to ensure that the school’s curricula meet at least the minimum standards as prescribed by the Ministry.

The twelve students, the “leavers,” who formed the nucleus of this study withdrew from the school of their own volition. The school welcomed each of these twelve students for continued enrolment. In each case, however, the student made the decision to leave the school.

Some of the teachers who participated in this study held the position as a “housemaster” at the school. In addition to normal classroom teaching duties, a housemaster lives in a separate apartment within a student residence. The housemaster spends time with the students on a social level, acting as the student’s parent and liaising with the student’s actual parent(s) while the student attends
This means that housemasters know the students on a social level because the housemasters interact with the students for social occasions, administer discipline, attend to the students' health needs, and become available to the students in times of need. In short, housemasters may know the students in their residences very well and bring a great deal of social background information to the discussion of the attrition issue.

Organization of the Thesis

Following this introduction, Chapter Two of this research paper consists of a review of the relevant literature of the subject of voluntary student attrition. While relatively little research exists directly on the topic of private school attrition, related research primarily from literature on university and college issues proved very valuable toward understanding attrition at the private school level.

Chapter Three describes the methodology of this study. This chapter includes a discussion of issues such as site selection, accessibility, the choice of subjects as interviewees, the interview processes, interviewer trust, data analysis, and external validity.

Chapters Four and Five explore the issues which led to the students' decisions to withdraw from the school as revealed by the subjects in this study. Chapter Four introduces the complexity of the attrition phenomenon and examines the personal background characteristics which played a role in the leaving process. Chapter Five investigates the school's cultural characteristics which played a role in the students' ultimate decision to withdraw.
Chapter Six presents several recommendations made by various interviewees. They talked about ways in which the school might be able to retain at least some of the students whom it does not wish to lose to voluntary attrition.

Finally, Chapter Seven presents the summary and conclusions flowing from the findings of this research study. This chapter also encourages the undertaking of similar studies toward enhancing our understanding of the very complex issue of private school student voluntary attrition.
CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Trying to come up with a detailed analysis of why students withdraw was perhaps the most difficult part of this study. Virtually every study which examined this question utilized different terminology and classifications . . . . In the end, it became obvious that it was impossible to answer this question in detailed, quantifiable terms, regardless of how general a comparative taxonomy was utilized. (Pascal, 1979, p. 22)

A review of the literature on the issue of private elementary and secondary school attrition reveals that few sources of information exist focussed directly upon the specific phenomenon, especially as it relates to Canadian education. Other sources of information investigate attrition from different, but somewhat related, perspectives. The bulk of that material flows from studies done at tertiary levels of education, that is to say college and university. Most of these investigations come from the United States. Still other studies investigate related attrition issues from the perspectives of Canadian public schools and the voluntary sector of the Canadian Military.

Clearly, from the small body of research specifically focussed upon the topic of private school attrition, the majority of information comes to us from the United States. Hoerle (1993a), for example, suggests that as an over-view explanation for attrition, families who select private schools today have different expectations of their schools than has been the case traditionally.

Coleman (1988) suggests that the lack of social capital is, in part, responsible for the high rate of transfer of students out of private schools. The concept of transfer differs from the more familiar notion of school drop-out where students leave school altogether, as opposed to transferring out of one school into another.
Coleman (1988) reports that the volume of transfers among students from private schools is considerably higher than the drop-out rate from these schools.

Coleman (1987) describes social capital as a resource employed to aid in the development of the school's youth. He defines social capital as consisting of the relationship between persons of the sort that exist in the community. Norms and standards exist as to what young people should do both in and out of school. Young people can turn to adults other than their own parents when necessary and find support. "In a variety of ways, these relations constitute social capital that aids schools in their task, and both supports and constrains young people growing up" (Coleman, 1987, p. 8).

Coleman (1988) also suggests that independent schools must form a school community from among a set of individuals. In private boarding schools, this need is especially great. In private day schools, school officials often lack the understanding that a private school requires special efforts to create a coherent student body. Thus, a student can be isolated and without social capital, unhappy with school and self, and at risk of looking for a more satisfying existence. The school must provide this social capital among the students themselves as well as among the parents of those students in order to pay rewards to the school and its students.

Private School Attrition Studies

Two studies investigate causes for student attrition from private schools as reported by school officials in the United States. The earliest such attrition study (Admission Services Report, 1989), begins to define more clearly the magnitude and some of the causes of student attrition from private schools.
The authors of this study report that overall 12% of students enrolled did not return to their private school. Much of that attrition takes place during the transition from elementary to middle school or middle to secondary school. The highest attrition occurs at the end of grade eight. Significant differences exist between day and boarding schools in terms of attrition. As the boarding population increases so does student attrition.

Geographic relocation ranks as the main reason for private school attrition in the schools which responded to that survey. "Family/child dissatisfaction" appears as the second largest reason for departure from private schools. Dissatisfaction seems to be much more prevalent a factor at the secondary level than at the elementary level (Admission Services Report, 1989). The report suggests that part of this is probably due to the child having a stronger voice in the decision making at an older age.

This study represents a benchmark in helping schools to assess their effectiveness in retaining students and in enrolment planning (Thayer, 1993). The authors of the study suggest that attrition remains an area which schools should study carefully. Schools, they say, can exercise some control over this area. The monitoring of students’ reasons for departure can reveal some factors which, if changed, could reduce school attrition (Admission Services Report, 1989).

The second and more recent study (N.A.I.S., 1994) finds that the overall attrition rate is 11% for the school year 1992-93. That represents a decrease of 1% in attrition over the previous survey.

This N.A.I.S. (1994) study identifies even more clearly the reasons for private school student attrition as reported by school officials. N.A.I.S. (1994) indicates that geographic relocation still remains the primary reason for students not returning to a private school at 22.7%. Financial and school-initiated attrition (the latter for
reasons of academic or non-academic, or behavioural, problems) each account for 16.9% of attrition.

"Other" reasons, by which the study refers to family, medical, or "other unusual reasons for departure," (N.A.I.S., 1994, p. 4) ranks fourth at 12.2%.

Remaining categories for attrition include logical year, where families decide to change schools at a "natural year" (p.4), e.g. grade eight in a K-12 school, at 11.9%; dissatisfaction with school program or services at 10.4%; dissatisfaction with the school's environment, the school's social or cultural makeup, at 4.2%; transportation at 1.6%; homesickness at 1.5%; and co-ed/single gender school choice, feeling that a change to the other type of environment is preferred by the family, at 1.5%.

Another more recent study explores the attrition issue specifically from the Canadian private elementary and secondary school perspective. Grasmück (1995) reports that, overall, the Canadian private school attrition average for the school year 1992-93 is 10.9%. This figure is virtually equal to that of the most recent N.A.I.S. (1994) study in the United States.

In both the Canadian and the United States (N.A.I.S., 1994) studies, voluntary attrition, meaning the student's and/or family's decision to leave the school, represents by far the highest percentage of attrition. Grasmück (1995) reports voluntary attrition at 81.8% overall. Non-voluntary reasons, of course, account for the remaining 18.2% of attrition in Canada for that year.

From that study, a review of the overall reasons for attrition in Canada reveals a pattern similar to the situation in the United States. That is to say, in Canada the highest percentage of attrition overall occurs for voluntary reasons, geographic and financial reasons being reported most frequently at 19.4% and 18.8% respectively. Non-voluntary reasons, or school-initiated for academic and non-academic reasons, come next at 18.2%.
Voluntary attrition, of course, makes up the remainder of the reasons for having withdrawn. "Other" reasons rank fourth highest at 14.3%. Logical year reasons appear at 8.5%; school environment at 6.6%; school program at 6.3%; coed/single reasons at 3.2%; homesickness at 3.1%; and transportation at 1.5%.

Overall, from both the Canadian and United States studies, a clear majority of students who withdrew from their private schools did not drop out of school at all. Instead, they re-enrolled elsewhere. Most of the students from Canadian private schools, 52.1% (Grasmück, 1995), and 41.4% of the students from the United States (N.A.I.S., 1994) transferred to public sector schools.

Those students who then enrolled in other private schools account for 25.4% (Grasmück, 1995) and 33.1% (N.A.I.S., 1994) of students in each country. Students whose destination upon leaving their current private school was unknown to the school official completing the survey account for 22.5% (Grasmück, 1995) and 25.5% (N.A.I.S., 1994) of attrition overall.

Grasmück (1995) and the N.A.I.S. (1994) offer some explanations for the more obvious causes for voluntary attrition. N.A.I.S. (1994) suggests that "with a mobile, transient society, schools continue to be challenged by relocating families during the academic and non-academic year" (p. 6). Grasmück (1995) notes that attrition for geographic reasons may simply represent a "'fact of life'" (p. 3) in today's society where families appear to relocate often. Similarly, that study indicates that financial concerns represent a significant cause for attrition.

Regarding non-voluntary, school-initiated attrition, where school officials ask the student to withdraw from the school for academic or behavioural reasons, issues of student selectively, in other words matching the students with the most appropriate school best suited to meet the student's needs, come to the fore. Grasmück (1995) recommends that schools consider adopting other measures
toward reducing attrition in these cases. This may include having schools modify existing academic programs so as to address better the needs of students who otherwise would have been asked to leave the school.

Voluntary attrition, however, as highlighted in the two most recent attrition studies (Grasmück, 1995; N.A.I.S., 1994), arguably remains less well understood or explained. Indeed, one of the most intriguing categories of attrition is that which the studies label as "other" reasons. That label represents a rather vague category of explanations in describing reasons for attrition, and includes family and "unusual" (N.A.I.S., 1994; Grasmück, 1995) reasons for departure. Still, this category ranks fourth in Canada and in the United States as an “explanation” for students having left their private elementary or secondary school.

Similarly, categories such as dissatisfaction with the school's environment, the school's program and services, homesickness, and perhaps even logical year and coed/single gender choices, provoke further discussion when attempting to understand these as causes for student attrition. These categories point toward the need to comprehend better the more profound issues arising in students' and families' lives as they attempt to cope with the school social and cultural makeup, the school program, a desire to live at home rather than a boarding school, and even the need to transfer to a single gender or coeducational student environment.

One private school official (Principal, 1994) reflected upon the issue of attrition and its root causes. The principal expressed the view that "it's [the reason for attrition] never a single thing. It's a combination [of factors]." This same principal went on to list factors which she viewed as having contributed toward attrition in her school for one academic year, 19XY.

The six factors cited (Principal, 1994) include the following. The students who chose not to re-enrol felt a loss of respect for the school because it is not what
the school says it is. New building construction in the school also meant that the students suffered physical dislocation and insufficient physical space.

Further, a large number of newly admitted students into the senior grade levels may have had a strong effect upon the returning students' desire to re-enrol at the school. At the time of the discussion, teacher unrest seemed to be high, resulting in a trickle-down effect upon the students.

The principal also thought that student orientation is very important. The start to the school year must be more uplifting. When it is, the students have a good year. The principal concluded by suggesting that the school administration was not showing enough appreciation to its teachers.

**Attrition from the University and College Perspectives**

Many studies directly address the attrition issue from the college and university perspectives. The sheer volume of studies devoted to this phenomenon at that level seems to indicate that many of these institutions view attrition as one of serious concern for them. Attrition has direct economic impact on the institutions and also speaks to a school's effectiveness in performing its mission (University System, 1994).

Recent studies (e.g. Allen & Nelson, 1987; Johnson, 1994; Pascarella, 1982; Stith &Russell, 1994; Tinto, 1993; University System, 1994) represent continued exploration of this issue based very clearly upon a synthesis of a large body of research which precedes them in this area. In this literature, studies routinely refer to students' decision to remain enrolled in any particular institution of learning as a matter of "persistence." Hence, this body of literature defines attrition as the "failure [of students] to persist in college [or university] after matriculation" (University System, 1994, p. 2).
The myriad of studies on university and college level attrition make it clear that the causes of student attrition represent a very complex issue. Many, many factors come to play in the lives of students such that they withdraw from their institution (e.g. Allen & Nelson, 1987; Hawken, Kelly & Duran, 1990; Johnson, 1994; Lapidus, Green & Baruh, 1985; Pascarella, 1982; Stith & Russell, 1994; Tinto, 1993; University System, 1994).

In essence, however, three overall themes emerge which suggest the presence of interconnected perspectives in the lives of students who fail to persist. One theme pertains to the individual student’s personal character and background. The second involves an examination of the factors which come into play within the institution once the student has enrolled. The third concerns the effect of external forces which influence students’ behaviour in the institution (Tinto, 1993).

Looking first toward the role of personal characteristics and attributes, Waldo (1982) and Pascarella (1982) suggest that differences in the personal characteristics of the students enrolled may play significant roles in accounting for persistence rates. Pascarella finds that a “substantial body of research . . . . suggests that students’ interactions with the college environment are not independent of their particular background traits and personality orientations” (p. 8).

A report from the University System of Georgia (1994) elaborates upon some of the salient parameters of those personal background orientations of the students with regard to persistence. That study refers to characteristics such as academic aptitude, study habits, and grades; demographic elements such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity; aspirations and motivation including the degree of personal aspiration, commitment, peer group influence, and occupational goals; and financial factors such as concerns regarding finances, employment, and financial aid. Allen & Nelson (1987), however, found that such background
characteristics play only a minimal role in predicting persistence behaviour. These personal characteristics have a largely indirect influence, and become mediated by social integration once enrolled in the school.

Tinto (1993) addresses specifically the matter of personality traits. He comments that we sense that personality may play a role in student departure but we cannot say for certain to what extent different personality traits affect the student in different institutional settings. He goes on to say that little evidence exists that early leavers possess a unique personality profile.

Johnson (1994) notes that each student does possess a unique combination of academic (e.g. study skills) and personal (e.g. health, family background) attributes. Once enrolled, this unique combination then interacts with institutional variables:

It is the interaction between an individual and an institution that results in student academic performance and psychological state, directly or indirectly [forming] the bases for both institutional and personal withdrawal decisions. (Johnson, 1994, p. 339)

Tinto (1993) suggests, too, that the student’s intentions (educational goals and willingness to remain in the university) and commitment (a willingness to commit to the time and energy necessary to meet the social and academic demands of the college) all play a role in the attrition process. These and other prior personal dispositions have an impact on the decision to withdraw contingent upon interactions then encountered with other members of the institution. Further, an individual’s perception of the degree to which those interactions meet her or his needs and interests also contributes to the decision to withdraw, or not, from the institution. Tinto (1993) summarizes the situation in saying:
It is for this reason that researchers generally agree that what happens following entry is, in most cases, more important to the process of student departure than what has previously occurred. (p. 45)

The potentially more significant issue, then, becomes a concern with what happens within the institution of learning once the student has enrolled. As Sith & Russell (1994) suggest, “It is the intensity of the push and pull of certain events over time that helps to shape persistence” (p. 3). The literature presents somewhat conflicting views as to the significant factors involved at this rather murky stage of the process. As Pascarella (1982) notes, institutional persistence comes as a result of “a complex interaction of different influences” (p. 25).

Essentially, once inside the school, students encounter two challenges, both dealing with integration or assimilation, into the institution. One challenge deals with integration into the academic aspects of the institution. The second involves the integration into the social aspects of the institution (Allen & Nelson, 1987; Johnson, 1994; Pascarella, 1982; Stith & Russell, 1994; Tinto, 1993; University System, 1994). It appears that both of these aspects play a role with respect to persistence.

Johnson (1994) and Allen & Nelson (1987) indicate that success at the academic levels of the college or university plays a more prominent role regarding persistence than does social integration. Students acquire a perception of their academic performance and then evaluate that against a personal standard (Johnson, 1994). In her study, students who withdrew from the university showed a lower level of academic confidence. They were also significantly more likely to report incidences of personal problems, but not family problems. Johnson found from her study that students who remained in the university did not show any more clear patterns of integration into the campus social life than did those who withdrew.
Allen & Nelson (1987) report, however, that whereas academic integration has a stronger and more direct effect upon persistence than does social integration, academic integration actually has a negative effect upon persistence. In other words, the more academically integrated student fails to persist after the first year of university. Allen & Nelson suggest that perhaps personality factors come into play in this process. Perhaps the same personality factors which influence the student’s behaviour to succeed academically make her/him more sensitive than his/her less academically inclined counterparts to the relatively fewer opportunities for satisfying her or his need for intellectual interaction with faculty and peers. Thus, Allen & Nelson (1987) conclude that commitment to the institution comes largely as a function of the student’s interaction with the social system of the institution.

Pascarella (1982) speaks specifically to the residential environment at colleges and universities. He notes that, overall, the social involvement in a school has a greater effect on persistence than does academic involvement.

Tinto (1993) helps to clarify the nature of this highly complex issue. He refers to “interactional roots” (p. 45), the factors that come into play once the student has enrolled, as playing the major role in student attrition. The interactional roots consist of four clusters of themes. These four clusters include adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, and isolation. Adjustment refers to the fact that students must adjust to a new, and sometimes strange, world of college. Most people experience difficulty with that adjustment which can become so difficult that the student withdraws from the institution.

Two sources prevail in making that adjustment: the inability to separate from past associations, including peer groups, and the inability to adjust to new and more demanding social and intellectual demands imposed by the college. In this context,
academic difficulties as well as social isolation can lead students to depart early. Further, those who live away from home for the first time may need to learn an entirely new set of social skills appropriate to the college life. For such people, adjustment becomes especially stressful as they encounter academic as well as social forms of adjustment. Tinto (1993) suggests it is little wonder that people link problems of adjustment to individual personality, coping skills, and the character of the schooling and educational experiences. Without assistance, such students who have not yet learned to cope with new situations flounder and withdraw.

Academic difficulty refers to the fact that persistence requires more than adjustment. It also requires the meeting of academic standards. Not all students can meet these standards. Tinto (1993) notes, however, that voluntary withdrawal generally has little to do with academic difficulties.

The third and fourth clusters of themes, incongruence and isolation, deal directly with integration into the college or university. Integration means that the more satisfying both the social and the intellectual experiences felt by the students at the college, the more likely these students will persist. The less integrated a student becomes, however, the more likely she/he will withdraw.

Incongruence refers to the lack of institutional fit. A student may judge it undesirable for him/her to integrate into the school based upon the character of the interactions she or he experiences. This represents a mismatch with the needs, interests, and preferences of the individual and those of the school. Incongruence springs from a perception of not fitting in or being at odds with the social and intellectual fabric of the school. If so, the student judges it undesirable to remain enrolled.
Students come to know the character of the institution through a wide range of formal and informal interactions with other members of the school. These needs and interests may be expressed individually, in groups, or as a reflection of the general ethos or culture of the school. The student may come to know the character of the institution, too, through the academic or social systems of the school through the rules which govern acceptable behaviour. What seems to matter most “is whether the individuals perceive themselves as being incongruent with the life of the institution, not whether observers would agree with that assessment” (p. 51).

Incongruence can result from either academic or social misfit. Academically, things can appear too difficult or too easy, resulting from a marked decline in academic performance or finding the academics insufficiently challenging. Sometimes, too, students fail to avail themselves of any assistance offered.

Socially, incongruence can flow from the social values and preferences, particularly with one’s peers, expressed individually or collectively. Social incongruence can appear through formal activities, e.g. extracurricular pursuits, but more often mirrors the day to day informal personal interaction with other students and the teachers too.

The social benefits of extracurricular pursuits may reflect some gender differences at the university level. Woo & Bilynsky (1994) report that male students became primary beneficiaries of involvement in extracurricular activities. Female students may rely less upon organized activities and more on a personal support network in terms of their social adjustment.

Tinto (1993) notes that some level of incongruence is to be expected by everyone. He remarks that the major difference with leavers, however, means that:
when the perception leads the person to perceive him/herself as being substantially at odds with the dominant culture of the institution and/or with significant groups of faculty and student peers, the withdrawal may follow. (p. 53)

Social incongruence occurs especially among young adults and especially in residential settings. There, the interaction with peers, and notably with roommates, “proves to be a particularly important element in voluntary departure . . . social identity is sometimes as important as intellectual identity” (Tinto, 1993, p. 53).

Roommate relationships form the basis of many studies on attrition from the perspective of tertiary level institutions (e.g. Carey, Hamilton & Shanklin, 1986; Hawken, Kelly & Duran, 1990; Lapidus, Green & Baruh, 1985; Lovejoy, Perkins & Collins, 1995; Waldo, 1982; Waldo, 1984). Quite clearly, students who cope successfully with their roommate relationship generally demonstrate a better overall adjustment to college life (Lovejoy, Perkins & Collins, 1995).

Several sub themes pertaining to the residence roommate relationship emerge from these studies. Waldo (1982) notes that most students report that their new relationships developed in college have the “single greatest impact on their college experience” (p. 3). If that impact forms a negative impression, a student can experience social alienation. Waldo reports that specifically the social environment in the student residences can become associated with feelings of alienation. Students in residence who find low levels of social involvement and emotional support therein tend to become unhappy.

Hawken, Kelly & Duran (1990) point specifically to roommate relationships within the residence. The first semester represents a time of particular importance to freshmen. They likely view the roommate relationship as one of particular importance, at least until they can develop a social network on campus. If they do not perceive their roommates as “socially confirming” (p. 19) of them, i.e.
the student does not find approval for her or his own self presentations and becomes unable to express her/his thoughts and feelings clearly, the student may feel distant, unable to communicate with his/her roommate, and as a result feel very lonely in the new school. The roommate serves as an important antidote to loneliness. A low level rapport with the roommate helps to create general dissatisfaction with the new environment. The depth of this dissatisfaction ultimately results in the student’s decision to leave the university.

Many researchers (e.g. Hawken, Kelly & Duran, 1990; Lovejoy, Perkins & Collins, 1995; Waldo, 1982) affirm that a student’s relationship with her/his roommate is associated with the student’s perceived quality of the entire college experience, the student’s academic performance, and good psychological adjustment. Poor roommate relationships can lead to such loneliness and depression that the student may “apply the negative impressions to the campus in general and eventually drop out of [the] school” (Hawken, Kelly & Duran, 1990, p. 3).

Carey, Hamilton & Shanklin (1986), Lapidus, Green & Baruh (1985), and Waldo (1982) report that no strong relationship exists between similarities in personality types or personal backgrounds, and positive roommate relationships. The ability to communicate with a roommate, however, does play a very strong, determining role in the success of roommate relationships (Carey, Hamilton & Shanklin, 1986; Hawken, Kelly & Duran, 1990; Waldo, 1982; Waldo, 1984). Roommates must clearly understand each other’s expectations, openly communicate with each other, and verbalize with each other about their thoughts and feelings (Waldo, 1982).

Hawken, Kelly & Duran (1990) refer to this ability as “communicative competence” (p. 9). It appears that six dimensions exist regarding this
communicative competence. They include social confirmation, social experience, social composure, appropriate disclosure, articulation, and wit.

Waldo (1982) suggests that gender differences may exist regarding the way in which roommates may be willing and able to communicate with each other. He says that males and females tend to differ in their level of motivation to work on relationship skills. Carey, Hamilton & Shanklin (1986) comment that women tend to place more emphasis upon communication related factors whereas men tend to define the roommate relationship as one without a commitment to act as friends. Women and men may have different expectations from the roommate relationship as a result. Lovejoy, Perkins & Collins (1995) say that females also receive more social support from their roommates than do males.

The decision to continue or abandon a roommate relationship occurs very early in the relationship. This can happen as soon as two weeks into the match (Hawken, Kelly & Duran, 1990). Lovejoy, Perkins & Collins (1995) recommend that students suffering from roommate relationship problems should receive intensive intervention so as to prevent the problems from quickly disrupting the students’ academic and social lives.

A roommate relationship characterised by a high level of interpersonal rapport, trust, warmth, security, and understanding may indeed play a contributing role in a student’s decision to persist (Hawken, Kelly & Duran, 1990). This relationship results in a socially involving and emotionally supportive environment, relating to overall perceptions of social involvement on the part of students (Waldo, 1984).

Lapidus, Green & Baruh (1985) note that studies on roommate relationships essentially divide the relationship into four variables: personality, values, background, and living habits. They advise, however, that the most promising
approach toward determining success of that relationship involves a look at the students’ behaviour in several key areas. Dissatisfied roommates report conflicts most often over issues such as bedtime hours, smoking, studying, noise, and use of the room. Indeed, roommates more closely matched on the basis of these rather more mundane concepts of concrete lifestyle characteristics, result in more incidences of compatibility, roommates who participate in the same activities together, and fewer room change requests (Lovejoy, Perkins & Collins, 1995).

Returning to Tinto’s (1993) cluster of themes associated with interactional roots, Tinto defines the fourth and final cluster, isolation, as the absence of sufficient interactions to allow for student integration. Students find themselves largely isolated from the daily life of the institution. Unlike incongruence, which may be unavoidable at the university level, isolation, he argues, need not occur. Isolation consists of the absence of sufficient contact between one person, and the other members of the social and academic communities of the college. Isolation can arise among persons who are not very different from other members of the college.

Students who become isolated cannot establish personal bonds with other individuals. These bonds form the basis for membership in the communities of the institution. Such isolates typically note feelings of the absence of opportunities for contact and the remoteness of teaching faculty as instrumental in forming the decision to leave. These isolated students do not differ appreciably from their peers, as do the incongruent students, but instead differ only in “their failure to have established a significant personal tie with someone on campus, faculty or student” (Tinto, 1993, p. 56).

Both the degree and quality of such social bonds become critical elements in the student’s desire to remain enrolled. Tinto (1993) calls the absence of this
sufficient contact with others in the institution "the single most important predictor of eventual departure even after taking into account the independent effects of background, personality, and academic performance" (p. 56). Noting, again, that voluntary withdrawal reflects more what occurs on campus following enrollment than what has occurred prior to that time, Tinto confirms that "and of that which occurs after entry, the absence of contact with others proves to matter most" (Tinto, 1993, p. 56).

Teaching faculty, too, seem to play a particularly important role in the student's desire to persist (Pascarella, 1982; Tinto, 1993). Frequent contact with faculty must especially extend beyond the formal boundaries of the classroom to the various informal settings of the college life (Tinto, 1993).

Further, the faculty relationship with students must appear warm and rewarding. The perception of largely formalistic exchanges linked to the "narrow confines of academic work prove to be tied to the occurrence of voluntary withdrawal" (Tinto, 1993, p. 57). Interactions outside the classroom clearly help to shape the student's decisions regarding withdrawal.

Tinto (1993) notes that the first semester accounts for the highest frequency of freshmen withdrawals from university. Students finding difficulty in meeting people, making new friends, and who respond to ambiguous situations by withdrawing into themselves tend to have more difficulty than do those who reach out to others. This isolation becomes an enduring and then debilitating experience.

Students do not require a wide ranging social contact or even a perfect match with the institution. Instead, students must find some compatible academic or social group with whom to establish membership and make contacts.

Tinto (1993) refers to the existence of student subcultures as meaning the diversity of student communities on campus. He mentions that a student may find
congruence within any subculture or community without the necessity of finding a fit across the whole of the institution. One can be at odds with a great number of groups and still find sufficient social contact to support persistence. "Thus, the notion of finding one's own niche within the institution as a requisite part of persistence in college" (Tinto, 1993, p. 59).

Tinto (1993) explains, too, that intellectual and social life of most institutions consists of a centre and a periphery. The centre, or mainstream, establishes the prevailing climate or ethos of the institution, its distinguishing attitudes, values, beliefs, and patterns of behaviour. That centre consists of "one or more communities of individuals or dominant subcultures whose orientations come to define the standards of judgement for all members of the institution" (Tinto, 1993, p. 11).

The periphery, on the other hand, comprises subordinate subcultures or communities "whose values, beliefs, and patterns of behaviour may differ substantially from those of the centre" (Tinto, 1993, p. 11). Such peripheral communities have lives of their own and exist outside the margins of power that define campus politics. Peripheral communities have little impact upon the overall ethos of the institution or its decisions.

For students, the closer one exists to the mainstream of the academic and social life of the college, the more likely one finds one's self as congruent with the institution. This, too, enhances the chances for persistence. The more removed a student finds her/himself from the mainstream, however, the more marginal and likely the student becomes to see her/himself as existing separate from the institution. When this occurs, a student has a strong attachment to the group but not to the institution. Once a student finds him/herself marginal to the institution, she or he becomes more likely to withdraw.
The meaning the students attach to community membership becomes a reflection of the culturally laden definitions students attach to various subcultures within the institution. While membership in some community remains important for persistence, the impact of that membership depends upon the prevailing ethos of the institution which gives meaning to that group or community.

As for the various external forces and commitments acting upon a student once enrolled, students who attempt to retain past friendships in their transition to the new institution may find that transition particularly problematic. Such students, especially with past friends living off campus, tend to have the greatest difficulty in becoming socially integrated. This force can actually serve to pull students back and away from the participation in the college's communities (Tinto, 1993).

**Adolescent Issues**

Clearly, social issues figure prominently in the matter of student voluntary attrition from their educational institution. The review above largely investigates attrition issues from the university and college student perspective. Whereas these institutions enrol students mainly in their very latest adolescent and youngest adult years, private schools enrol students mainly from their early to mid to late adolescent years. Students at that age tend to demonstrate very specific and characteristically adolescent needs, and interact with each other socially in characteristic ways. Thus, specific attributes of the student as an adolescent bear examination.

Many studies (e.g. Arhar & Kromrey, 1993; Eaton, Mitchell & Jolley, 1991; Gallagher, 1996) demonstrate quite clearly that adolescents possess a strong need to affiliate, to belong, to bond, with other people, and particularly with their peers.
Gallagher (1996) notes that this sense of belonging means that an adolescent feels personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by the people in her or his environment. An adolescent acquires a sense of significance from feeling included, connected, and having psychological membership. Adolescents feel the need to belong so strongly that Gallagher (1996) equates that feeling with being almost as strong as the need to survive. Thus, the sense of "not belonging" becomes a lonely experience from which adolescents will "try instinctively to relieve the pain it brings" (p. 3).

Gallagher (1996) also reports that peer acceptance acquires increasing significance throughout adolescence. The mere perception of belonging often becomes more important than reality in influencing adolescents' feelings and actions. Adolescents feel great social support as a by-product of close relationships with their friends.

Arhar & Kromrey (1993) note that a lack of feeling connected, or affiliated, with other students, their teachers, and the school in general relates directly to students withdrawing from school early. For students to feel it worth their while to invest psychologically, they must feel valued in their school. Social bonding, then, becomes a prerequisite to academic engagement in the school (Arhar & Kromrey, 1993).

Adolescents also must feel the support and approval of adults in the school. Arhar & Kromrey (1993) note that teachers play an important role in this affiliation process. Specifically, teachers' background and competence, and their interactions with students outside of the classroom make a difference to this bonding.

Goldberg & Chandler (1989) refer to Coleman (1961) in saying that adolescents rely upon peers' values to establish standards of acceptance and play a critical role in the socialization process within the school. The importance of peers
to adolescents increases during those adolescent years (Gallagher, 1996). During the middle school years, adolescents become particularly vulnerable to feelings of alienation. They look toward peers, and adults, as sources of support toward establishing an identity of their own (Arhar & Kromrey, 1993).

Gallagher (1996) refers to Wehage, et al. (1989) in saying that school membership for adolescents really means that students belong and feel accepted as valued members of a peer group. This provides them with feelings of mutual support and trusting relationships. Eaton, Mitchell & Jolley (1991) refer to this need as a requirement for stimulation. Adolescents thus need a crowd, a group, to structure their social activities. Also, considerable dependence on the other people around them best satisfies the adolescent need for belonging (Gallagher, 1996).

When adolescents do not perceive themselves as valued by a group, gradual disengagement occurs, of which withdrawal from school becomes a final step (Gallagher, 1996). Non-membership in a group can result in “social isolates” (p. 12) who lack friends. This may occur even when other students do not particularly dislike the isolate. That person then becomes neglected, rather than actually disliked. This can result in an adolescent who feels there remains little that she or he can do to change her/himself, or his or her environment. Such a student can become virtually invisible socially and seeks no attention so as to minimize the risk of blatant rejection (Gallagher, 1996). The resulting alienation clearly can result in withdrawal from school (Arhar & Kromrey, 1993).

Goldberg & Chandler (1989) talk about the ways in which adolescent peer groups recognize highly valued student members within a school. Whereas female students place the perception of being an outstanding student high on the scale of being accepted, for male students, a high degree of athletic skill remains a key ingredient toward achieving popularity among his peers. It appears that while
academic strength may also receive increasing importance among adolescent males, still the role of the student athlete does not diminish correspondingly. Further, Goldberg & Chandler suggest that it may be particularly important for a male student in grade nine, as opposed to a senior student, to win popularity through athletic success most of all.

Retention from a Public School Perspective

Lawton and Leithwood (1988) take a different approach to the study of attrition from those studies reviewed above. While still not targeting the notion of private school attrition specifically, they enhance our understanding of attrition from the perspective of a public secondary school's institutional variables. Their study attempts to determine "what Ontario high schools might do in order to increase student retention" (Lawton and Leithwood, 1988, p.1).

Lawton & Leithwood (1988) suggest that people in schools tend to think of the issues of student retention as an individual student rather than an institutional concern. These authors reveal instead that several institutional variables seem to affect the student's decision to leave school before completing a diploma. Lawton & Leithwood (1988) refer to policies affecting student behaviour, codes of behaviour, attendance, tardiness, and types of discipline including detention and suspensions. These all seem to play an important role in explaining students' decisions regarding staying in school.

Lawton & Leithwood (1988) demonstrate also that seven attributes of effective schools have an affect upon student retention. These attributes include the goals given priority by the school, attributes and practices of teachers and administrators, the nature of school programs and classroom instruction, school
policies and organizational features, school culture, and the nature of school-community relations.

Goals of the school includes both long and short term outcomes considered important for the students to achieve, including school conditions that would be necessary to achieve these goals. Aspects of the goals which explain differences in school effectiveness include clarity, academic emphasis, use in decision making, and use in creating a sense of affiliation within the school (Lawton & Leithwood, 1988).

The qualities of teachers include relevant personal qualities, the view of a teacher's role, the teachers' disposition toward students, and the teachers' disposition toward collaboration with other teachers (Lawton & Leithwood, 1988). Regarding the school administration, the issues pertain to the basic beliefs of administrators, the nature and use of administrator's goals, any emphases among and knowledge about factors in the school influencing students' experiences, strategies used by administrators to influence factors, and the administrators' decision making process (Lawton & Leithwood, 1988).

The concept of school policies refers to those affecting the teachers and students, as well as school size, the use of time, the amount of school-level discretion and district support for school initiatives (Lawton & Leithwood, 1988). With regard to the terms “program” and “instruction,” program means the curriculum content presented to students, the degree of choice among courses, and the extent of articulation among program components. Those factors having the greatest importance were academic emphasis, core curriculum requirements, a rich array of curriculum offerings, program coherence, carefully planned instruction based upon sound learning principles, efficient use of instructional time, and a systematic monitoring of student progress (Lawton & Leithwood, 1988).
Culture, ethos, and climate go toward explaining differences between schools. Effective school cultures address this dimension as shared and student-centred (Lawton & Leithwood, 1988). Culture refers to a "unique set of core norms, values and beliefs that are widely shared throughout the organization" (Lawton & Leithwood, 1988, p.33, referring to Rossman, Corbett & Firestone, 1985, p.5). Lawton & Leithwood (1988) also refer to "ethos," (p. 33) which may be defined as "a climate of expectations or modes of behaving" (Rutter, et al., 1979). In many cases, individual actions are less important in their own right than in the combined impact they have on what it feels like to be a part of the school.

Lawton & Leithwood (1988) suggest that school/community relationships serve as an important discriminator among schools varying in effectiveness. Effective schools make use of community resources such as volunteers and student tutors, and developed solid working relationships with universities toward providing assistance to academically talented students and businesses. Effective schools are responsive to their particular social and political milieus and generate high levels of community support (Lawton & Leithwood, 1988).

Lawton & Leithwood (1988) found that school culture forms the strongest path affecting student retention. School culture has a positive influence on teachers. The teachers in turn affect dropping out directly through their influence on programs and instruction.

Regarding culture, Schein (1985) suggests that several cultures can operate within a larger social unit called the organization. He defines culture as,

a pattern of basic assumptions - invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration - that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (p. 9)
Schein (1985) finds that three levels exist within a culture. He identifies one level as its "artifacts" (p. 14). These are its creations, its physical and social environment, its physical space, the written and spoken language of the group, artistic productions, and overt behaviour of its members. The second level consist of "values" (Schein, 1985, p.15). These are the sense of what ought to be as distinct from what is; solutions to problems as based upon the convictions of someone in the group, usually the leader. The third level is "basic underlying assumptions" (Schein, 1985, p. 18). These are assumptions so taken for granted that one finds little variation within a cultural unit.

Van Maanen & Bartley (1985) provide interesting insight into the concept of organizational culture particularly as it pertains to the newcomers to any existing culture. Van Maanen & Bartley say that individuals may be unaware that they indeed have a culture unless it is pointed out to them. When newcomers move into a group, they will find others already there who have defined the situation. With specific regard to newcomers, Van Maanen & Bartley (1985) suggest that:

If newcomers are to interact successfully in the setting, thus becoming members of good standing, ...[three] pre-existing definitions have to be learned and respected. (p. 34 - 35)

Van Maanen & Bartley (1985, p. 33) portray these three definitions as follows. "Ecological context" refers to the attributes of the group's physical setting, the pertinent historical forces, and the demands, expectations, and social organization of those who lay claim to the group's conduct. Van Maanen & Bartley (1985) call the second definition "differential interaction." It means the patterns of interaction which emerge between people who may or may not be members of the group. There must exist a high ratio of intra-group ties as compared with extra-group ties in order to develop a common frame of reference and to establish a collection of individuals as a group.
The third definition Van Maanen & Bartley call "collective understandings."

These consist of a collection of signs,

essentially devoid of meaning until they are noticed and interpreted by members of a collective. Interpretations of objects, events, and activities are for this reason, the quintessential content of any culture. (Van Maanen & Bartley, 1985, p. 34)

Briks' (1994) study deals with the issue of attrition in the context of volunteers in the Canadian Armed Forces Reserve. Briks notes that a review of the literature on current school dropout theory suggests that an accurate assessment of voluntary attrition can best be achieved when research targets both the "dropout" population as well as the organizations from which they withdraw, in other words the organizational culture.

Summary

In sum, then, current literature concerning the issue of student attrition and retention, including studies from both the United States and Canada, begins to reveal something of the causes of attrition from institutions, including private elementary and secondary schools, universities, colleges, and public sector secondary schools. Concepts pertaining to attrition emerge from a review of all of these sources. These form the basis from which to undertake this study of voluntary private school attrition.

In the private sector, some of those causes such as geographic and financial issues appear to be fairly practical and self evident. Other causes of attrition may also represent relatively obvious classifications in terms of explaining student withdrawal from private schools. These categories include non-voluntary attrition for academic, non-academic, and voluntary attrition for transportation reasons.
Reasons for voluntary student attrition in many other areas, however, appear to have less conspicuous explanations. These categories, established in private school attrition surveys, include "other," school environment, school program, homesickness, logical year, and co-educational/single gender concerns. These represent 41.8% of attrition in the most recent United States study (N.A.I.S., 1994) and 42% of attrition in the Canadian study (Grasmück, 1995).

This review of the literature suggests that several factors may be at play in a student’s decision to leave her or his school. Reasons for attrition may lie embedded in the school's cultural characteristics, including students’ personal interactions once inside the school specifically with regard to their peers and including roommates, and the relationship with teachers. In addition, the student’s personal characteristics and background may play a role once the student interacts with those factors within the school.

Clearly, student voluntary attrition represents a very complicated issue and process. As Briks (1994) suggests, attempts to understand better this process could sensibly take into account the complex roots of student departure and provide a meaningful basis for subsequent student retention. Stith & Russell (1994) report that qualitative research methods now begin to reveal the complexity of the interwoven events that come to play in students’ lives as they consider withdrawal from their schools.

Tinto (1993) suggests that the very complex nature of student attrition represents “in many respects . . . a highly idiosyncratic event, one that can be fully understood only by referring to the understandings and experiences of each and every person who departs” (p. 37). This study, then, investigates the issue of voluntary attrition from one private school by addressing the problem from a qualitative research perspective.
CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

I really support your case study approach because I think a case study is an excellent way of looking at it [attrition] . . . you’re trying to come up with strategies . . . and this is part of what . . . the school should be doing. (Stan, a school official)

This study explores the attrition issue from the perspectives of some of the students, parents, teachers, and school officials of a Canadian private secondary school. Through a process involving qualitative research methodology, these people shared their understandings as to why twelve students voluntarily withdrew from their school.

Respondents provided information which addresses the many factors involved in making a decision to withdraw from the school. These factors pertain to the interplay of the students’ personal attributes, including external forces at play in the leaving students’ lives, and the school’s organizational characteristics.

This investigation takes the form of a case study, a detailed examination of some of the people involved in this phenomenon within a single school. Bogdan & Biklen (1982) refer to such a case study as a situational analysis. They define a situational analysis as a case study involving a particular phenomenon, in this instance the withdrawal of several students from their private school.

Bogdan & Biklen say that case records may be drawn upon for the purposes of such a study. In this context, the study involves those students whom the school has recorded as having withdrawn voluntarily during the school year 19XY for reasons categorized as "other," "family," "program," and "homesickness."
Students who withdrew voluntarily from the school for the more obvious reasons of "financial" or "logical year" were not interviewed for this study.

This chapter outlines the methodology employed in this research. The following discussion addresses issues pertaining to site selection, gaining access, the respondents, interviews, interviewer trust, and data analysis.

Site Selection

Choosing one site for study over another results in a different study, not necessarily a better or worse study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). The school chosen for this study, however, possesses characteristics that appear to make a study of attrition at that site of interest.

The school enrolled a total of 275 students, of both genders, in the year of this study. It is a residential/day school, having enrolled 225 boarders and fifty non-resident students. Situated in a mid-sized city, the school continues to attract students from both smaller and larger urban centres.

The school is in the category of schools representing the highest attrition rate in terms of boarding/day status in both the N.A.I.S. (1994) and Grasmück (1995) studies, and in terms of co-ed/single gender status (Grasmück, 1995). This school experienced a student attrition rate for the school year of this study of approximately 16%. The school's overall rate of attrition for that year was higher in all categories of schools as used in both the N.A.I.S. (1994) and Grasmück (1995) studies with the exception of the "boarding/day" category. Of the students who did leave the school, most, 71%, left voluntarily.
Access to the Site

Gaining access to any research site remains a key issue relating to the success of the research. In this study, I, as the researcher, had access to the school, its students, former students, teachers, and past parents, as an "insider." I continue to teach in the school for my fifteenth year and, until recently, the year in which the students in this study left the school, held the position as a Director of Admissions at the school.

Both advantages and disadvantages present themselves to the researcher as an insider during the course of such a study. Bogdan & Biklen (1982) encourage any researcher to locate a site within fairly easy access of the researcher. Travel, they suggest, can be burdensome, and limits access and involvement.

As a teacher and former Admissions Director at the school, access and involvement were not at issue in this way. The travel throughout Ontario necessary to meet with the respondents who had left the school was practical and attainable for this study. Telephone calls, however, became the only practical means of reaching families in the further reaches of the Province or out of Province.

On the other hand, Bogdan & Biklen (1982) suggest that researchers not study their own school. This may be so notwithstanding the fact that several successful studies have been carried out in this way (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Instead, Bogdan & Biklen advise that researchers choose sites where they are more or less strangers. As for the risks in being an insider researcher, Bogdan & Biklen say that:

people who are more intimately involved within a setting find it difficult to distance themselves both from personal concerns and from their common-sense understandings of what is going on. For them, more often than not, their opinions are more than 'definitions of the situation': they are the truth. (p. 57)
Bogdan & Biklen suggest that others in the research setting are not accustomed to relating to the researcher as a neutral observer. Rather, they see the researcher as a teacher and as a person who has opinions and interests to represent. The people whom such an interviewer wishes to interview may not feel comfortable in speaking freely to the researcher. Also, the transition from "old self" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982, p. 57) to researcher may become ambiguous for the research subjects.

In this interviewer's experience, however, quite the contrary proved to be true. I had the advantage of knowing everyone whom I interviewed. With the exception of the student friends whom I interviewed at the school, we interviewed in locations, for the most part in the interviewee's homes, and at times mutually convenient and chosen by them. In such cases, I came typically to the interviewees as a guest in their homes. I also knew each interviewee from my perspectives as their teacher, friend, colleague, Admissions Director, and then as a fellow student. I knew the people whom I interviewed as people, not merely from our more formal roles within the school setting. This perspective played a positive role with respect to interviewer trust, as I discuss later in this chapter.

Nevertheless, aware that some interviewees may have felt some discomfort in speaking with me as an insider, especially as we eventually came face to face or spoke on the telephone, I attempted to mitigate any such feelings of discomfort. I verbalised with each person, again, at the start of each interview as to how very much I appreciated their assistance. I told them again that they were helping me as a student researcher with my thesis, and not as a teacher or colleague.

I knew also from each interviewee's positive response to my initial letter or conversation wherein I requested an interview, that she or he expressed a genuine willingness to help me and the school to learn more about attrition. I reiterated this position with each respondent by explaining, again, that anything they did tell me
would go toward helping me to attain my degree, as well as toward enhancing our collective understanding of the issues, including assisting the school specifically with its student retention.

To further emphasize that I conducted these interviews in my capacity as a student rather than as a teacher or colleague, I verbally reminded each interviewee that the identity of everyone contributing to this research would remain confidential. When asked during interviewees as to what someone else had said about an issue or a person, I replied that such information must remain confidential and that I could not speak to it for that reason. I reiterated that I acted under the strict supervision of the University of Toronto for my research project. I reminded each interviewee that I remained accountable to the University for the procedures I followed and for the integrity of my final report.

Kirby and McKenna (1989) encourage the researcher undertaking a qualitative study to integrate her/his own experience into the research process as a source of information and analysis. In this case study, given my background as a teacher and former Admissions Director, I was familiar with many of the background issues present in the student's and/or family's life at school and at the time of admission to the school initially, at least as much as the families revealed at the time of enrolment. In this way, I as the researcher and an insider used my own insight gained already into the lives of each family as a part of the interviewing process.

The Respondents

Bogdan & Biklen (1982) note that individuals who share a particular trait but do not form groups can be subjects of a qualitative study. Such is the case with the students who have withdrawn from the school. They share the fact that they chose
to attend the school and then chose to leave the school. They did so as individuals, or as individual families, rather than as a group from within the school.

Bogdan & Biklen (1982) say that this kind of study, a situational analysis, examines the issues from the point of view of all the participants. In this case study, that means the students, their student friends, the students' parents, and the teachers involved.

Looking first at the students who withdrew, a total of sixteen of them voluntarily left the school for the reasons noted earlier. I was able to contact twelve of these students and their families. The remaining four students had all left the country. I could not locate addresses or telephone numbers for those students. Of those four, three of the families were also out of the country and unreachable.

A parent of one of these four students still lives in this country. I attempted, unsuccessfully, to contact that parent who failed to reply either to my letter or my many phone call messages. I then learned that this parent was undergoing highly traumatic personal experiences at the time. Under the circumstances, I felt that I could not pursue my attempts to make contact.

For each of the families whom I did locate, I wrote a letter of explanation regarding my research. I addressed the envelope to the parents of the students with whom I wished to speak concerning this research, rather than to the students themselves. I addressed the letter itself to both the parents and their son or daughter (see Appendix One).

I then followed that letter with a telephone call, made from one to two weeks later. I called each parent(s) for the purpose of making personal contact to discuss the research further with them. I inquired as to their willingness to participate and to permit their daughter or son to participate. At that time, we also established
a date, place, and time for the face to face interviews, or a date and time for the telephone interviews.

Each family with whom I spoke, parents first and then their daughters and sons alike, expressed tremendous support for my research. They were happy to be asked to participate and to share their views. All offered to speak with me at any mutually convenient time to begin the interviews.

In order to gather as complete a data base as I could, during the interviews with the “departed” students and their parents, I asked for the names of the students’ friends, former roommates, and teachers with whom they shared a special closeness, such as a residential housemaster, school advisor, or some other teacher. I made it clear to the respondents that I needed to interview these people, too, in an effort to make my research as complete as possible. Each respondent understood that concept and said that this was fine with her/him.

The leaving students gave me the name(s) of their closest friends at the school, and their roommate(s), and the teachers with whom the students felt closest and who know them best. Some of these teachers acted as the students’ housemasters while the students lived in residence at the school. A housemaster acts much in the capacity as a surrogate parent while the student lives away from home. Housemasters tend to know the students who live in their school residence very well, especially on the social level outside of the formal classroom situation. These, then, are the students and teachers with whom I needed to speak in order to complete my research from as rounded a perspective as possible.

Following my interviews with each of the leaving students and families, I contacted each of these sixteen students and seven teachers personally while we were still at school and near the conclusion of the academic year. I explained the nature of my research to each person. Each of these people was also most
supportive of my research. Each offered to speak with me at any mutually convenient time to begin the interviews.

The students’ friends and teachers whom I interviewed corroborated the students’ stories and really helped me to understand the issues better from their unique perspectives. In addition, the teachers provided information and insight about the attrition issue which did not come to light from anyone else.

It was through this method that some highly sensitive issues came to the fore. In these cases, teachers, and in one case a fellow student, who know the “departed” students and their backgrounds very well revealed the great depth and profundity of the issues. These teachers and the student shared the sensitive information with me willingly and freely with me on the understanding that the information remain confidential.

I assigned each respondent a pseudonym to help protect her or his true identity in this report. Each respondent falls into one of the categories of student leaver, students’ friend/roommate, teacher, or school official.

The following table includes the categories and the pseudonyms of each respondent included in that category:
Table 3.1 Pseudonyms used for Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Leavers</th>
<th>Leavers' Parents</th>
<th>Leavers' Student Friends/ Roommates</th>
<th>Leavers' Teachers/ Housemasters</th>
<th>School Officials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adriane</td>
<td>Andy</td>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>Betty</td>
<td>Sharon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>Brad</td>
<td>Candace</td>
<td>Stan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barb</td>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>Brenda</td>
<td>Pat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benny</td>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>Cory</td>
<td>Rodney</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dennis</td>
<td>Deirdre</td>
<td>Dave</td>
<td>Wayne</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanne</td>
<td>Don</td>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>Wendy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>Ed</td>
<td>Donna</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priscilla</td>
<td>Eugene</td>
<td>Eunice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ralph</td>
<td>Hugh</td>
<td>Howard</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>Jillian</td>
<td>Jim</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>Lois</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todd</td>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>Mark</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>Paula</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mandy</td>
<td>Ruby</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mario</td>
<td>Sally</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>May</td>
<td>Tony</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interviews

The information gathered for this study from the students who withdrew from the school, their parents, and subsequently the students' former room-mates at the school, and the school officials and teachers involved came through the interview process. Bogdan & Biklen (1982) recommend that the researcher interview the subjects in such cases as a preferred approach to participant observation. Through interviewing, "what they [the subjects] share will emerge more clearly when you individually solicit their perspectives rather than observe their activities" (p. 60). In this study, the interview approach became the best means of obtaining the
information because the students had already left the school and enrolled elsewhere, some in different cities and Provinces of Canada.

Woods (1986) suggests that interviews often represent the only way of finding out about the perspectives held by people. Woods (1986) notes that interviews comprise a means of "making things happen" (p. 62) and stimulating the flow of ideas. Woods (1986) also suggests that interviews ought to be unstructured and intended to facilitate the:

expression of personal views and facts sincerely and accurately. The interviewee provides the structure, and the interviewer's quest is to help discover what it is. Care is needed, therefore, to avoid 'leading' or suggesting' or otherwise spoiling the outcome, and skill in discovering what is in the interviewee's mind. (p. 65)

Woods (1986), then, considers the interview to be more of a conversation or discussion; an open, democratic process where people can be themselves rather than play a role. Woods does advocate, however, the use of a prompt card with which to provide some guidance as to what to talk about. Kirby & McKenna (1989), however, say that the basis of the interview is the question. Thus, the research focus must be transformed into specific questions which will allow the researcher to stay close to the focus and help the interviewee to respond in a thoughtful and insightful way. Kirby & McKenna prefer the use of a combination of pre-set and interactive, spontaneously derived questions for the interview.

For this study, I adopted a position incorporating both views in my approach to the interview. I entered the interviews with a set of questions focussed upon specific areas of school life as suggested in the attrition model developed from the literature. I allowed also for different paths of exploration as they arose from answers given or directions taken by the interviewee on the topic of her/his own/child's departure from the school.
I conducted a total of forty-six interviews for this research, during the period from November, 1995, to June, 1996. Where possible and practical, the interviews took place in person. In three cases, the subjects lived a considerable distance from me as the interviewer, hundreds of kilometres from my home, including out of Province. I conducted those interviews over the telephone.

Woods (1986) recommends that interviewees be given the choice of time and place for the interview where possible. This helps to ensure in the interviewee a sense of control and confidence. In the case of both the person-to-person and the telephone interviews with the students who left the school and their parents, therefore, I made every effort to interview in the subjects' own homes. With teachers, I anticipated that more likely venues would be the faculty room or department offices at the school or, indeed, in their own homes as well.

In the case of the students' friends and former roommates who interviewed with me, the school setting seemed the most likely, comfortable, and convenient location for them and for me. In this case, Woods (1986) recommends that the interviewer explain that he is stepping outside the role of teacher for the purpose of the research. This proved not a difficult task at all to accomplish, given that the students in the residential school routinely see their teachers in many varied aspects of their lives already, both personal and professional, in the context of life at the school.

Woods (1986) also suggests that students interviewed in school can be made to feel more comfortable in the interview situation by seeing them in "friendship groups" (p. 72). This technique can provide the researcher with a better glimpse of the student culture as well as acting as a system of checks and balances among the students with their answers. Due to the highly confidential nature of my questions
and the interviewee responses, I elected to interview each student individually instead, rather than in the group method suggested by Woods.

Both Woods (1986) and Kirby & McKenna (1989) say that the subjects must speak from an informed position about the nature of the study. All participants knew the purpose of the study and I assured them of confidentiality in their identities and responses.

Woods (1986) offers a check list of items for consideration by the interviewer in the name of accuracy during the interview. This list includes: check on apparent contradictions, search for opinions, seek clarification, ask for explanations, seek comparison, pursue the logic of an argument, ask for additional information where some is missing, aim for comprehensiveness, put concepts in a different way, express astonishment, summarize occasionally, ask hypothetical questions, and play "devil's advocate" (p. 80). Each of these techniques proved very useful in drawing from the interviewees as clear and detailed a response as I felt possible in each circumstance.

Woods (1986) also advocates the use of a tape recorder when used unobtrusively and where it does not threaten the flow of conversation or distort it. Recording allows the researcher to concentrate on the task at hand, although rough notes and a journal must also be made in the process to capture fleeting thoughts and impressions toward an enhanced understanding of the data. The tape recorder proved to be absolutely invaluable for the information gathering process. Notes I had taken did indeed assist me with interpretation of the data, but I found that quotes I took down at the time of the interview were often incomplete or inaccurate. Only upon transcribing of the tapes did I properly record the actual, and often very powerful, quotes necessary for this research.
I began each interview by re-explaining my research to the families, and then asked for their permission to tape record the conversation. Each interviewee gave permission for me to use the tape recorder. I later made transcripts of each tape for purposes of the data analysis. I also made handwritten notes during the conversations for use in my understanding of the data.

I informed each interviewee that I had prepared a set of questions (see Appendix Two) to ask them and that these questions arose out of the literature on my research. I explained, too, that the interviewees need not feel constrained by the content or direction of the questions, but rather should feel comfortable telling me their thoughts as they came to them. Thus, the interviews took on a very non-linear nature. We did not follow rigidly the order of questions as I had prepared them once we entered into a dialogue. The questions did stimulate discussion with the interviewees, however, in key areas of interest to this study and so proved to be very useful in the process. The questions also provided me with the broad categories with which I could later begin to categorize the data when transcribing the tapes.

With the student friends of the leavers, I mentioned that I needed to contact their parents by telephone or E-mail to obtain permission for an interview with the students. I did contact each student’s parent(s) and each gave me permission to interview the son or daughter.

At the conclusion of each interview, I asked each interviewee to sign a consent form giving me permission to use the information which she/he gave me, and acknowledging that the interviewee understood that the information would remain confidential, and that she/he could withdraw from the research at any time (see Appendix Three). For the telephone interviewees, I mailed that form to them following our interview.
Regarding the telephone interviews, I found the formalized list of questions very useful from the outset, especially because a face to face encounter did not occur during the interview, even though the interviewees and I already knew each other. Sudman & Bradburn (1989) suggest that any question that can be asked face to face can be asked over the telephone. They suggest that the telephone method, however, can lack the legitimacy of face to face interaction. This proved to be less of an issue in this study, given my known identity as the researcher to the interviewees and the context in which I knew the participants involved.

Alreck & Settle (1985) suggest, too, that interview bias may be less likely with the telephone interview. The aspects of dress, facial expressions, and physical appearance are not factors in the discussion. They also suggest that interviewees may feel more confident and at ease over the telephone and willing to reveal more personal or sensitive information than would be the case otherwise.

In this process, I found the participants to be at ease on the telephone. I also found no apparent difference in the interviewees’ willingness to reveal information to me over the telephone as compared with the face to face interview method.

These telephone interviews lasted from forty-five minutes to an hour and a half in duration. In all three cases, I spoke with the parent(s) and students separately. I was told by the families on the telephone that other interviewees were out of the room while the other was on the telephone. This was organized by the families themselves rather than by any urging on my part.

At the conclusion of each interview, I discovered that I had covered the prepared questions and had also allowed the interviewees the freedom to expand upon the areas of examination as they spoke with me. The conversations provided rich sources of information in part because we were not bound by a rigid set of questions or format. In later data analysis, I discovered that I had many more
categories and subcategories of material than had been provided by the prepared set of questions alone.

One parent, whose child I had interviewed by telephone, preferred to respond to my questions by E-mail. This parent answered my questions as posed but also ventured into free response format quite often, thus readily letting me know the issues uppermost in her/his mind concerning the child’s departure from the school.

For all but one of the remaining sets of student and parent interviews, I travelled to the families’ homes to meet with the families for the interviews. In one case, we interviewed in a restaurant which was more mutually convenient in time and place than the interviewees’ home. In each case, as with the telephone interviews, I re-explained the research to the interviewees. I also received their permission to tape record the conversations and took hand written notes during the process.

In five of the sets of face to face interviews, a family of parent(s) and the student, the parents and students chose to interview with me separately. They made that decision rather than my having insisted upon it. I sensed that this was in keeping with their standards of privacy within each family. It seemed perfectly natural in each case and rather spontaneous in the way each family made this decision to do the interviews.

In the remaining four sets of interviews, I interviewed both the parent(s) and the student simultaneously. This, too, seemed perfectly natural in the family context and the setting of the home. In this scenario, however, the parent and student often dialogued with each other over issues, in a way that was of course impossible when only one or the other was in the room with me at a time. It became apparent that the families had not discussed many of the issues with each other until then. In these
cases, I found myself assuming the role as a catalyst or a moderator in focussing the family dialogue in areas left as yet undiscussed.

It appeared that for both types of interviews, this was what the family would do normally for me or anyone else who came to visit and to speak with them. The effect of the presence or absence of the parent, however, was noticeable to some extent during the interviews. On the one hand, where the parents were present, I found that they really helped to draw more complete answers from the son/daughter and challenged gently any answer which they felt may have been less than complete or where the student was attempting to be merely polite in the family setting. In this context, I was more a guest in their home and the students seemed to feel the need to act in a more socially “correct” manner with their responses with the parents present.

This is where the parents put the child more at ease by having said things such as “Well, that’s true, but you were also feeling . . . .” The son/daughter agreed with the parents, in most instances. When the student did not agree, however, it was a rather typical adolescent reaction such as “oh, mom!” or “that’s not true. You just think it’s true!” With both parent and child present, then, each helped the other to clarify the issues that really came into play in this attrition process.

In the other interviews, without the parents present, the students appeared to be more direct with me from the outset. They spoke with me on very comfortable and familiar terms. This felt to me more like the relationship we had at school when the student was still enrolled, in a very open, considerate, adult-like, mutually respectful, friendly, and honest manner. This typifies the student/teacher relationship at the school as I experience it on a daily basis.

Interviews with the students’ friends/roommates and teachers occurred during late May and early June of 1996. The students and I met individually in a room
within the school library or in an empty classroom during the student’s free time after the dinner hour. I interviewed each student and asked her/his permission to tape record the interview. Each student gave me that permission.

With the teachers, we agreed to meet at mutually convenient times and places. I met with the two school officials in their school offices, one teacher in a classroom within the school, and two other teachers in their own homes. The remaining two teachers preferred to come to my home to interview with me. Each teacher also gave me permission to tape record the interview.

All interviews lasted from thirty minutes each, in the case of the students’ friends, to one and a half hours each with the “departed” students, parents, and teachers whom I interviewed. Overall, the interview method proved a very effective way of gathering information. In every case, the interviewees provided revealing information as to the many factors involved in the students’ decision to leave. People felt comfortable. We spoke candidly and warmly. I sensed that parents and students felt they could speak their minds.

One parent, for example, expressed this comfort level with the process in the following way. Mandy commented as to this personal interview method of data collection versus another method, for example a focus group methodology. I asked Mandy, after discussing the interview itself, whether she could have imagined trying to get everybody in a single room for a focus group session. Mandy replied “No. Plus you don’t have your anonymity that way either. Like, you can’t. There are things you say that you don’t necessarily want your name attached to.”

Similarly, I felt, almost without exception in these interviews, that the students were telling me as much as they could about why they left, rather than holding back any information from me. I later had this feeling substantiated when I spoke with their teachers and friends at the school. I got the same information,
often expanded upon by virtue of the interviewee’s perspective rather than because the leaver had deliberately left anything out.

The exceptions occurred in the cases of three “departed” students whose stories, I discovered after having interviewed others who knew them well, contained issues of extremely personal information and of extraordinary delicacy. I understood, upon hearing of them from other interviewees, as to why the leavers themselves would have felt disinclined to mention these to me. I simply did not know them well enough on a personal level for them to have confided in me with this sort of information.

The timing of the interview schedule worked in favour of the research, as it happened. I began the earliest interviews seven months following the students’ departures from the school. Not only had almost none of the interviewees been asked previously by any school official as to why the student left the school, all students but one report that they were glad of and needed at least some distance in time to reflect upon the leaving process. The students reported that they had a much clearer view of the underlying reasons behind their leaving after having had the benefit of several months’ reflection time than they had at the time of their departure.

Issues of Trust

Interviewees need to feel that they can trust the interviewer. A student may need a sympathetic ear for what she/he might honestly feel about teachers; a teacher may need to feel that the interviewer appreciates the difficulties of teaching (Woods, 1986). All subjects expect the interviewer to be knowledgeable and fair, and not easily taken in by distortions of the truth (Woods, 1986).

Woods (1986) suggests that there must be a relationship between the interviewee and interviewer which transcends the research, promotes bonds of
friendship, and a joint pursuit of a common mission which rises above personal egos. These things, says Woods, can be communicated through what is said, how it is said, shared interests, the looks exchanged, and the way the interviewer answered the subject's questions and listened to the subject. In this study, I had established relationships already, to varying degrees, with the subjects. I relied upon them to trust in me from my reputation and from their own past dealings with me. This forms an integral part of the information gathering process (Woods, 1986).

The parents' and students' willingness to chat with me and obvious candour made it clear that they were very supportive of this research, confirming with their actions the support they indicated to me when asked initially about my doing this research with them. Many parents asked when the project would be completed because they would like to read about the issues and hear others' comments about attrition.

Each of the leaving students and their parents talked about their deep affection for the school. I believe that people's willingness to speak with me flowed in large measure from a trust of me, and a sincere desire to help the school to improve as well as to help me with my research.

Only in three cases, as mentioned earlier, did a student's comment about the reason for him/her having left the school appear to have failed to reveal fully the story concerning the departure. These were the cases where the personal issues at stake were so highly sensitive, personal, and significant in the people's lives that the students yielded to me only a portion of their story on that issue as I interviewed them. I found this to be completely understandable given the context of the situation. Perhaps these students may have revealed such information to an outside researcher, but I suspect not. The issues clearly are just too delicate to share with
anyone other than an adult in whom the student can confide after having established a very close and very personal relationship over time.

I sensed that the only reason I was able to gather the information that I did was indeed because I was an insider. Through my long association with the school, and through my professional and personal dealings with people, I was known and trusted by the interviewees already.

One of the pronounced advantages to being an insider researcher relates to an important issue in qualitative research, that of the "gatekeeper." Several authors address the subject in the context of qualitative research (e.g. Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1993). A gatekeeper refers to someone having control over key resources and avenues of opportunity . . . such gatekeepers' functions would actually be carried out by different personnel in the different organization settings. (Atkinson, 1981, in Hammersley & Atkinson, 1993, p. 38)

Such gatekeepers within the school, for example the Principal or the Board members of the school, could be considered as "hostile" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982, p. 58) to an outside researcher. These gatekeepers may choose to keep an outsider from delving into information that is clearly of a rather sensitive nature to the highly competitive private school sector of education. In this case study, information solicited from school clientele, and which may be revealed about the school's culture, may be regarded as private and not for any outside consumption. Gatekeepers,

will generally, and understandably, be concerned as to the picture of the organization . . . they will have practical interests in seeing themselves and their colleagues presented in a favourable light. At least, they will wish to safeguard what they perceive as their legitimate interests. (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1993, p. 65)
On another level, parents act as gatekeepers for their children. Not only may parents who do not know a researcher be unwilling to speak about their decisions to outsiders who have no connection to the school, but they may not permit their child to speak with such a person. All interviewees know me as someone who also knows the student in the context of the school, who taught some of the student interviewees, and who admitted many of the students to the school in the first place. In other words, our relationship had been established already as one of being mutually supportive and focussed upon the well-being of the sons or daughters in the school.

Any of my initial concerns about peoples’ comfort level with me, as the researcher in this study, in discussing their own reasons, or those of their friends, for having left the school quickly dissipated from the moment I spoke with the parents on the telephone after they had received my letter explaining the research to them. Without exception, the parents expressed their delight in helping me and told me that their sons and daughters were also most willing to assist me. All remained keen to help not only me, but also to assist the school in understanding more about its attrition issues.

With the exception of the parent who was experiencing deep personal trauma at the time of my attempts to make contact for an interview, no one refused to interview with me. Quite to the contrary, each person was most pleased to speak with me and quite delighted that what she/he had to say had significance in this research.

In this research, then, my position as an insider of long standing at the school, including as Admissions Director, allowed for the creation of bonds of trust and understanding with key gatekeepers. The Principal of the school, the Chair of the Board, and the Chair of the Board’s Admissions Committee conveyed to me their
support of this project. They expressed their desire to learn more about students' reasons for departure.

Teachers, of course, act as their own gatekeepers. The teachers interviewed, as colleagues of mine, appeared to trust in the research and in me personally. They seemed to believe readily that my motives lay in conducting this research as a student, and collegially toward helping the school retain students it would rather not "lose." As Hammersley & Atkinson (1993) say:

> Whether or not people have knowledge of social research, they are often more concerned with what kind of person the researcher is than with the research itself. They will try to gauge how far he or she can be trusted, what he or she might be able to offer as an acquaintance or friend, and perhaps how easily he or she could be manipulated or exploited. (p. 78)

The school official, Stan, and each of the teachers whom I interviewed, all spoke to me freely as colleagues who not only trusted me but wanted to assist me with this research. The teachers, indeed all the interviewees, appeared to enjoy being interviewed. I mentioned to each interviewee that his/her comments were important to understanding this issue and ultimately toward helping the school.

In short, certainly my fifteen year tenure at the school, my record of accomplishment, and my conduct within the school community all played a role in determining the degree to which my presence was accepted by the people involved in this study. From the Chair of the Board and the Principal, to those who no longer have any formal connection to the school, and to the students and teachers still at the school, people supported this research by giving willingly and generously of their personal time and information.
Data Analysis

The interviewees throughout this process revealed many details about the specific issues involved with the students’ decisions to leave the school. As a result, these interviews yielded vast quantities of data. Organising and analysing that enormous volume of information certainly proved challenging.

In terms of transcribing the recorded data, that task alone was formidable. Woods (1986) advocates the use of an index made upon listening to the tape and then only transcribing the relevant data rather than all of it. In this study, I had begun that way but soon found it much better for my understanding of the issues to have transcribed verbatim each interview tape.

After having transcribed each interview, I categorised each response according to the theme it addressed. Initially, the questions which I used in the interviews formed the broad categories of themes. Quickly, however, many and subtle sub-themes, and even new themes, emerged. This process continued until I had transcribed each interview and categorised each comment into its theme category or categories. The process also proved extremely time consuming.

In terms of validating what the interviewee says, Woods (1986) notes that the interviewer can colour and/or interpret the data in a number of ways. Even so, it may not always be necessary, possible, or desirable to have each interviewee validate the entire interview. Woods recommends, therefore, that it becomes a matter of judgement as to when and with whom validation will be necessary.

In this study, I was able to validate the student interviewee’s data with the corroboration of the interviews which followed. Using my own personal knowledge of the leaver’s situation prior to each interview, I was able to direct questions to the interviewees as needed to enhance their explanation and my understanding of an
issue. Where information seemed scant or otherwise incomplete from an initial interview, the subsequent interviews from fellow students and the teachers/house masters completed the picture. This also explained some discrepancies in the interview data as I had noted to myself during the course of some interviews.

**External Validity**

The information relating to the attrition issue as developed from the literature review provided a starting point from which to investigate this phenomenon of voluntary student attrition from one private school. With regard to this research, Woods (1986, p.137) reminds us that "it is unlikely that a complete, strong, original model will emerge from one study." In this case, then, as the researcher I hope that this study will result in a different and more profound glimpse of the complexities of student attrition in one school than has been accomplished to date, including through any previously conducted survey methods (e.g. Admission Services Report, 1989; Grasmück, 1995; N.A.I.S., 1994). Again with reference to Woods (1986), this study may provide information moving "toward a model" (p. 137) of revealing the nature of the causes of student attrition in the case study of one private school. Certainly, external validity can be strengthened through further case studies and other empirical evidence.

Hammersley (1993, p. 44) cautions that when studying a single case "the representativeness is always in doubt." Ideally, however, the findings of this study will be transferrable, or relatable, to the experiences and circumstances of other people involved in private schooling toward enhancing our collective understanding of attrition in private schools. The "relatability" of this study, then, will find meaning and support "not least, in the readers' heads as they deploy their own knowledge and experience of such institutions" (Woods, 1986, p. 50).
As noted earlier, given that little literature exists directly on this topic of student voluntary attrition from private schools, this study represents a very early exploration of the topic. In that light, Hammersley (1993, p. 45) comments that:

The appropriate strategy to adopt in selecting cases will depend very much on the stage the research has reached in the relevant theoretical area . . . . In the early stages of generating theory, which cases are chosen for investigation may not matter greatly. Later on in the process of developing and testing theory it may come to take on considerable importance.

The findings of this piece of qualitative research may serve to form part of a larger body of literature which will speak to private school administrators and teachers in their attempts to enhance their school's ability to retain more of their students. Shulman (1987) refers to the influence of such qualitative data upon the decisions people may make, as compared with so-called "better" evidence brought to light with empirical data:

most individuals find specific cases more powerful influences on their decisions than impersonally presented empirical findings, even though the latter constitute "better" evidence. Although principles are powerful, cases are memorable, and lodge in memory as the basis for later judgements. (Shulman, 1987 p. 32)

In the next chapter, we see the complex interplay of issues as they affected the students' lives while enrolled in the school. These issues ultimately influenced the students' decisions to withdraw from their school.
CHAPTER FOUR

An Introduction to the Issues

It's [the cause of attrition] always a lot of things combined. It might seem like one [reason] to some people but you have to really know the person to see them all. (Mark, a student)

This chapter begins to examine the issues which affected the students’ decisions to leave their school. In telling their stories, interviewees conveyed that neither any single issue nor any “triggering” event prompted any of the subjects to leave. Always, a combination of factors played a role in this decision and had a cumulative effect over time.

Included in the complex and unique “formula” leading to departure for each student, personal issues and history clearly assumed importance in “setting the stage” for the withdrawal process. Interviewees talked about this personal side of things as these details pertained to the leaving process.

A Complex Issue

Traditional surveys sent to private schools for the purpose of collating causes of attrition typically ask respondents to categorize each “leaver” according to only a single explanation for each student having left the school (e.g. Admission Services Report, 1989; Grasmück, 1995; N.A.I.S., 1994). In contrast, this study demonstrates that none of the participating students left the school for only a single reason. This certainly supports the attrition literature from other sectors of the population (e.g. Allen & Nelson, 1987; Briks, 1994; Hawken, Kelly & Duran, 1990; Johnson, 1994; Lapidus, Green & Baruh, 1985; Lawton & Leithwood, 1988; Pascarella, 1982; Stith & Russell, 1994; Tinto, 1993; University System, 1994).
Stan, a school official in this study, summarized the multiplicity of issues in this way. From his perspective,

I don’t think that attrition can ever be attributed to one thing. Ever. It would be hard for it to be [even only] two things . . . . It’s interesting to articulate it, too, because it brings into focus a lot of things.

Mark, a student friend of many of those who chose to leave the school, supported this notion. Whereas people may attribute a student’s departure to a single reason, by getting to know the person and the issues involved, one discovers a totally different view of attrition.

Without exception, each of the fifty-two interviewees explained that a combination of several and varied reasons resulted in the twelve students having left the school. Eight of the twelve participant student leavers, when asked for an explanation as to why they left the school, actually answered immediately by summarising the situation in that very way. For example, when asked why she left, June exclaimed, “[for] lots of reasons . . . . When you asked me that first question [why I left], I was a bit overwhelmed . . . . It’s big [the issue of the reasons for leaving]!”

Similarly, Alice thought for a moment about whether she left for a particular reason, and then replied, “I don’t think so. It was just like everything accumulating.” Sarah first spoke about the influence which several factors (friends, academics, lifestyle, and boredom) had upon her decision. She then summarized by saying, “It’s just all those combined.”

It became evident in all cases that no single defining moment or incident led to any of the students’ decisions to leave. For example, when asked whether a final factor brought things to a head, Barb replied, “No. Not really. It was just, I guess,
everything just kind of added up. It wasn’t just one particular thing.” Benny noted, “It was a combination. It wasn’t just one [incident].”

The leavers’ friends, offered similar comments about the multiplicity of issues involved in the departures. Eunice referred to a build up of circumstances in Barb’s life, a build up which finally resulted in her decision to leave the school:

Hmm...just a build up of things I guess. There wasn’t one particular incident. Like she never got into any serious trouble. Her grades weren’t that good, I know. She was . . . smart . . . she just didn’t try. Like, she didn’t care. And last year things weren’t too good with her roommate.

Another student friend of two leavers described the decision making process as a result of the balancing of the forces at play in her friends’ lives. Lois commented by using the term “weighting of things:”

For Joanne and Samantha it wasn’t so much wanting to leave. It wasn’t so much that they didn’t like [the school], you know. I don’t think it was so much that as like a weighting [sic] of things . . . . I never really sensed that they wanted to leave.

Ruby, a friend of another leaver, June, said simply, “I think it was a lot of things. She wanted a change of schools . . . . She had her reasons.”

Parents offered observations confirming that many issues played a role in their child’s decision to leave the school. Parents explained in more detail the attrition causes from the outset of the interviews than did the students. One parent, Hugh, explained how the presence of many factors, including a physical injury, greatly influenced his son Ralph’s decision to leave the school:

Ralph had made the . . . basketball team. He felt he had to get . . . in shape . . . this was a terrible set back for him because the wrist [injury] wasn’t improving . . . . I think that he was worried about that too. All of these factors came into being. There was [sic] many, many factors that came into bearing on that [decision to leave].
Another parent, obviously wished to be helpful but felt considerable difficulty in offering a concise explanation as why her child left the school. Deirdre finally exclaimed in a most exasperated and apologetic tone of voice, “Sorry. It’s awfully difficult to get to the bottom of this. It’s just so complicated!”

Teachers attested to the existence of many issues involved in a leaver’s decision making process. Pat, a teacher/housemaster in charge of one of the school’s student residences, spoke of the many issues at play for Barb, a student in Pat’s residence,” I can’t think of any one thing [reason]. I certainly talked to Barb’s mom and Barb.”

Another teacher, Candace, made a suggestion as to why sometimes it may appear that a single incident or issue represents the reason for a student’s withdrawal. People sometimes attempt to explain in the simplest of terms what instead appears to be a very complex phenomenon. Candace referred to one factor acting as the lightening rod which leads to a situation of “kicking the cat,” in the evolution of the leaving process:

Candace: [A teacher] at the school . . . was, certainly from the adult point of view, a bit of a lightening rod. [She] was gathering all the frustration that was milling around generally. It all got laid on [her] . . . All the anxiety about life . . . parents. About [the roommate]. It drew it all into that one point.
SG: It became the focal point.
Candace: Yeah.
SG: Interesting. We all look for something [upon which to take out our frustrations].
Candace: It’s called kicking the cat . . . . And [teacher] was the cat for a while. And it wasn’t anything to do with [the teacher]. [She] happened to be the one standing there at the right time at the right place.

Betty, another teacher/housemaster, reflected for a moment about attrition and concluded that for any of these cases of student attrition, the causes may be rooted
in background family issues, school issues, and/or personal issues. Betty explained:

With any of these kids, it could be anywhere from family problems, past present, family issues, it could be issues of the school . . . some of the challenges they face here, some of the pressures they put on themselves here . . . . It could be anything . . . difficulty living in a residential setting, difficulty with structure. I honestly think it’s a lot of things.

**Personal Background Issues**

Many studies (e.g. Allen & Nelson, 1987; Johnson, 1994; Pascarella, 1982; Tinto, 1993; Waldo, 1982) note that personal background plays a role in the decision of students to withdraw from their university or college. This study affirms that concept.

Each of the twelve student leavers had some issue(s) relating to her/his personal situation which influenced directly his/her decision to leave the school. As one might predict from the literature, these personal issues later had the effect of combining with other school-related factors, e.g. social, academic, or extracurricular in nature, which the student encountered once having enrolled in the school. The net result, of course, meant that the students decided to withdraw from the school.

Often, the students spoke initially about these personal issues in general terms, making reference to the issues with phrases such as “family things.” Then, as we entered into a more detailed examination of those issues, the interviewees elaborated upon the details involved.

Dennis, for example, first referred directly to his personal family problems. They were ever-present in his mind as he attempted to deal with his new school surroundings:
It wasn’t the school itself. It was several factors. It was like [my] home situation [that] I wanted to deal with. Some family things. Like they were going on at home before I even decided to go to boarding school . . . every single time I called home or wanted to go home for the weekend the problems were still there. And they were getting worse. So I wanted to be there to deal with them . . . once I looked back on it I realised how much it really did affect my life at that point in time.

Then, Dennis described the tremendous anxiety he felt accumulating as a result of these personal issues. He viewed it all as blocks piling up in his world to create pressures on him. The first block related to his personal home problems:

I think looking back now, I would probably say it was, well it was everything stacked on top of each other. The fact that I had bad home problems was like one block. And then the fact that all the people at the school, like, basically alienated me was another block which built on top of that, which kind of like enhanced everything else. And then the fact that I felt I didn’t belong either in [home location] or [the school] was another block. So it just all built up . . . together, it just amplified everything . . . problems at home which were constantly bothering me at school and at home.

For each of the twelve leavers, personal issues clearly influenced the way in which she or he attempted to cope with life while enrolled in the school. In order for a student to remain enrolled, as teacher/housemaster, Pat, stated, there must be something about the students’ personal constitution that allows her or him to be happy at the school, to find her or his own niche:

I think a lot of it [the students’ willingness to stay] has to do with whether they have what it takes to be happy here. And that’s different for everybody. We offer an awful lot. It’s whether they find a niche or not.

This supports Tinto’s (1993) assertion that as students find their niches, the closer they exist to the culture’s core group, the stronger the tendency for the
students to persist. The closer those niches become to the periphery, the more marginalised those students become and the greater the likelihood of their leaving.

The Nature of the Personal Issues: "Baggage" which Set the Stage for Withdrawal

Personal background orientations can take on a myriad of forms with regard to the issue of student persistence (University System, 1994). In this study a variety of personal issues set the stage as to whether a student "has what it takes to be happy here," as Pat suggested. In all but three instances, the student leavers themselves, or their families, spoke directly about the details of the personal scenarios involved. In the remaining three cases, the ones of the utmost delicacy, I learned the details instead from the student leavers' teachers and/or close friends.

These personal issues included parameters such as physical size, personality traits, age, maturity, habits of substance abuse, family home life, sexuality, and physical health. These issues ultimately figured into a pattern which prevented the student from joining into the life of the school and, ultimately, choosing to remain enrolled.

Stan, a school official, talked about the significance of this personal attribute dimension which prevented students from integrating successfully into the life of the school. This supports Tinto's (1993) position regarding student adjustment and its link to personality. Stan suggested that one could predict student withdrawal based upon personal attributes. Although Stan referred to new student leavers in his comment here, he in fact broadened the application of his thoughts by having included a returning student, Alice. Stan commented about affiliating into the school community and how personal "baggage" can interfere with that process so dramatically:
Coming as a new student, you’ve got to cut the mustard [prove yourself] . . . and number one is people skills . . . ahead of anything. Number one is that you have to have that open person, which Benny didn’t have. Alice had the stressful baggage [family issues from home]. And therefore they became difficult people to be part of a team or be part of a house or part of a family or part of an affiliated community. Their interpersonal skills which are affected...by their fears and by their self esteem affected so often by siblings and parents affects how they walk [carry themselves] in the house. There are people on the first day in a residence at a boarding school . . . [who, as with] the majority of people, come in the first day . . . [having] the sense that they’ll be affiliated [into the school community]. The fit is there . . . and in every one of these [the students who left the school], there was a message at the interview stage . . . you could predict [that they would leave the school]. Yes . . . you get the message [about affiliation concerns] number one because often there could be one significant, I hate to use this phrase, sort of unusual event in their life, because often it could be a separated family or it could be the pressure of the parents or it could be low self-esteem. [It] is very big in boarding schools for adolescents. Low self esteem is one of the biggest issues such that they come in and we don’t know [that they are this way] . . . . When you have people who are less communicative at the interview stage, you have a harder time reading them . . . and certain pressures come on students and they behave in a certain way and that can hurt or destroy their friendships [here at the school].

In this study, each leaving student carried some “personal baggage” into the school. These attributes revealed themselves as powerful forces in helping to draw the students back out of the school once they had enrolled.
Physical Injury

With Ralph, for example, so much of his baggage centred about a very serious physical injury which occurred prior to enrolment. This injury bore directly upon his sense of self and his contribution to the school. Ralph’s teacher, Rodney, made the following observation. This supports the assertion of Goldberg & Chandler (1989) regarding the importance to male students of athleticism as it pertains to their status among peers:

What I found out after the fact, as his advisor, was that Ralph and his parents saw him as the great family basketball hope . . . he really defined himself as an athlete . . . . When he came to us it was really unclear as to whether he’d play basketball again . . . so when he came to us he was very much a bundle of uncertainty . . . . He defined himself as a superior athlete more so than as a student.

Ralph enrolled in the school with that physical disability, one which totally hampered his ability to play his chosen sport. Ralph disclosed that, “I felt that my wrist wasn’t really healthy and I couldn’t really play basketball.”

Hugh, Ralph’s father, reflected upon his son’s feelings about this injury and the impact this had upon Ralph. He felt that he had let the school down very early in the year:

When he first got there I can remember him saying that people were saying that he was going to be the saviour of the basketball team. And I think that put a lot of pressure on him, more than maybe even I knew about.

In the context of that physical impairment, which saddened Ralph so much, he began to miss his home. This added to Ralph’s feelings of pain while he lived at school and at a great distance from his home. As Rodney described, “the kid had never left home before . . . . He’d never been away from his parents for longer than a weekend.” Jim, Ralph’s roommate, noted that Ralph longed to be with his father
again, and that Ralph “like, really missed his father. He got homesick really bad supposedly . . . . He was on the phone a lot, always talking to his father.”

*Physical Size, Maturity, and Age*

Physical size played a prominent role in two students’ decision to withdraw from the school. Size proved to be one of Todd’s, a student leaver, more distinguishing characteristics. His physical size clearly influenced negatively Todd’s enjoyment of school life, his affiliation, in combination with other personal attributes including his younger age relative to his classmates and the commensurate lack of mature social skills. All of this contributed to his decision to leave.

Personal attributes can have the effect of marginalizing students, placing them outside the mainstream of the student social circles. This places students at risk of withdrawing (Tinto, 1993). Stan talked about Todd and the effects that size, age, and other unique personal traits have upon students at the school as they attempt to cope within the school community in this regard:

He’s [Todd] a unique case because of his age and physical size . . . . and that’s huge. Size, it is [a] huge [problem]! . . . Being too big is a huge issue . . . . Whenever you’re on the extreme, the edge, of any program at he school, you’re at risk. So, the guy who’s the tallest left [the school]. The guy who’s the smallest, the guy who’s the fattest, the girl who’s the thinnest and bulimic. They have incredible sense of where they stand in their community and I would also say that your brightest student and your weakest academic student . . . . is at risk of leaving. Because the community may not be serving their needs as well. Someone has to be there by definition.

Candace talked about Todd in this light. Having physical, athletic abilities can be very useful in “fitting in” within the student culture, especially for an adolescent male (Goldberg & Chandler, 1989). With Todd, however, his obvious lack of such ability had the opposite effect. A boy with strong academic skills but
without any athletic skills will not go "nearly as far" socially:

He was . . . about nine feet high . . . and yet way too young looking . . . incredibly bright, [but] really non-athletic . . . a huge, gangly guy . . . number one, right off the bat, is the social [aspect of life at the school]. Fitting in . . . Todd was five years ahead of himself academically. Five years behind himself socially . . . he’d live with the computer . . . the girls thought he was scary. The boys . . . tried to avoid him . . . . The older kids are not going to sidle up to someone like that too fast . . . . Athletic prowess is an automatic acceptance factor whereas other things aren’t necessarily automatic factors. Like, being good at computers isn’t going to get you nearly as far.

Tony, one of Todd’s acquaintances, commented as to how Todd was actually shunned by others in the community. Tony attributed this to Todd’s lack of maturity:

He tried to get involved with the community, but it seemed that the more he tried, the more he was kind of shunned by the community . . . he would just say things that you would normally only say to a close friend, only he’d do it to people who weren’t close friends to him . . . and they’d kind of look at him like he was being odd. What he was trying to do was get a friend and didn’t know how . . . . I don’t know if it was age. It was certainly a factor, that’s for sure. Yeah, it was age. He was certainly smart enough to cope with the curriculum but maybe he wasn’t mature enough to cope with the social pressures.

Dave, another of Todd’s friends, mentioned Todd’s physical size, too. Dave refers also to Todd’s social maturity combined with his high level of intelligence as issues with Todd’s personal attributes.

There’s one thing that made him different from everyone else. He was a lot bigger than everyone in his grade . . . [size] can be a bit of an issue as far as acceptance, maybe a little bit. But it’s probably more [the lack of] emotional maturity. Although he had the raw intelligence to work at the [grade] level I don’t think he really identified with the grade . . . in terms of his social level . . . . I do think that he was probably lonely . . . he made a lot of weird comments but he was not
that socially capable so his comments were strange . . . . I guess it was a developing sense of humour . . . his voice was kind of funny . . . .
His mouth was disproportionately small . . . he was probably a pretty unusual intelligence for [that] grade.

**Physical/Athletic Characteristics**

Another male leaver lacked the same sort of physical prowess as did Todd. This, again in combination with other personal factors, placed the student very much at risk in the school environment. One teacher/houseparent talked about this boy as an “extreme.” He said that, “he was very significantly different.” This clearly worked against the boy’s feelings of comfort within the school. The housemaster talked about the ways in which this student’s lack of physical/athletic ability caused him humiliation in front of other male students:

He was overwhelmed by that [having to engage in the physical activity]. He had never done anything like that before. He said the other boys who were on the team always said that he wasn’t [doing the same task] as they had [to do]. They had experience . . . and he didn’t. So right then he was labeled a sort of a weaker [boy]. [His mannerisms were] very effeminate. Very effeminate. He didn’t have the strength or the savvy. At one point one of the other kids had to [assume his task]. And he felt really demeaned. And then they teased him about it . . . . He felt trapped . . . . He wasn’t athletic. So he wasn’t used to getting that kind of exercise. I mean . . . he was embarrassed.

**Mental Health**

In this study, issues of mental health substantially affected two students’ abilities to cope in the school environment. A housemaster addressed this issue with regard to two students. One of them questioned her own sexuality. As a result, she felt afraid, alone, threatened, and extraordinarily unhappy within the school environment. She found boys “vulgar” and yet did not feel comfortable around girls either. With boys always present, and with other girls socializing easily with those
males and with each other, she could not fit into circles of friends that had become established. Said one housemaster,

She was an unusual female . . . she found that her beliefs couldn’t be valued or respected in a setting like that. She had a lot of questions about her own sexuality, and was terribly afraid and unsettled. She felt threatened, not physically, but mentally . . . because she was surrounded by what she considered to be loud, vulgar boys . . . But she realized that only after she had been at the school a very short time . . . she couldn’t live like that here . . . And she was just so offended by having or being expected to be part of that [social] group that she simply couldn’t be part of . . . It was a terrible thing. A really terrible thing.

From another perspective, the student’s roommate, Lois, talked about what it was like living with this girl, and confirmed that at the same time, she also could not fit into the subculture of that girls student residence. Inside the residence was a very “feminine” culture, and therefore not suitable for her either. The other girls in the house acted as stereotypical females. Not fitting into a residence culture meant that this particular student had no female friends and so was uncomfortable at least “forty percent” of the time at school:

SG: Is that a problem? . . . . Does it matter when you’re living in a single gender house that you have no friends from the same gender? Lois: It would. Because you’re spending like maybe what, like forty percent of your time at [school] inside the house, right? And you’re with the girls. If for some reason she didn’t, I don’t know why, but she didn’t get along with girls well, or she didn’t associate very well with them, so, um, maybe she was unhappy for that percentage of time every day and then maybe that’s why she decided to leave. SG: So she just didn’t fit in with the girls. Lois: Well, she was sort of masculine. Very masculine . . . . The way she talked and stuff like that. SG: Does that mean that people made fun of her? Lois: Well, maybe. Because people, like, saw that and they’re, like, well maybe she’s different and they don’t wanna’ get to know her, kind
of thing. ‘Cause [the residential house] is kind of, the girls in there are your stereotypical kind of females . . . . Maybe if it was a different house . . . where there’s a lot of different kinds of girls, it might have been different.

SG: Oh, so you would categorize [house] as being a sort of particularly feminine house?
Lois: Yes. Yes. That’s how I see it.

Another student faced similar issues. His housemaster dealt with this student through many issues while he was at the school. In this school, being heterosexual and having a girl/boyfriend becomes challenge enough. Being homosexual created many more problems for the student. This made it horribly difficult for him to cope within the school culture. From the housemaster’s explanation, it became evident that this student was ready for a close homosexual relationship. This meant that he eventually had crossed a “line” of acceptable standards in the residence culture:

**Housemaster:** So he was another person who was very different. He had questions about his sexuality . . . . He really was having strong feelings that he was homosexual and had always had those feelings. And I don’t think a boarding school was the right place [for him] . . . . I think he was lost. I think he came to us lost. And I think his parents couldn’t help him because of what they’re going through themselves [socially] . . . .

SG: The idea of sexuality, is it particularly difficult to have those inclinations and survive in a boarding school?

**Housemaster:** I think so. I think it is. I think there’s so much confusion associated with adolescence as it is. If the person already feels that they are homosexual, maybe when they’re an adult and can sort of make sense of the world in general and have some privacy about their own preferences. But there’s no privacy at a boarding school for sexual preferences . . . . But I think in his case, he was on the edge of really looking for that one person . . . So it was already moving in this direction. So it was already beginning to be noticed . . . and no matter where you go, you’re seen. And the information is passed very quickly on. I’d say there’s not a whole lot of give for having sexual preferences . . . . There’s definitely a line. He’s on a road of self destruction . . . . I don’t think he had the
common sense to realize he couldn’t pursue his sexual preferences at a boarding school. I don’t think he realized that.

Emotional Sensitivity

Adriane’s personality trait as a person of extraordinary sensitivity placed her at risk of leaving once she found herself in the school’s environment. Wendy talked about Adriane’s unusual personality as being “other worldly” and as someone who needed a very strong sense of belonging to a community. This made Adriane very different from the other students at school:

Wendy: She’s another extreme. Highly sensitive . . . . She’s one of those people who is very spiritual . . . . She is very, very sensitive and very deeply affected by other people’s moods . . . very deeply. She’s also in her personality a very, very emotional person, very passionate person . . . . Someone like that needs to be in a highly stable environment where things are predictable . . . she needs a sense of home and she needs a sense of community. And she needs to feel safe. It’s very important for her . . . very unusual girl . . . . Extreme.

SG: What you’re saying to me is that this is not the norm.

Wendy: Yeah. Yeah.

Family, and Other, Issues

Five student leavers experienced family issues of such magnitude that these influenced their decisions to leave the school. Dennis talked about the fact that he had to deal with personal and family issues. This gave him a perspective on life, a background, such that he felt he could not share common feelings with others at the school. Tinto (1993) talks about this in terms of incongruence with the social elements of the school culture. Dennis dealt with things by turning to drugs. This “baggage” compounded his problems enormously:
And I come from such a different background from most people at [the school] . . . . I’ve seen a lot more, been through a lot more shit than most people my age . . . . Experiencing life in general . . . . I’ve lived with many [people] who’ve been total assholes. I’ve just seen a lot of shit, more than most [people my age] have seen . . . it just gave me a different outlook on everything....my parents don’t care about me. I had a drug habit when I went to [the school] . . . . I had low self esteem . . . . It’s not fun . . . . I was so messed up . . . . I was going downhill.

Samantha, too, had family issues with which to deal. These clearly had a strong impact upon her while she attended school. Two of Samantha’s friends talked about that family situation. Sally saw Samantha as one who liked the school but felt a strongly negative influence from her home life:

Things were going pretty badly with her family situation and [she] wanted to get home and sort of try to . . . sort that out . . . things are really tough for her.

Paula confirmed this about Samantha. Paula referred to the nature of the problems as very unusual, very different, “pretty crazy:"

Samantha loved it here but she had some pretty crazy family problems . . . . She could have had other problems too. She really did like it here but she needed to sort out her family problems.

Samantha spoke about that family situation in more detail. That very negative feeling from home had a profound impact upon her wanting to leave the school:

I was just sometimes unhappy. Then I’d start thinking about leaving . . . . It wasn’t unhappiness with the school. It was unhappiness with the like outside situations, things that were occurring at home . . . . I was beginning to feel more and more uncomfortable coming home on the weekends, which I was doing a lot of . . . . every weekend I’d come home and we’d fight . . . . When I went back to school I’d be unhappy about that.
Andy, Samantha’s dad, talked about the family life having created circumstances that made the “fit” not right with the school at that time. This may relate to Tinto’s (1993) reference to the lack of fit arising from a lack of social congruence with the preferences and values of her peers. Andy commented that in this case, the family dynamics contributed to that lack of congruence for Samantha:

A different time, different circumstances, you know, Samantha and [the school] would have been an excellent fit. In some ways last year it was still an excellent fit. The times and circumstances were just not right. The circumstances of the family situation.

June experienced difficult family issues in her life as well. Her parents’ marriage had just disintegrated prior to her re-enrolment in the school. The traumatic effect of all of this upon June while at school when she found out about the situation from her mother caused June to “panic,” in Wendy’s terms. This led to a marked decline in June’s desire to achieve at school or to be interested in the work she was supposed to accomplish.

Family issues played a slightly different role in Alice’s life at the school. She felt under enormous pressure to be at the school, to do extremely well, and to please her family in the process. This proved to be a strong factor in her decision to leave the school. She had made herself an isolate, as Tinto (1993) refers to it. Stan explained the family pressures in Alice’s life as having negatively influenced her experience at the school and caused her to isolate herself within the school:

When Alice came to the school there would be a fair amount of pressure on her, both [from] her personality and from the parents... When she arrived at the school she had a very competitive personality and had to be the best, had to be recognised as the best. Therefore [she] became very high maintenance in the residence by way of being demanding and putting pressure, being verbally aggressive . . . . Therefore she became isolated at times . . . those factors . . . were already at play before she came . . . her social/emotional difficulties at the school exacerbated an
already stressed relationship with the parents . . . huge [pressure], in her personality, very competitive, had to be the best, had to be seen to be the best, had to be seen to be the most popular . . . many of these students come with some [personal] baggage.

Alice explained in her own words the kind of pressure she felt to achieve while at the school, including from the school itself:

I was under a lot more pressure . . . to do well . . . . I don’t know, I guess I just found there was pressure coming at me from every way to, you know, do well and live up to every promise that I’d made to be good and stuff and I don’t know, I found that was a little too much pressure . . . my parents didn’t really believe in me . . . I tried to come up with some ways that I could change who I was and I kinda’ took the wrong way out . . . I’d say it was pressure that I put on myself . . . I saw myself as never doing as good as I could, no matter how hard I was trying . . . maybe in terms of support from my parents and what I saw for myself, it wasn’t all there.

Alice went on to say how she felt threatened by her family in the process while at the school. This added to her pressures:

I found it kind of funny how my parents seemed to use [the school] in a way just because, I mean when I wanted to be there if I wasn’t working hard enough or if I was not, you know, being up to standard, they would use it as a threat to say, you know, well you’re not going to go back there next year or we’re going to pull you out of there right now.

Alice’s mother, Angela, acknowledged that pressure on her daughter. Angela, however, viewed the pressure as primarily a result of Alice’s personality. This made it difficult for her to cope with residential school life:

I want to start here by saying that ninety percent of the problem here is Alice’s and not the school’s. Alice is really lacking in maturity and she is by nature impulsive and very independent minded and she can be wilful and she can be stubborn and you put all that together, she’s not a good candidate for boarding school . . . . I just knew that she could not keep this up forever.
Betty, Alice’s housemaster at the school, confirmed the pressures under which Alice was operating while at the school:

Alice had a real difficult time dealing with the pressure that was coming from herself and from her parents in order to produce quality work . . . academically, socially, in the [curriculum] program. Every facet . . . A lot of pressure was on her.

In a different way, Adriane referred to family issues having directly affected her life at the school and acting as a strong incentive for Adriane to withdraw. This, as Adriane explained, acted in combination with many factors. She became utterly desperate for social reassurance, which she could not find at school:

Partly it . . . had to do with, I guess, my mom too. "Cause I never got to see my mom when I was at boarding school. And so I was really, like, our relationship was not that good . . . because I was like losing touch with my friends at [school] and things were fading there . . . like, I needed some reassurance. Like, I didn’t know what I would do. I think I was just like really scared. There was a lot of things inside of me. I was sort of like freaking out about everything. And everything was happening so fast. And I couldn’t do anything about it.

Later Adolescence

Comments about, and from, five of the leaving students indicated that later adolescence, and the maturity it can bring, played a factor in the strength of the attraction away from the school. In some cases, the older “leaving” students had a longer time period in which to develop strong friendship relationships back at home prior to enrolling. In other cases, these older students needed to expand their social horizons, and experience the freedom gained by living at home and being with old friends on a daily basis.

One leaver’s friend, Dave, still at the school, talked about Joanne’s departure in terms of her age and maturity. At her age, she felt socially “trapped” at the school:
Dave: The freedom. The partying . . . She felt trapped at [the school].
SG: Is that a common feeling here?
Dave: Yeah . . . The little rules . . . There’s just a lot of rules that by the time you’re eighteen or nineteen you don’t feel like you should have to adhere to. Some people get tired of it more quickly than others . . . I’ve heard a lot of people say well my parents would let me do it and I’m old enough to make decisions for myself so why should they tell me I can’t?
SG: Is this a prevalent sense or is it one or two people?
Dave: This would be quite prevalent, I think, in the senior grades . . . 12, 13, maybe a little bit in grade 11 . . . A lot of people felt that they have outgrown [the school] . . . And they can live with it when they’re in grade 11 and they’re 16 . . . but by the time they’re 18 they’re just itching to leave . . . really itching to leave

Joanne’s father, Mario, and her mother, Linda, talked about their daughter’s age, too, in this context. Joanne had reached adulthood at the age of seventeen:

Mario: When she went to [the school] she was at a certain age and a bit hard to live with occasionally. But she’s much more mature now.
SG: Do you sense a difference between a fifteen year old and a seventeen year old?
Mario: Oh, she’s an adult . . . she looks after herself.
SG: And . . . do you think this was a factor in any way?
Mario: Oh yes. She’s changed a lot. She’s stronger
Linda: Yeah. I do think [so].
Mario: She didn’t [say] it [directly] but I think she’s very aware of that . . .
Linda: But I think that . . . by the time she’s seventeen going on eighteen, she likes the more sophisticated environment . . . I think the first year she absolutely loved it . . . she could hardly wait to go back . . . And somehow that came unstuck . . . partly she’s just older.

With that maturity, for Joanne, also came a strong desire to enjoy the social life she had enjoyed at home rather than at the school. Two of her friends, Dave and Paula, talked about Joanne’s social needs. Paula noted that Joanne’s social life at home “was very important to her and I think it was too much of a switch for her
to come here.” Dave confirmed this by suggesting that “her [Joanne’s] image was so important . . . it [the image] couldn’t be more opposite ends of the spectrum between what she was [at home] and when she was [at school].”

Adriane also talked about her age and the effect it had upon her need to leave the school. She saw herself as having matured and said, “I think I’m just more interested in life right now . . . . Maybe just, I guess, growing up a bit.”

Samantha explained things from her perspective regarding the age at which she came to the school. The age factor made it too difficult for her to remain at the school. Socially, she had her adult-like relationships established already at home. Had she started at the school at a younger age, things likely would have worked out differently for her regarding her tenure at the school:

If I had started going to [the school] in grade nine, I don’t think I would have come home either. I think I just started the wrong year . . . . Just because I think when you start in grade eleven, or anywhere in your senior years, you’re gonna’ have a very good group of friends from where you’re from . . . it’s inevitable that you’re gonna’ have like one friend or group of friends that you’re gonna’ stay in touch with for a long time. So that’s difficult . . . . But I think if I had’ve come . . . in grade nine, I would’ve been at [the school] right ‘til I graduated . . . . I think as you grow older the bonds between you and your friends become deeper. It’s more of an adult relationship. It’s really sort of difficult to leave that.

June’s maturation played a role, too, in her decision to leave. She soon “came of age” and found herself wanting to leave because she had matured. June and her mother, Deirdre, explained it all as a natural development:

June: Like, going to [the school], I absolutely loved [it] . . . . I did. At first. By the end of two years, I wanted to be in [a different] city again . . . . I was two years younger then . . . .
Deirdre: Yes, it’s a teenage thing . . . and she hadn’t got to that yet.
June: I didn’t want to go to parties and stuff on the weekends . . . at twelve . . . and at fourteen, I did . . . I changed a lot during the . . .
years I was at [the school] . . . . I hit my teenage years sort of as a natural development

Insecurities

Other personal factors constitute a form of emotional “baggage” which accompanied the departing students. These factors, because they are of an internal nature and seem to be in the natural make-up of the students concerned, appear vague in nature and so become more difficult to describe. Sarah, for example, enrolled in the school as a girl with rather unusual insecurities and personal fears. Julie, Sarah’s mom, commented upon the insecure nature of their daughter and how one teacher told the parents that Sarah’s insecurities may be more than the school could accommodate:

She [the teacher] said something to the effect that she felt Sarah was really insecure. And that she didn’t know if the school would be able to get her through the situation, if they would be able to get her enough support or whatever to get her through her feelings of insecurity . . . . I guess we all sort of knew that she was insecure. She has a nice bubbly personality but that’s not always the secure personality.

Sarah talked about her own personality. Her personality required her to find support through a special “companion” when sleeping in a hotel. Without the social equivalent of that companion at her school, Sarah felt all the more insecure, “It’s like . . . I sleep with a teddy bear. If I go to a hotel and don’t bring my teddy bear, I can’t go to sleep. It’s kind of like that.”

Sarah reacted to an incident at the school. Her reaction seemed unusually severe, given the rather benign nature of the circumstances from other peoples’ perspectives. In the context of Sarah’s personality, however, the incident took on significant proportions in her life. She became unusually reclusive. Her parents explained:
Eugene: Another kid it wouldn’t have affected . . . And then she started to withdraw [psychologically] . . .

Julie: Sarah has a lot of fears that are really quite, if she ever tells you some of them, are really quite humourous because they’re so very childish and she knows that.

Priscilla had issues at play in her life that seem to arise, at least in part, from her background. At home, she was accustomed to a very independent lifestyle. She may not have been ready for the kinds of changes necessary for living in a residential school. Tinto (1993) referred to this as encountering an entirely new set of social skills appropriate to the residential life. He said that for such people, adjustment becomes especially stressful as they encounter academic as well as social forms of adjustment. This certainly applied to Priscilla. Her dad, Don, explained it as taking a “mammoth leap” psychologically:

I think the big step for us was going from pretty, ya’ know, [a] pretty distinct independence situation . . . no siblings at home, run of the house . . . and then going right from there not only into private school but right into boarding school without having ever been to summer camp or away from home or any of these things, which I think was a . . . mammoth leap.

Priscilla’s house parent, Betty, talked about the way Priscilla behaved once at the school. Betty had great difficulty in understanding Priscilla’s needs as a student because Priscilla became so sad and socially withdrawn:

She [Priscilla] seemed really sad all the time. She slept a lot. And I think without labelling [her] too much, she may have been somewhat depressed . . . . There just was no spark in her eye . . . I felt at a loss of words [with her]. I didn’t know what inspired her.

Don, Priscilla’s dad, and Jillian, her mom, commented upon their daughter’s state of mind. Don suggested that he had to play psychologist in this matter. His daughter was very quiet, and revealed only small amounts of information and only
when prompted by the issues arising during the interview process. Priscilla confirmed Don’s and Jillian’s explanations of Priscilla’s state of mind while at the school:

**Don:** You were so determined to not let homesickness get you . . . you didn’t have any release like at all. You weren’t showing any emotions of being homesickness [sic] and she was, you know, everything’s great and I’m doing this and I’m doing that and I think, in retrospect, that pressure built up . . . and then it built up and built up and you kind of said to hell with it.

**Priscilla:** Yeah . . . . It was sort of like that. ‘Cause when I went I knew . . . that I’d sort of have to adjust or whatever, and so I just [let on that] everything’s fine you know it’s great . . . . So, the fact that I was having a hard time adjusting, I just kind of ignored that . . . I expected it and so I just kind of ignored it when it came. And then after a while it never really changed. You know, it’s like wait a minute here! . . . When I realised that I hadn’t adjusted that well, and stuff, I just, I just was like ‘K, no more. I don’t want to try anymore . . . .

**Don:** I think it was a pressure build up. And when she snapped, she snapped. And that’s the downside of the practical toughness.

Sally, a friend of Priscilla’s and one who lived in the residential house with her, reflected upon Priscilla’s behaviour while at the school. Sally talked about Priscilla’s obvious personal discomfort with living among large groups of people, a theme which Priscilla discussed herself in more detail as related in Chapter Five:

Like, Priscilla was in my house and she had a lot of emotional problems . . . . She was sort of compulsive. She was just sort of unhappy in general, had never been away from home. I just don’t think [she] knew how to deal with living with a group of people.

Lack of personal confidence played a role, too, in Joanne’s life, particularly when combined with her competitive personality and status as an older student. Her house parent, Betty, explained that Joanne “didn’t have the confidence to go
ahead with a number of things,” and that she lacked in the confidence necessary to risk failure at a social level.

Mark, a friend of Joanne’s, contributed to our understanding her personal profile. He noted that Joanne felt more comfortable among different types of people in her home village:

Joanne was a totally different person here than she is in [her home town] . . . the whole [school] atmosphere [here] . . . . Just different people all together . . . she just wanted to be back in that whole . . . scene . . . like, there’s the biggest party in [her home town] this weekend and we’re stuck here!

Paula, another really close friend of Joanne’s commented on the issue of personal confidence as it pertains to life within this school. Paula noted that confidence lies at the root of being able to be yourself and, so, accepted and comfortable within the school. Paula felt that Joanne lacked this confidence and commensurate comfort level while enrolled at the school:

I think you can be whoever you want here, as long as you’re confident in that. I think that’s probably where Joanne was wrong [for here], wasn’t able . . . wasn’t confident that she wanted to be like that here. I mean, Joanne . . . had a pretty good confidence problem . . . she didn’t feel comfortable being herself here.

A third friend, Dave, commented, too, about Joanne. He felt very certain that “she had low self esteem.”

Strongly Independent Personality

Barb, a departing student, exhibited yet a different personality trait. Barb demonstrated unusual independence. This characteristic made for a difficult existence at the residential school. This ultimately helped lead to her decision to leave as she explained:
SG: Would you consider yourself *particularly* independent as a young woman?"
Barb: Um, yeah. Yeah.
SG: Would you consider yourself . . . unusually independent for a [the school] student or about typical?
Barb: Um . . . I guess I’d probably be more independent I guess. Just ‘cause of my own background . . . . Yeah, I usually choose what I want to do . . . .
SG: I wonder if that would make a difference to the way you were feeling.
Barb: Yeah, I think so. Yeah.

Cathy, Barb’s mother, elaborated upon her daughter’s personality. Cathy noted that Barb seemed determined to create conflict and get her own way:

Barb, as a social being, is not prepared at this point in her life to be a follower, only a leader. If she did not join in, it would be because she is not prepared to move through the ranks in order to have a turn at being in charge. Her personality, at this point in her life, I think . . . [she] continued to have trouble sorting out her relationships with the other girls . . . [Barb has] such intense passions in terms of spending most of [her] time fighting and making up with whomever. Her own streak of being demanding; dominating; opinionated; seemed to occupy most of her time and thoughts . . . . Barb always has *somebody* on her hit list.

Pat, Barb’s house parent, concurred about Barb’s personality. Pat said that Barb’s personality probably left Barb inclined to be unhappy no matter where she attended school:

Barb was never terribly happy here. And she was sent here partly because of her behaviour . . . . Barb didn’t take to structure well, didn’t take to rules well. She’s really strong headed girl. And that has obviously positives and negatives . . . . But Barb’s the sort of person who might not be happy *anywhere* . . . the grass is always greener somewhere else . . . . I think it’s fair to say she was a pretty negative sort . . . she complained about other girls. And she was very catty. There was a lot of negative undercurrents with Barb. She wasn’t happy
with a lot of things. She didn't like a lot of people . . . . But she was one of those people I wondered if she'd be really happy anywhere . . . . Barb stepped on people. Insulted people. Even those really close to her. She wasn't one to tell people their positives or to boost people around her. That was maybe a self esteem problem of her own coming through. But she did step on others to make herself feel good.

**Summary**

Many factors played a role in students' lives such that the students decided to withdraw from the school. In no case did any one single reason cause a student to leave. Similarly, no single event triggered that decision. Interviewees conveyed that each student brought personal characteristics and background issues with her or him into the school upon enrolment. These characteristics and issues played a profound role in the decision making process to withdraw from the school.

In the next chapter, we investigate the powerful influences within the school culture which the students encountered. The interaction between these cultural characteristics and the students' individual characteristics ultimately created an environment such that the twelve students felt that they must withdraw from the school.
CHAPTER FIVE

School Related Issues

It’s your friends and your social life at the school that make the difference, I think. If that loses its savour, it’s hard for you to find it that interesting afterward. (Mario, a parent)

The interviewees established that each of the students who enrolled in the school brought with him/her some personal “baggage” at the time of enrolment. Thus, each student possessed some personal attributes and/or experienced some form of personal issues in her or his life which placed that student at some risk of withdrawing once having enrolled in the school.

In each case, several factors from within the school culture interacted with those personal issues in each student’s life in a way that prompted him or her to decide to leave the school. The factors which ultimately resulted in each student’s departure had a cumulative effect upon each student. The students ultimately withdrew from the school after having been enrolled for varying lengths of time. The shortest time enrolled was three months; the longest, two full school years.

This chapter examines the details of those interactional (Tinto, 1993) factors. Information provided from the interviewees showed patterns, theme groups and subgroups, which serve to illustrate the forces at work in the students’ lives once enrolled.

In this study, one broad thematic category embodies the overwhelming majority of data as explanations of attrition among these students. In each case, reasons classified under the umbrella heading of “social,” people-related issues, constitute the most prolific and most profound explanations for attrition among these twelve students. Social issues include the concepts of affiliation, friends, housemaster and teacher relationships, roommates, old friends back home, new
friends' beliefs, rules, personal privacy, and the socially sheltered nature of the school. Other comparatively minor issues follow in the discussion. These include extracurricular concerns, academic matters, and issues of physical space.

We begin with an examination first of the concept that students must affiliate with their school in order to become integrated into that community, and so, to choose to remain in it. Then, we examine the details of the related social issues which prevented the leavers from affiliating with the school community.

Affiliation

The literature on attrition refers to the necessity for students to feel connected, affiliated, with other students and their teachers in order for the students to persist. Students must feel it worthwhile for them to invest psychologically and they must feel valued in their school. Social bonding, then, becomes a prerequisite to academic engagement in the school (Arhar & Kromrey, 1993).

In this case study, the departing students failed to affiliate with the school community. These students became marginalised within the school after having enrolled. As a result, they left.

Stan, a school official, remarked that the retention of students necessitates that they feel connected with the school community. Personal issues, he said, the psychological "baggage" the students brought into the school with them, can and did hinder that affiliation:

If . . . a student feels affiliated to the school [he/she will stay here], but because of her [or his] personality and the way she [or he] came in, we have a harder time affiliating a lot of these people [who left]. There are reasons why we, as a school, could not cement the healthy, caring relationships . . . . So, for some students we do not achieve our mission.
Many studies (e.g. Arhar & Kromrey, 1993; Eaton, Mitchell, & Jolley, 1991; Gallagher, 1996) demonstrate quite clearly that adolescents possess a strong need to affiliate, to belong, to bond, with other people, and particularly with their peers. Other studies show that in order for affiliation to occur, adolescent students must find great social support from their friends (e.g. Gallagher, 1996; Goldberg & Chandler, 1989; Tinto, 1993). Students must also find a good relationship with teachers and/or other adults within the school community (e.g. Arhar & Kromrey, 1993; Tinto, 1993). We now examine the leavers’ experiences at the school from these perspectives.

The Need for Peer Friends

Stan affirmed that affiliation at the school necessitates finding a friend. Adolescents, and particularly those attending school away from home, need someone to trust and help them with their own confidence. As for the quality of that friendship, Stan likened it to the kind one experiences with a spouse, a very close connection built upon trust and mutual support:

Number one, affiliation means having a friend. That’s the huge issue for adolescents . . . . Why is it important having a friend? We all need someone whom we can trust, who we can confide in, basically someone who makes us feel good about our self . . . in our relationship with our spouse, it’s there. We make each other feel good. We know the support, the crutch that provides in a relationship. There would be something about human nature which is calling out for that...there is a need for us all to feel wanted, respected, to feel human dignity...I think it’s that fundamental. Particularly when you’re away from home. When you’re away from home, many of the securities are gone and how are those replaced? I would say as a residential school, [this school’s] strength is the healthy, caring community . . . that helps replace home . . . when you can break down systems and replace it with family, the student is happy.
Other interviewees affirmed the importance of this concept of affiliation by referring to it as social bonding. Lois, a long-term student, explained how much bonds of friendship with other students mean at the school. Once established, breaking those bonds makes it extremely difficult to leave the school. Lois commented as to what it is that keeps students enrolled. Without hesitation, she remarked, "for a lot of people who have formed bonds here, it’s definitely your friends. Definitely. It’s a hard place to leave once you’ve committed to it. Really hard."

Friends, what they mean to students at the school, and how having friends, or not having friends, and of utmost importance, the quality of the relationship with friends, played a clear role in the leavers’ decisions to withdraw from the school. All twelve leavers said that they had friends in the school. Nine leavers, however, reported that they really had no close friends at school. The remaining three leavers had closer friendships but of a very negative character. For these latter three, the friendships did not serve them as the positive and supportive, spousal-like relationship needed for persistence within the school.

Students spoke passionately when they chatted about the importance of having friends. Sally referred to the tremendous support mechanism provided by having friends at the school. For her, having friends became the core to one’s existence at the school. Friends act as surrogate family, without which a student can feel very lonely and unloved:

Sally: It’s really easy for people to feel really lonely and excluded and unloved . . . . It’s really easy to get lost and swept up . . . And if you don’t have a great group of friends, there’s really no one else to go to.
SG: Are friends important here?
Sally: Oh definitely! ‘Cause you don’t have your family to fall back on here.
Donna made it clear that friends play the most important role in keeping students in the school. She felt that having friends makes the difference literally between surviving at the school or not. Sometimes, when a student feels inclined to leave the school, connections with friends still at the school keep the decision in favour of remaining enrolled:

Actually, they [friends] are the most important thing . . . Quite a few people wanna’ leave but the only thing keeping them back is friends . . . If I didn’t have my friends... I don’t think I’d be half as happy as I am now . . . . They’re always there for you. You can relate to them and stuff . . . Especially at a boarding school if you don’t have friends you can’t get away from everybody and stuff. If you lived at home you’d be able to go home and not see everybody but at [this school] you’re always around these people and so you need friends here. I just find that you have to have friends to survive here.

Two boys, Brad and Jim, allowed that it may be possible for some people to exist happily in the absence of good friends. Brad talked about friends, however, acting as the missing family support mechanism while students attend school away from home, especially when life at the school seems to absorb students’ thoughts so completely that they forget there is a life outside the school. Having problems with friends can collapse a student’s social world around her or him:

Friends are really important here ‘though. Because you live here. It’s hard to get away from things. So you live with your friends. Like you’re constantly surrounded by, like if you’re having problems with your friends it can feel like your whole world caving in because it does completely surround you. You can’t just go home to your family.

Jim referred to the notion that watching everyone else at the school have friends could really “eat away” at someone who did not have such friends. This is particularly true at the school where people tend to be close with their relationships:

I guess you could [exist here without friends] but it’d be hard because everyone’s pretty well friends with everyone . . . we’re really close
here... if you don’t have any friends and you’re walking around by yourself in the halls and you see all these groups of friends, ya’ know talking and laughing and stuff, that could eat away at you.

Adriane, a student leaver, talked about peer friends as fulfilling a much stronger need in her life than do adults. Given a set of circumstances, Adriane would always find support and strength in her friends rather than an adult. Friends, she said, understand you and do not become judgmental:

I think when you’re growing up, through your whole life even, for sure, you need your friends. Like who else [are] you gonna’ go to? Like when you watch those cheesy movies in health class, [imitates movie dialogue] ‘well, like, you can go to a counsellor or a teacher’. But, like, when you’re a teenager you don’t want to go to those people. You look towards your peers. When you’re like, you know, in dire straights or you just need a hug, or something. ‘Cause they understand. They really do. Like, sure your parents have probably gone through some of the same problems as you have but they’re on a different level. Now, like, they really can’t relate... friends are just easier to talk to. And they’re not going to judge you usually. Whereas I know that if I’m in... a sticky situation and I go to my parents about it, they’re sort of judging me. They have to pull the whole parental thing. And they get cross usually, ya’ know. And they have to... give me advice but criticize me at the same time. But friends don’t usually criticise you if you need help... they can comfort you.

The quality of Adriane’s friendships at the school declined dramatically during her enrollment time. One of her friends began to dominate all her other friends. Adriane, the extraordinarily sensitive girl about whom one housemaster said she needed to feel the sense of family, became very lonely instead. She felt that she was “fading out of the picture:”

I was really, really lonely... I felt like nobody had any time for me anymore... I always felt like she [her friend] was competing with me. And I’m not a competitive person. So it brought me down, you know... it just seemed like a lot of my friends were very like drawn to
him and I felt like the person kind of like on the outside of the circle. So I was kind of feeling pretty lonely . . . . And pretty depressed. And crappy . . . . And people recognized it. They saw me like, you know, fading out of the picture. I wasn’t hanging around with my friends any more because he was with them. Like, it was noticed.

At her darkest social times, then, Adriane knew she had to get out of the school. At one time, she loved the school. Then, with the fading of her friendships, she referred to the school in extremely strong negative terms. She called the school a “hell hole” from which she had to escape. The loneliness she felt without her friends became so intolerable that the school, “became this big bad world whereas before it was this happy place that I loved . . . . It’s like I gotta’ go back to that hell hole . . . . I was so scared.”

Other leavers also felt a lack of supportive friends quite profoundly. In his rather depressed state of mind, given his physical injury and subsequent lack of identity as an athlete, Ralph used the term “abandoned.” He felt much more comfortable at home with his family than he did at the school where he felt totally alone. The support he required came from home, not the school. Ralph said, “up there [at the school] I felt, like, stranded . . . a lot of people tried but they couldn’t be with me all the time.”

Ralph’s advisor, Rodney, confirmed Ralph’s lack of connection with other students. Rodney also made the point that “you can’t legislate friendship.” It takes time to make friends and doing an activity alone meant that “he didn’t really connect because he didn’t know anyone . . . he needed some other kids.”

Even with time, however, Brad, a student who knew Ralph, suggested that with Ralph’s injured wrist, he could not participate in the athletic activities. Skilful athletic participation, especially for males, can play an important role in their degree of peer acceptance in a school (Goldberg & Chandler, 1989). At this school,
clearly, athletics play a vital role in school life for the students. Without being able to participate, too, Ralph had very little to do to occupy his time, especially on weekends, as Brad noted:

> It is a really hard time with a physical ailment. Especially here . . . Sports are a really big part of school . . . it’s just a big part of life here . . . [An injury] can leave you with very little to do . . . sports, they give you something to do.

Todd confided that he had only one “sort of close” friend. Actually, Todd admitted, that friend was not really so close after all, “I had one sort of close pal. But not that close.” Candace, a housemaster, noted that Todd lacked friends and was either unwilling to earn them or did not know how, given his lack of social maturity:

> Yeah, he didn’t have any friends, but he was a real loner. I think he obviously wanted friends, that’s something we all need, but that, uh, [he] wasn’t willing to earn them, or didn’t know how to.

Dave disagreed with Tony’s earlier assessment that Todd had been shunned at the school. Although not shunned, neither was Todd embraced. He became more of a social isolate, as Gallagher (1996) refers to the phenomenon. Todd could not assimilate into the school community. He needed to be embraced by the student community but was not. Students were friendly toward him. Students, however, were not friends with him. Dave noted,

> He [Todd] wasn’t shunned or anything. He wasn’t embraced. He wasn’t made fun of or anything like that . . . people were friendly to him. It’s just that people didn’t really befriend him that much . . . he was just like ‘oh hi, Todd.’ Probably everyone treated him like that and so, whereas most people would be nice to Todd, but then [they] would have their [own other] group of friends. I don’t know that he
really had a group of friends . . . . I can’t think of anybody who would know him well.

Todd made a rather melancholy comment about his life at the school. He referred to his social life within his school house and said that he did not understand why he had no life there, “I had no social interaction whatsoever in the . . . house. I have no idea why.”

Dennis experienced feelings of very low self esteem. He came to the school burdened with terrible family problems and then found no connection with students at the school. Dennis felt like a “freak” at the school. He said he did not feel that he belonged there, nor did he feel that he belonged in his home town any more either. He felt “in limbo.” All the while, his family issues kept plaguing him and he was drawn back to his home town where he thought he still had friends:

Cause I went from having lots of friends ta’ having everyone kind of look at me like you’re a freak . . . . So that’s why I went home every weekend . . . . Every weekend! . . . . What I did to compensate for the fact that I had no friends was like, well where do I have friends? OK, I have friends at home. OK, I’ll go home. And I’d go home but since I wasn’t with my friends on a daily basis, it didn’t feel like, I was still friends with everyone, it didn’t change that, but it changed the feeling. Like we weren’t as close because I was away. I wasn’t there during the week . . . . It made it worse . . . it put me in a kind of limbo. I didn’t feel like I belonged at [the school]. But I didn’t feel like I belonged in [my home town] anymore either . . . . So it just all built up . . . together, it just amplified everything.

Dennis did reveal, finally, the thing for which he was looking all along. He felt the basic need for acceptance which Gallagher (1996) described as being almost as strong as the need to survive. Without acceptance, Dennis felt horribly alone. He needed someone to care about him, to ask how he was doing. In the absence of
that at the school, he left and went back home, finally, to confess some substance abuse to his family:

I was pretty much waiting for somebody to catch me. No one did. I wanted somebody to basically come and care for me and say what’s going on, ya’ know what I mean? I didn’t want somebody to be like ‘you’re doing drugs, you’re fucked up.’ . . . And I like went really far down and got really fucked up . . . by the time I told my dad, I had already pretty much dealt with it . . . ‘Cause I was having a really, really rough time. And I was really, really depressed. I felt really alone. And there was no one there . . . my [family] was having such problems with life at home and stuff. It was scary . . . No one noticed.

If the quality of friendships became close enough, the relationship acted toward pulling students out of the school if the friends themselves thought about leaving, or even graduating. June, for example, had a friend in her roommate. When the roommate suffered some personal problems of her own and had thought of leaving the school, June could not have imagined staying at the school either. To June, it was unthinkable to stay in the school without the person she considered her best friend, someone with whom June would spend all hours of the night talking. June and her mother Deirdre reflect upon the depth of that friendship and its implications. June stayed on at the school longer, but it was her other friends who actually made that possible for her:

Connie [her roommate] had some rough times. And I had to be there for her. I was worried about her . . . It made her want to leave. I couldn’t imagine not having her as a roommate . . . she was my best friend . . . I guess I wanted to leave too. I considered it . . . But I had a lot of support from other people by this time. We were just . . . a big gang.
With Adriane, the fact that the friends whom she still had at the school were leaving, some for graduation, made the decision to leave clear in her mind. Without her last friends to help her through, she decided to leave the school too:

Part of my [my school] was Jody [her graduating friend]. Having Jody here . . . she was the one person who really understood me . . . especially when I [also] found out that Samantha wasn’t coming back. And Sandra wasn’t coming back. It just kind of solidified everything. And I’m, like, *fine* [I’m leaving too]!

Sometimes, too, friendships existed but were based on a great deal of negativity rather than mutually positive support. This had the effect of building upon itself in two cases. While the friendships were close, then, the negative quality of them worked against the students’ desire to persist.

Both Barb and Alice said that they had good friends at the school. Betty, Alice’s housemaster, talked about the fact that in reality few of those were truly close friends. Alice, who felt enormous family pressures while in school, associated with these other students with whom she entered into disciplinary problems at school. As Alice’s mother, Angela, mentioned, her daughter and friends got away with too much in terms of bad behaviour. When they did get caught, however, they got the “book thrown at them.”

Barb’s housemaster, Pat, commented that the relationship between Barb and her friends was led by Barb and built solely upon negativity. Barb, with her unusually negative personality, in effect, insulted and “stepped” upon the other girls, including her “close” friends, possibly to build her own esteem. In so doing, she had built a “wall” around herself socially, as Pat, her housemaster, remarked:

Barb . . . was very catty. There was a lot of negative undercurrents with Barb. She wasn’t happy with a lot of things. She didn’t like a lot of people . . . . Her roommate [Debbie] was . . . her best friend . . . I often worried about Debbie. Barb stepped on people. Insulted people.
Even those really close to her. She wasn’t one to tell people their positives or to boost people around her . . . she did step on others to make herself feel good. And that was part of the cattiness and gossiping about the other girls . . . . That is the worst! . . . . I’d say in the end . . . . she was certainly building a wall around herself. I don’t think she wanted to get close to many people . . . . I think she embraced Debbie because Barb saw Debbie as weaker than her. She certainly stepped on Debbie.

The Adult Relationship: Housemasters and Teachers

Students need to establish a good rapport with an adult, or adults, in the school. This relationship becomes strongest when developed outside of the classroom and in the more informal aspects of school residential and social life (Arhar & Kromrey, 1993; Tinto, 1993).

In this study, Pat, a housemaster, substantiated the need for bonding, and explained the necessity not only for peer friends, but also for the student to establish a relationship with a person on the teaching faculty. Pat spoke in terms of meaningful, quality time together. She mentioned that if that bond is strong, students will not risk breaking it by leaving. This bond, she said, represents a far stronger relationship with the school than does an academic interest:

Pat: I think every kid needs to find one significant person that they bond with. And probably at least one best friend. And probably one person on staff. And that can be anything from a coach to a [residential] don to a housemaster to a music teacher. You know, someone that they spend what they consider valuable time with. And somebody who’s helped them see the light, or whatever it is. But if they have one best friend and one staff member that they bond with, then I can’t think of anybody we’ve lost that was like that, to be honest.

SG: You didn’t mention whether they get the right subjects [in their academic timetable].

Pat: Oh no. That’s not important at all! [laughter]. No. It isn’t. It’s
important to their parents. It’s important when they’re signing up to join us.

Five of the leaving students explained that while they got along well, for the most part, with their housemasters, these relationships had little emotional depth for the students. In other words, no bonding took place.

Sally, a student of long standing in the school, explained why that housemaster bonding role remains critical for students’ happiness in the boarding situation. She referred to the housemaster as fulfilling the role of a parent. Given the young age of many of the students, and even for the older students, they need someone to take a special interest in them, to act as a “mom,” or “dad,” as the case may be:

It [the housemaster role] would be more like a parent. A lot of people are still really young here. People sometimes tend to forget that. When I was in grade nine I think that’s what made me the happiest. My housemaster was amazing and she’d bake you muffins and come and ask how you were and take a genuine interest in your life. If things weren’t going well, she’d notice it and take you in and talk to you about it... mine [housemaster] in grade nine really was a mom for me... I’ve heard people say that before. Genuine people... who you really feel you can talk to... It’s important at all ages... If no one’s really there to take a special interest in you, it’s double easy to get lost and confused.

Adriane had a good relationship with her housemaster, but only in Adriane’s first year at the school. In the year she left, however, that relationship, from Adriane’s perspective, had deteriorated. Her housemaster spent less time with Adriane when she needed the support the most. Adriane felt “really, really lonely...I felt like nobody had any time for me anymore.” In contrast, Adriane used to talk with her housemaster, “all the time the year before.”
Benny described his relationship with his housemaster as “I got along with him fine.” Benny did admit, however, that “um, I found it hard to talk to him.” Jim, Benny’s roommate, and another housemaster, Wendy, help to explain the nature of this relationship.

The way the residential house operates on a social level is determined very much not only by the students in that house, but by the tone set by the housemaster. They both revealed that Benny’s relationship with his housemaster never evolved into anything more profound than “getting along” with him, given Benny’s non-athletic background. Mandy, Benny’s mother, described his housemaster as “Mister Sports Person” and “he was a real kind of man’s man.” This is not the kind of person with whom Benny would feel comfortable in establishing a deep relationship, a bonding.

For Barb, the independent, defiant girl, after having had a very enjoyable year in her first year at the school, the desire to leave in her second year began in the first week of school. Barb had an argument with her new housemaster, Pat: “It [the wish to leave] just started right there [on the first day.] ’Cause, like, the first week I got into this big argument with my housemaster . . . . I never really liked that house.” Anne, Barb’s friend, described Pat as “very strict” in her house rules. Barb reported feeling very uncomfortable with that style of house management when compared with the less strictly enforced rules in the house from which she had moved within the school in the year previous.

To further compound the discomfort for Barb, the relationship with her housemaster’s, Pat’s, spouse also became strained from the very beginning of the school year in which she left. Her spouse forms a “pretty integral part of the house.” Barb was a smoker of tobacco, a banned substance at the school. As Pat
said, "Any smoker in the house is terrified of [my spouse]. So there’s never a relationship with [him]."

Alice explained that she did have a bond with her housemaster. Alice, however, also mentioned that she needed more parental-type of support than she actually received from that relationship. She found support instead through the telephone line with her parents. If she had experienced more support of the kind she sought from her parents, Alice said she may have viewed differently the pressures she felt while at school:

For sure . . . . [with her housemaster] we’d have late-night chats and stuff. There was kind of a bond there . . . . I just really didn’t know how to deal with them [pressures] . . . . I mean I talked to my mom quite a bit [on the phone] . . . . I think if I’d seen them [my parents] everyday and known that they were there, it probably would have, I don’t know, I probably would have seen the pressures in a different way.

Ralph expressed his lack of affiliation through describing his loneliness. While he did have a housemaster with whom he had close contact, that relationship was insufficient in terms of sustaining Ralph in the absence of peer friends. He found things particularly insufferable after classroom hours and on the weekends:

There wasn’t really that many people that I talked to. I talked to, like, my [housemaster] . . . he really helped me a lot 'cause I was really down. I couldn’t stay there any longer 'cause I was so down . . . . After school, guys would go out and play baseball but I’d have to sit and around and do nothing.

The Teachers

Student leavers referred to their teachers with words expressing much fondness for them. Some students had favourite teachers, of course, and no student reported having left directly because of the teachers or any one teacher.
Lois made a comment which summarised the general comments of four of the student leavers. When any of Lois' friends leave the school, they miss the teachers very much because of the supportive and friendly relationships established between teachers and students at the school:

That's something that people miss is their relationship with teachers here. Definitely . . . . Your teacher . . . isn't just your teacher . . . . You have more of a relationship with your teachers here.

Eight leavers, however, mentioned that while they respected and liked their teachers, these students could not develop a close relationship with them. This comes as a result of the way in which the students perceived the role of a teacher rather than because the teachers did anything to promote this feeling.

Priscilla and her father expressed this sentiment well. She was simply used to teachers, from her previous school, who stand up in front of the class and teach. That is all they do. A teacher is not someone whom Priscilla would approach willingly and to whom she would just speak. She would never have given a teacher that opportunity to get closer to her socially:

I'm used to teachers just being teachers, coming from public school . . . . That's why I think I don't really talk to any teachers at [the school] . . . my experience with teachers is just people who stand up in front of the class. I don't think of teachers as someone who I would willingly go up to and talk to . . . . I mean . . . the teachers I had had previously were flakes . . . . I've had a few teachers which were really nice and they were good teachers but my teachers before going to [the school] were just people who stood at the front of the class and yelled at us and left. So, I'm not used to teachers as people who I would talk to.

Adriane explained that she had a friendly relationship with her teachers. This, however, was insufficient as a reason to have approached any of them to express her need for assistance with a non-academic problem. Typical for the students, Adriane
viewed herself and the teachers on a “student teacher level.”

As Dennis referred to the relationship, teachers represent academic issues to him. For social matters, he needs to know someone better than simply at that level. For him, he is the student; the teacher remains the teacher, even where that teacher may also be a housemaster:

But I find that if I’m gonna’ confide in somebody I have to be involved in more of their life than just on a school [level]. With teachers, you’re only involved with them on an academic level. I find that I have to know these people more than just as a teacher . . . . He’s a teacher. I’m a student.

Sarah, the extremely insecure person, needed to know someone, including any teacher, on a much deeper level before being able to confide in a teacher with any problems Sarah encountered. She did not just regard the relationship with any teachers anywhere as merely that of student and teacher. Indeed, Sarah thought of all teachers as, “the bad ones.” Teachers, to her, represented people who would tell Sarah that she had not tried hard enough to do her work:

SG: How do you regard teachers?”
Sarah: The bad ones! . . . Yeah. Like, I don’t know how they were as a child. I don’t know if they were smart or not so smart or whatever. But I knew that, I thought that, they don’t understand that I don’t understand the work.

Samantha really enjoyed the teachers, and related well to them, and felt quite comfortable with her teachers. She described herself, however, as a stubborn person and one with great family problems. She would never have thought of letting a teacher get emotionally close to her. Samantha did not wish to sit down to discuss her problems, or anything else, with a teacher. Even when her housemaster, Wendy, attempted to talk with Samantha about her family issues, Samantha would not do so:
I wouldn’t have even thought about going to talk to someone . . . . A couple of times [my housemaster] asked if there was something wrong. Of course I said no . . . . It’s just not my personality to sort of sit down and when I’m in the middle of something and discuss it. I’m very stubborn . . . . It’s not that I didn’t feel comfortable talking to her or anything like that.

**Gender Differences in the Bonding Process**

Three housemasters spoke about gender differences in the bonding or affiliation process. In the views of these interviewees, females and males look for different ways in which to connect with other people. In keeping with the findings of Woo & Bilinsky (1994), Wayne suggested that boys find this connection through doing things together. If a boy is not doing things with others, if he is on the "outside looking in," perhaps because he is too different from the other boys in what Wayne referred to as a homogenous group of people, that boy is in danger of leaving the school:

Boys have a peer group connectedness. But it’s related to . . . doing things together. 'I’m on the hockey team. And I’m going to be on the hockey team next year. And I talked to the coach’ . . . . So boys have a different relationship. If you’re a boy . . . who’s on the outside looking in . . . those guys are in real danger of quitting . . . if you’re too strange. You have to be within the norm. And if you’re outside of the norm, you’re in danger of losing it [a connection with the school]. Because it’s a pretty homogeneous crowd, ya’ know. And if you’re not right down the [middle, it’s difficult to stay].

Given their physical and emotional characteristics, the four male leavers in this study all found themselves too different, “too strange,” compared with other students. Benny, Todd, and Dennis found themselves alone much of the time. Each, by reason of background, found himself on the “outside looking in,” as
Dennis, too, said of himself. Ralph, on the other hand, was willing to engage in athletics but his injury placed him on the margins of acceptable participation. He, too, felt extremely alone as he watched the other boys.

Candace spoke about the difference between boys and girls with regard to the bonding experience. While students of both genders require that connection, she commented, boys find it in different ways and places than do girls. Boys, she confirmed, find affiliation through activity. Girls find their connection, their "survival" in her words, through emotional relationships. Girls, Candace pointed out, are sensitive and require a great deal of personal attention on a daily basis in order to find that bond:

*Especially* for girls, obviously for boys, but it's not as sort of tangible, the need, is for that connection with at least one adult, at least one good friend, hopefully more, and perhaps one coach. But with girls, that's the essential of their emotional survival . . . . I think males need it as well but they will look for it more . . . on a hockey rink, the team, comradery, group . . . that sort of stuff . . . . For women to survive, it's much more emotional . . . . Girls are gonna' be much more finely tuned to each other, hence have a much more intensive experience and they're gonna' pick upon the good and the bad . . . . Girls are extra sensitive, need a lot of attention . . . from a housemaster. They like to feel connected . . . . They need to feel cared for on a daily basis.

Wendy mentioned, too, that girls and boys look for different things in terms of this bonding process. For the girls, "the goal is relationships." Wendy referred to those relationships as, "the ties that bind . . . for girls." Girls' residence housemasters must be highly empathetic. Without that, "you're going to have a huge turnover of girls in the school. That will be one of the factors. It won't be the only one. But it's a critical one." In this study, six of the eight female student leavers did not establish that all important close, meaningful relationship with their housemasters.
External Forces: Old Friends Provide a Strong Pull Back Home

Tinto (1993) talks about the detrimental effects upon persistence which external forces can have for students. These forces can take many forms. The forces become particularly potent when in the form of ties with friends back home. As Tinto says, too, the occurrence of this situation with the old friends living off campus makes for an even stronger pull away from the school.

It became apparent that eleven of the leavers had extremely close and strong ties with peer friends back home, outside of the school. These ties proved to be much stronger than any friendships developed within the school. Even the twelfth student, Barb, had relationships with friends at home. She spoke with them by telephone while at the school but felt particularly close to no one given her personality.

Lois, a student friend at the school, talked about some of her friends at school actually receiving their identity from their friends from home. Lois felt this was true of students from particularly large urban centres. Coming to a smaller urban centre, such as the location of the school, can cause students to feel a loss of personal identity because it can be tied so strongly to past relationships:

All of a sudden you’re not this person as you relate to all these other people, you’re just this person, you know? . . . . For Joanne it was a bigger part of who she was . . . . [The reasons for leaving were] more being with her friends . . . your network is who you are in [larger urban centres].

Joanne and her friends at the school mentioned how many good friends Joanne has in the school to this day, even after having left. Yet, as her parents said, her really close friends, her “soul mates,” remained back at home:

Mario: I’m not sure she’s friends with people at the school to the same degree as her friends [at home].
Linda: She loves to go [and visit the school still, but] . . . her true soul mates are a couple of kids [long term friends from home] . . . they go back to grade eight.

Samantha felt a very strong need for friends, especially given her family situation. She had her friends at school, and said that they were as good or close, as those at home. Samantha’s focus, however, remained on finding support from her friends at home, rather than at the school. She needed to keep up with her friends at home. Her affiliation with home was stronger than with the school:

I just need to be with friends. Like I have four or five really good friends that I’ve had since grade 7. And I didn’t want to lose touch with them . . . . I felt more and more like I was out of it . . . it’s just that they were here. I was there [at school].

Both Samantha and Joanne left the school regularly and often during the school year to be with family and friends in their old home towns. Joanne reflected that she was not at the school enough to get the most out of it. When she did spend time there, she loved it, but she was home too much to remain connected with the school community. Joanne did not even realize at the time how much time she was missing from the school. All she knew was that she felt increasingly disconnected from it:

I wasn’t there enough to be getting anything out of it . . . it took me two weeks [after being away] to get back into it . . . . I was never . . . at school. I wrote my Greek exam here [at home] . . . . when I went back I was really trying to catch up on my work . . . . I didn’t know what was going on at [the school] . . . . So, I just didn’t do anything. I just worked and came home . . . . you really can’t be at a boarding school and not be there.
Although Alice commented that she had good friends at the school, she admitted that she would revert very often instead to talking with her old friends back home. She did so especially when things got so frustrating for her at school that she could not talk to her parents for support. Typically in this study, those old friends encouraged her return home:

Sometimes I'd be so frustrated with everything I wouldn't talk to them [her parents] at all in a week . . . I talked to my friends at home quite a bit. I kept in touch with them really well. I talked to them a lot. Yeah, I missed them, I missed them a lot. I heard of all the fun they were having . . . and just about the good times they were having on the weekends . . . I missed it . . . . They encouraged it [coming home].

Brad, Adriane's friend at school, talked about the way in which Adriane regarded her old friends at home as compared to her school friends. He said she had, "a lot better friends . . . more friends that were really good friends, at home."

Adriane confirmed that in fact her old friends gave her what she needed the most. They made her feel needed and wanted. She had lost that feeling from the school. She felt terribly insecure and shunned by her school friends. So, she turned to her old friends again:

I didn't want to lose my [old] friends . . . . Like, I needed some reassurance. I was like losing touch with my friends at [the school] and things were fading there, I didn't want to lose my friends [at home] . . . . I needed some reassurance. Like, I didn't know what I would do. I think I was just like really scared. There was a lot of things inside of me. I was sort of like freaking out about everything. And everything was happening so fast. And I couldn't do anything about it. And I felt like my only friends that were really there for me were the ones in [home town] . . . . I was just hearing like come on back to [your home town]. We want you here. You know it was kind of a confidence builder and it made me feel better about myself. The big thing that I said to my dad was like you know my friends don't care at [the school]. But my friends in [home town] do. Like I was always saying that.
Todd expressed his views about missing his old friends on a fairly simple level, and yet one which had great meaning for him at his young age. He would hear his old friends talk about doing things they used to do together. Todd missed that ability to just be with his old pals again. Then, when he tried to reach out and connect in a similar way with a friend at the school instead, Todd was met with rejection:

Sometimes I could hear them [old friends] talk . . . how they went to the movies and always went on bike rides and trips with each other and stuff like that. I really felt jealous . . . . I can never go out with my friends to a movie. I once offered Charlie [a boy at the school] . . . to go to the movies [with me] . . . he said, 'sorry, sorry, I have to do this.'

Priscilla’s story represents perhaps the most profound and poignant example of the pull back home from the old friends. Two of her friends at the school talked about how they observed Priscilla as she failed to connect at the school, instead remaining connected with friends at home. Donna, Priscilla’s roommate, watched Priscilla as she stared for hours at carefully arranged pictures at her dormitory desk of her old friends. Priscilla actually cried at times like that. Brenda also noticed that Priscilla’s friends were all she talked about. Brenda suggested that Priscilla actually lived vicariously through her friends, an indication as to how strong remained that bond back home. Brenda found that Priscilla made a concerted effort to refuse to connect with the school. The bond remained firmly attached to old friends from the beginning of the year:

She [Priscilla] missed her friends a lot at the beginning of the year. That’s all she talked about. So, she talked about her friends all the time. She was sort of living through them . . . . So it was getting to
the point where she refused to have fun. She refused to even try to get into life at [the school].

Priscilla and her parents, Don and Jillian, talked, too, about the strong attraction back home of Priscilla’s old friends. These are the people from whom Priscilla was so glad to move away from by going away to school, and yet the bonds there were so strong that these became the very people whom she missed so much. Priscilla admitted that this bond, “kinda’ had a lot to do with it, kind of [my] adjustment to school.” Priscilla’s mom, Jillian, referred to their old peer friendship as, “almost like a family, brothers and sisters, you know, they’re so familiar with each other.”

Roommates

Studies indicate that student interactions in residence situations with their roommates in particular affect students’ adjustments to their life within the school (e.g. Carey, Hamilton & Shanklin, 1986; Hawken, Kelly & Duran, 1990; Lapidus, Green & Baruh, 1985; Lovejoy, Perkins & Collins, 1995; Tinto, 1993; Waldo, 1982; Waldo, 1984). Generally, coping well in that relationship means that students show better overall adjustment to school life than would be the case otherwise. A negative impression from the roommate experience can lead a student to feel social alienation, rather than affiliation.

In this study, eight of the twelve student leavers associated their roommates directly with the students’ lack of happiness at the school. As for the remaining four student leavers, Todd had no roommate. Barb said she became close friends with her roommate. Barb’s housemaster revealed that, far from being a bonding process, Barb based that relationship upon dominance, verbal abuse, and used the relationship as a self esteem booster for herself. Priscilla found her closest, but by
no means close, friend at the school in her roommate. Dennis remarked that his roommate did not treat him badly but neither did they establish any real rapport.

Really then, for all of the student leavers who had roommates, those relationships played a very important role in the lack of affiliation with the school. In six cases, the roommate directly caused a problem with the formation of this connection. In the other five cases, the roommate simply added nothing to the feeling of connection when, instead, the roommate may have added so much toward helping the leaver to make that affiliation with the school.

Students, housemasters, and parents all shared the notion that the roommate issue remains a critical one in the students’ lives at the school. One housemaster, Candace, said that roommate relationship represents, “a hundred percent. It’s everything. That’s what I think of it.”

Brad emphasized that the quality of the roommate relationship becomes critical to having what he called a “good year” the school. If conflict exists between a student and his/her roommate, the stress level can become very high, resulting in a “terrible year all around.” He noted that,

getting along with your roommate really, really does help make your year go a lot better. I’d say its critical. If you have a roommate that you don’t get along with at all, then I think you’re pretty much going to have not a terrible year all around but it’s going to make things really, really stressful.

Matching roommates on the basis of concrete lifestyle characteristics tends to result in better compatibility and roommates who participate in the same activities together (Lovejoy, Perkins & Collins, 1995). In this study, Jim, a former roommate, talked in clear terms about the importance of the roommate relationship at the school in this regard. He mentioned that roommates spend a lot of time together. Their habits tend to “rub off” on each other. A bad relationship there can
ruin a student’s time at the school. Getting along as friends, or “buds,” as Jim called it, because they can share interests, becomes important. Without that, although they did not actually fight with each other, Jim’s relationship with his roommate faltered:

SG: Is a roommate a big deal at the school?
Jim: Yes. Of course. You sleep with them and, you know, . . . his habits would rub off on you and your habits would rub off on him. If two people were really, really different, then . . . they would just start rubbing the wrong way. And it could really ruin your time here. You see that in a lot of places where people are always fighting with their roommates.

SG: From what I see, while you say you didn’t fight, I can’t imagine you being the best of pals either.
Jim: No. We didn’t, like, get in arguments and stuff like that but we didn’t really get along like best of buds [pals] because we didn’t really have that common interest.

Benny and his mother, Mandy, spoke about how significant an issue the mismatch of him with his roommate became. Benny and his mom explained that with nothing in common, including about basic lifestyle habits and different ways of interacting with friends, Benny felt he could not stay in his own room.

Benny said about his relationship with his roommate, “well, it was OK. We didn’t have any major fights or anything.” With different backgrounds, tastes, and interests, as Benny said, different “everything,” Benny never returned to his dorm except to sleep. When asked why he was never in the residence, Benny told his housemaster, “well, sit in my room for a day and you’ll understand.”

Benny’s friend, Diane, explained that if one has a roommate with whom one can live, that is a “gift,” in Diane’s words. She expressed how awkward not being able to return to one’s dorm can be for a person living at the school. The dorm becomes the student’s home. Even if the roommate relationship is not abusive, the
discomfort one feels extends to the very place one calls home:

I just don’t think he felt comfortable. He didn’t take anything different from [anyone else]. He just wasn’t comfortable with this sort of atmosphere . . . . I think that they just clashed . . . . if you’re lucky enough to find a roommate who you get along with, that’s a gift right there...Because your room is your home for the year. You don’t want to feel uncomfortable every time you go into the place where you sleep and change and keep your private things.

In another case, Jim graphically described how unsavoury, negative, and detrimental the roommate relationship can become, based upon lifestyle habits. He described Ralph’s poor experiences with his roommate’s personal hygiene. The relationship adversely affected Ralph’s sleeping habits. Without sleep, coping with life became so much more difficult:

I know Ralph didn’t get along with his roommate. I know that . . . eh . . . they had disagreements . . . um . . . like . . . well . . . this may sound silly but Ralph would come up [to my room] and go ‘oh my room just stinks! I can’t sleep at night!’ ‘Cause [Ralph’s roommate] had foot odour problem and it really stunk up the room! You could smell it throughout the halls . . . . Sleep’s an important thing ‘cause it deteriorates you slowly if you have a lack of sleep and it slowly chips away at you. You become less tolerant of things. Little things annoy you more and turn out to become big things.

On other levels as well, this incompatibility with his roommate made an enormous difference to Ralph’s affiliation with the school. Ralph mentioned this in terms of, “my roommate and I were kind of opposite people. It would have been probably better if I could have had someone I could really talk to.”

Ralph’s parents, May and Hugh, alluded to that difference too. They referred to the roommate issue as a factor in Ralph’s having left the school. As with Benny, Ralph and his roommate did not share the same interests:
May: Ralph’s roommate didn’t have the same interests that he had and I think that was another problem.
Hugh: These are all factors that played apart . . . the person [roommate] was telling Ralph about what he [the roommate] was doing for the summertime . . . [i.e. using drugs].

Adriane described the roommate relationship as “everything.” She explained what it was like to live with someone else. The relationship involves complete sharing and living in close quarters. It became for her a familial relationship:

It’s like one of the major things. For me. You share basically everything with them. You end up sharing everything with them . . .
It’s a really important thing . . . ‘Cause like living in such close quarters with somebody. Like, it’s kind of hard to hide from them, you know. And they’re supposed to be there for you. It’s kind of like having a sister.

Adriane experienced terrible and on-going problems with her roommate. The problems arose with Adriane’s perception that her roommate had manipulated Adriane’s friends against her. The roommate lived a troubled existence and experienced many psychological problems in coping with life. Adriane’s mother, Laura, explained how Adriane wanted to come home and blamed the need to do so on her roommate. Adriane referred to the roommate relationship in the same term as did another female student. Living with a roommate becomes very much like a marriage. The problem for Adriane, however, was that unlike a marriage, she could not escape from the roommate problems. Adriane said that an unwritten, marriage-like “vow” exists at the school regarding roommates:

Laura: the phone call . . . she said mom I can’t stand it here any longer. I’ve got to get out of here. I said why. Is it the school? She said no, not the school. It’s [the roommate]. I said she can’t be that bad. Mom, how would you like to come home every night and spend the night and sleep with and have to talk to and live with someone you really didn’t like . . . . I’m stuck with her.
Adriane: Yeah. You’re living in close quarters . . . . It’s kind of like you made this unspoken vow to get along and be there for each other no matter what happens. 'Til graduation do us part!

The intensity of the roommate issue for someone looking for bonding, or affiliation, took on an even more extreme nature in another case. One boy’s housemaster explained that problems arose given that boy’s personality and background, that he longed for a close personal connection with someone and had homosexual tendencies. Through circumstances, short lived, the school matched this boy with a roommate who made his social connections with people in a sexual manner. The boy in this study, his housemaster noted, was by far the more innocent person but powerful forces at work resulted in he and his roommate engaging in a passionate embrace in the dorm. The housemaster found them this way. The school expelled the roommate. Then, the remaining boy felt a horrible lack of any connection with anyone at the school. As the housemaster said, the boy became, “heartsick. Heartsick . . . . He was the innocent. He didn’t know what he was doing . He was [saying] ‘I need a friend. I need a connection.’”

In contrast, in one case two other roommates Alice and Sarah, both leavers in this study, got along extremely well. Both girls attested to that. In fact, they chose each other as roommates. The roommate situation, however, caused a problem for them both in the views of the parents of both girls, and of another student in the school. The two girls shared a close but powerfully negative relationship. They always found themselves in difficulty with discipline issues.

Alice bubbled with enthusiasm when she described the close nature of her roommate relationship with Sarah. Alice felt closer to Sarah than to anyone. Alice called the relationship, “amazing . . . . We were best friends right away.”

Alice’s mother, Angela, however, noted that both girls were immature.
Further, Sarah was always complaining and wanting to be taken home. This, said
Angela, helped to colour negatively Alice’s perception of the school:

She had a roommate who hated the place and was also pretty immature . . . and called her parents three times a week to ‘please come and get me.’ Alice kept saying ‘try and work it out’ . . . . They all got sort of involved in it . . . they’d sit around and have bitch sessions and all complain about their parents [who] were expecting too much and nothing was ever good enough . . . . Sarah was crying and said she’d had it. She was leaving.

Cory, a student at the school who knew both girls, affirmed that the relationship between the girls was strong and very negative. In Cory’s view, however, Alice influenced Sarah adversely, not the other way around. Still, the two girls, Alice and Sarah, seemed to identify themselves by always getting into difficulty:

They always got into trouble together so I don’t think a housemaster would want to deal with the two of them together . . . . That’s what they did [i.e. get into trouble] . . . . And I always thought that Sarah was really influenced by Alice . . . . Alice came into her life...I never thought Sarah would get into trouble just by herself ’cause she was a really honest person. I always thought that Alice manipulated her.

Sarah confirmed that it would have made a difference to her perception of the school and her success therein had she lived with a different roommate. Sarah, however, remained uncertain as to how things might have been different for her had she lived with a different roommate. She thought only that, “it would have made a difference . . . . I would have either said OK who cares I’m never going to be as smart as you [a new roommate] are or I would have tried harder.”

In another particularly poignant case, Joanne’s close relationship with her roommate caused enormous strain on Joanne. Her roommate became seriously ill. The symptoms of the illness were subtle at first, but Joanne noticed them right
away. Joanne regarded her roommate as her closest friend and tried to talk with her about seeking help for her condition. Joanne was told to stop “bugging” her roommate. Other friends of her roommate, however, were indeed allowed to talk to others about the roommate receiving help, but Joanne was precluded from doing so by the roommate herself.

This placed enormous emotional strain upon Joanne. She talked about the extraordinary stress:

She was my roommate for . . . years . . . she was also my closest friend. And I saw her getting sick before anyone else did . . . . And I saw that from a mile away . . . . It was awful. 'Cause now, I know that [another friend] gets to talk to someone about it and [the boyfriend] gets to talk to someone about it. But . . . I was told just to stop bugging her. It wasn’t making things better . . . . I’m the one who lived with her. I knew she was sick! . . . . This was a huge deal . . . . It was drainful. It was hard.

Betty, Joanne’s housemaster, emphasised that with the closeness of the roommate relationship, such a medical problem with one roommate puts enormous strain upon the other. Betty mentioned that this situation, “puts a lot of pressure on the roommates to . . . lend support and just be there. It’s really tough on the people close to an individual [with this illness] . . . . That’s hard.”

To complicate matters, when the illness issue became more widely known, nobody, not even Joanne’s parents, thought to ask about Joanne’s feelings in coping with this issue throughout the ordeal. Joanne declared that this really exacerbated terribly her existing feelings of dismay. Joanne felt ignored and stressed. As she explained, this situation clearly helped to finalize Joanne’s decision to withdraw:

And everyone was so focussed on [the roommate], which they should be, but at the same time, I, you know, only towards the end of the year did [my housemaster] say ‘how are you doing?’ I said thank you! I’m
fine [sarcasm]! . . . It was hard . . . it [the roommate issue] pushed it over the edge [the decision to leave].

Joanne did not realise at the time how much of a negative effect this roommate issue had upon her. She only realised this when someone, in this case her housemaster, Betty, thought to ask Joanne how she was coping at the time. Then, the full impact of the stress brought about by this issue finally became clear to Joanne:

It was something you did not discuss . . . it was not a thing you should raise . . . Oh it really bothered me! . . . She needed help . . . it’s hard for me to tell [how I was feeling at the time]. But finally when [Betty] asked me [how are you doing], I was like, wow! Finally, that’s what makes me feel better! I needed someone to ask me that . . . . I really understood how much it had upset me and frustrated me . . . . I said wow, this has really bothered me.

Joanne’s mother, Linda, confirmed that Joanne had referred to the roommate issue has having caused a serious problem for Joanne at the school. Linda mentioned about how Joanne talked so little about the situation but likely came home so often to be with her old soul mates. Joanne needed to escape from the intolerable living condition with her roommate. Linda holds no doubts that the roommate issue played a major role in her daughter’s departure:

I still think the roommate issue [is of prime concern]. We were slower . . . to pick up on [it] than we should have been. Joanne told us in the early winter that [the roommate] had come back and she was [ill] . . . and my reaction, frankly, was to worry about [the roommate]. So Joanne would call and I’d say how’s [the roommate], how’s she doing. Somewhere in the mid-winter I’d ask and she’d say I don’t want to talk about [the roommate]. I’m sick of everybody asking about [the roommate] . . . . But I still think that had a hell of a lot more to do with it than we realize . . . . She wanted to keep coming home. I think if we’d focussed on it [roommate problem] earlier, it might have been different . . . . I think we all dropped the ball.
Samantha talked about how she had thought, and hoped, that coming to the school meant that she would have a roommate with whom she could become best friends and chat long into the night. Instead, her roommate proved to be someone compared to whom Samantha was very different. They did not argue and did respect each other, but they were opposites in interests. This proved to be good for getting work done, which Samantha viewed as a positive in their relationship, but resulted in a complete lack of the kind of friendship Samantha needed and to which she looked forward prior to enrolling. Samantha expected to find a roommate with whom she would, "be best friends... the whole boarding thing. Which didn’t happen... I guess when I thought of boarding I thought my roommate would be a girl exactly like me and we’d chit chat all night.”

Samantha’s housemaster Wendy, however, revealed how detrimental an effect the lack of compatibility with her roommate had in Samantha’s circumstance. Far from being simply different from each other, Wendy described the roommate Francis as “kooky,” something which Samantha clearly was not, especially given the family circumstances with which she needed to cope. Had Samantha been allowed to have had a better match for a roommate, more of a soul mate, and a more mature, senior roommate as opposed to a younger one, that would have made a big difference to Samantha’s happiness at the school:

If she had had a roommate that she really liked. She had Francis, that kooky [roommate] . . . it was not a match. I mean it was OK, they tolerated each other. But she was hardly a soul mate. So if she could have had a senior as a roommate and if she could have been a senior, that would have made a huge difference.
Students New to the School: Finding New Friends

Six of the twelve leaving students in this study, Samantha, Todd, Dennis, Ralph, Priscilla, and Benny, enrolled as new students to the school. Three of them left the school within five months. The remaining three chose to remain until the end of the year.

Van Maanen & Bartley (1985) speak to this issue of newcomers to an organization. In order to integrate successfully, new people must learn about and respect the new group's physical setting, historical forces, and the demands, expectations, and social organization. New people must also learn about and respect the patterns of interaction between people, as well as the objects, events, and activities of the new culture. Issues pertaining to physical setting and activities arise later in this chapter. The far greater concern in this study for the new students became the social interactions.

Stan explained that finding a sense of connection by making new friends at the school does not just occur naturally. New students do not just find each other. As Stan said, when they enrol, the students are strangers to each other. The fact that the new students are still so young, essentially still children, enhances the difficulty inherent in that process:

**Stan:** Whenever someone comes into a new environment, they don’t just find each other . . . they *don’t* find each other. That’s the huge issue. You’re strangers . . . [for example,] when you go to first year university, and there’s a lot of parallels here to first year university, and people’s coping with that. Back that up! They’re not 19! They’re 13 and 14 years old. Wow! Because university has a hard time with orientation drop-out rate . . . you back that up to 14 years old.

**SG:** They’re children.

**Stan:** Absolutely.
For new students, making friends at the school remains the critical link for finding that connection, bonding, or affiliation within the school. The necessary friendships must exist as more than just passing acquaintances. The friendship(s) must provide that mutually supportive relationship necessary for survival at the school, as one student referred to it.

Five of the new students in this study experienced integration difficulty in that they could not make friends at all. The remaining new student, Samantha, experienced instead a social mis-fit within the school structure because she could not gain adequate access to those patterns of interaction which she needed. For Samantha, this difficulty related to school rules and will be discussed later in this chapter.

Tony confirmed that the real social issue at the school is not being able to find a friend. This is different from the way Tony perceived social problems at public schools wherein the social difficulties experienced would be of a more aggressive and meaner nature. At this school, however, the issue becomes one of social ostracization instead:

The kind of social problems that you’d have here are quite small in comparison to social problems that you’d have in a public school. [Here] it’s like the ostracization, not being able to find a friend. In public school . . . It would be more teasing and a lot meaner. This one is more of a neglect than an attack.

Dennis explained how vital it was for him to find friends at his new school. It became very important to find them early in his enrolment. He affirmed this need which Gallagher (1996) describes as akin to basic human survival in adolescents. Dennis felt that he, and all new students, needed these friendships, and needed to establish them very quickly, in order that he and others not be considered “losers” or “loners” by their peers.
Dennis also emphasized immediately the significance among his peers associated with belonging to a group. Gallagher (1996), Eaton, Mitchell, & Jolley (1991), and Wehage, et al. (1989) all mention this group mentality to which Dennis referred. School membership for adolescents means that students belong and feel accepted as valued members of a peer group. Whereas group issues arise later in this chapter, Dennis’ comment here illustrates that in his perception, for a new student finding a friend at the school also meant instant acceptance into a group:

They [new students] want to find people that they can call their friends as fast as they can because they don’t want to be left out . . . . Well, everyone immediately is starting the year [and] looks for friends as fast as possible. They don’t want to be, like, deemed a loser or deemed like a loner. So they just like they make as many friends as fast as possible and they all like group [together] and, like, yeah, we’re, like, the group!"

Orientation for New Students

At the time of this study, the school provided a four day orientation activity period at the beginning of the school year for the purpose of having new students integrate successfully into their new school. New students met and interacted with each other, and learned about their new school. The younger grades remained in the school where they engaged in a period of games, dances, a casino night, movies, a scavenger hunt, etc. The older grades left the school for various outdoor activities.

Three of the five new students, Dennis, Priscilla, and Todd, enrolled in the younger grades. For two of these students, Dennis and Todd, this orientation specifically proved to be a critical time for them in terms of the lack of integration. Whereas they were to have established friendships during that time, this did not occur.

Sharon, the school Principal, the school official, Stan, and three students all
mentioned how important a role the orientation period plays in students’ happiness at the school. Sharon reflected upon the start to each school and how that part of the year “must be more uplifting” in terms of the students experiencing a “good year” at the school. Referring to a year following the year for which this study was undertaken, Sharon mentioned that “orientation is very important. I haven't seen the students happier at the start of the year.”

Two students at the school talked about this orientation period and the impact it has upon students new to the school. Both students, Tony and Brenda, referred to orientation as the critical social time of the year, the time where one must establish those bonds with friends.

Brenda described orientation as the time which actually “chooses your friends.” She said that it is actually a more critical time for the students than most people might believe:

Orientation. It sort of chooses your friends. It shows you who you’re going to be hanging out with for the rest of the year . . . [it] is more important than a lot of people think . . . . We need that week to get to know each other . . . . Yeah. Oh yeah. Orientation is very important.

Tony expressed his views about orientation a little differently. Still the time when one makes friends, he talked about the pressures it places upon new students, especially in grade nine. Tony referred to orientation as a kind of game, “Musical Chairs.” The social expectations before and after having experienced orientation become quite different for the young students.

Tony explained that before orientation, new students merely exchange pleasantries. After orientation, however, the expectation exists that students will have established those friendships. Those who have not become the “losing” students and find themselves essentially out of the game. Finding one’s self “out of the game” can mean finding one’s self out of the school eventually, due to the lack
of affiliation at a critical juncture in the process:

Grade 9, which is a tough year socially . . . oh God! Especially after orientation . . . before orientation you can kind of go through the motions and everyone’s kind of exchanging little pleasantries with each other. But after orientation, you’re expected to have found a group [of friends]. And if you haven’t, then it’s kind of like playing musical chairs. Ya’ know, the music stops and you’ve nowhere to sit!

Dennis attended school for the first few days. Then, he became so ill that he returned home to recover. He missed the orientation process. His classmate Brenda mentioned that had Dennis participated in the orientation, he might have made friends and approached his new friends with a more open mind. Instead, he did not. As a result, he really knew very few people:

Maybe if he had been there for the whole social getting to know each other week, he would have come to it with a more open mind, I guess. And he would have taken the time to get to know more people. Because he was quite sceptical of everybody here . . . Oh yeah [laughter]. He just referred to things as ‘oh, the people in this school.’ Or ‘the school is so gossipy.’

Dennis explained that he never had trouble making friends before. He described himself as a friendly person to everyone, a sort of “hey, how ya’ doing” fellow. He expected to be the same at his new school and to find the same sorts of friendships in his new school as he had in previous schools. This, however, did not occur.

Dennis, too, attributed this lack of connection to his having missed orientation. It seemed to Dennis that when he returned to the school everyone else had formed into groups of friends. In effect, he had “nowhere to sit.” Students became “cliquey.” Seniors exacerbated the issue. While he knew everyone and was able to keep up with his work, he simply did not feel a part of his new school:

And when I came back, everyone had separated into . . . like in their
groups. Everyone is sectioned off. At [the school] people don’t just like intermingle with each other. They all have their little groups. That’s the way I saw it . . . within the grade, yeah. And the higher grade people kind of looked down on the grade nines. It’s kind of a weird year because all the younger kids in the school were very cliquey . . . and all the people in the upper grades kind of stuck with the people in the upper grades . . . . I knew everyone in my grade. I knew everyone in the school. But it was like I wasn’t a part, I didn’t feel like I was a part of the school. Only because of the people there, not because of the school itself.

Dennis explained what it was like for him to be excluded from any established groups. He felt completely left out and his thoughts reverted to his home town. Even his dreams, literally, focussed upon his home town. In his personal situation, mentioned earlier, Dennis felt “destroyed” with regard to his self esteem. It becomes clear that Dennis fit the description offered earlier by Wayne as a boy who found himself on “the outside looking in:”

It means that you go to school every day and you just kind of pass everyone by. And you don’t really talk to very many people. You don’t do very much. And because it destroys your self esteem, you don’t want to do anything. You just want to go back to your room after school and not deal with anything. I was completely living in [my home town] while I was at [the school]. All my thoughts and my dreams. Like I dreamed about being in [my home town]... just hanging out with my friends. Because it was so devastating. It destroyed me. Like my self esteem. 'Cause everyone needs to be reassured to some degree. As soon as there’s no one there to say yeah, you’re a nice person, whatever, it’s tolling [takes a toll] on your self image and your self awareness . . . . It was a pretty rough time.

Dennis speculated that had he attended orientation, he may have been able to make friends. Although he was not sure of that, because he knew that he still had to cope with his background and the personal things with which he still had to deal, he likely would have remained at the school:
I’m sure I would have been much more accepted, but I don’t know if I would have been able to associate with them. . . . I probably would have stayed at [the school] if I could have made friends there. If people had liked me, at least openly liked me, it would have been different. I would have enjoyed school a lot more. And I probably would have stayed.

With Todd, his lack of social skills adversely affected his ability to make friends, even during orientation. Tony found himself to have been Todd’s closest friend, but even that relationship was not close. Tony reflected that “he [Todd] was kind of left with himself all the time.” Other students essentially neglected Todd, said Tony. Todd did try to make friends. As Dave said, “most people would want to have a group of friends...probably both for security and comradery.” Todd was no exception and Dave noted that, “it seemed that he [Todd] was reaching out to people.”

Tony said that the more Todd tried, the more others neglected him because of his lack of skills. His social “weirdness” prevented a connection for him among his peers at the school:

They interacted with Todd as little as possible . . . it was that people would say ‘God, he’s weird, he’s odd,’ . . . the more that he tried, the more people would say that . . . . He didn’t have the social skills to cope.

For Priscilla, no interviewee specifically referred to orientation as having been a factor in her “disconnectedness” with the school. Betty, her housemaster, however, noted that with Priscilla, “anyone who tried to get close to her, to give to her, she just pushed away.”

Notwithstanding attempts made by several students in the school, Priscilla increasingly withdrew, even from those whom she had befriended for a couple of months. She simply chose to be alone in her room, as she said, “the more I kind of
wanted to leave the more I kind of drew back, I guess . . . . I go to school during the day and I'd go back to the room and want to be alone.”

Eventually, and predictably, other students simply stopped trying to befriend Priscilla. Brenda confirmed that as Priscilla remained uncommunicative, “nobody really came to visit any more . . . . You wouldn’t get much of a response from her.”

As for the three older students, Benny, Ralph, and Samantha, two of them, Benny and Ralph, had very poor orientation experiences. This period directly affected their lack of connection with the school. Neither Samantha nor any other interviewee expressed that Samantha had encountered a difficult experience during orientation. She was an athletic person who knew people at the school prior to her arrival. Orientation appeared to have fulfilled her needs in terms of making connections.

Very much on a parallel with Dennis’ experience, Ralph, with his injury, could not participate in the orientation. Ralph remarked that not only did this sadden him, he never really met people. He felt left out right from the beginning of the school year. Ralph lamented that, “I never really met people at the start. I stayed behind. I was down . . . . I felt kinda’ like left out.”

Rodney, his advisor, revealed that Ralph was so “down” that he was actually going to leave during that orientation time, so profound was his lack of connection. In Rodney’s view, with Ralph’s state of mind, “ostensibly he had left . . . he was packed, he was just waiting for his folks.” All that remained was for his parents to give him the permission to leave physically, which occurred later in the year.

One male student suffered through a terribly negative orientation experience. Physically weaker and quite disinterested in the type of orientation activities planned for him, he became embarrassed in front of his peers. They had to do the work assigned to him because he could not cope. Rather than bring him closer to his new
peers, he felt pushed away from them through this experience. His housemaster explained the details of the traumatic time through which the boy tried to endure as he displayed his lack of physical skill for his peers to witness:

He felt *really demeaned*. And then they teased him about it. And then he said they would tell ghost stories at night. And he’s a really sensitive kid and he didn’t want to hear ghost stories. And that made him feel really uncomfortable. He felt trapped . . . And he felt that his introduction to the school . . . was *really a shock* . . . And he’d be demonstrating his lack of skill. You can’t hide it . . . Everyone would know. They would joke about it. Back at school he said it was teasing but it wasn’t in fun.

**Encountering the Practices and Beliefs of their New Peer Group: Not Fitting into the Social Groups at the School**

Lawton & Leithwood (1988), and Rossman, Corbett, & Firestone (1985), define culture as a set of core norms, values, and beliefs widely shared throughout the organization. Schein (1985) suggests that several cultures can operate within a larger social unit called the organization. Culture for him becomes a group’s pattern of basic assumptions used in part to cope with internal integration and taught to new members as the correct way to think.

Clearly, these newly enrolled students encountered new and different beliefs and practices from their peers at the school. These beliefs and practices hindered the affiliation process that needed to occur for successful integration into the community. The new students in this study could not integrate into the new culture for the many reasons following.

Stan talked about tolerance of the current students for differences among their peers. Stan admitted that, “I guess what I think is that [the school] celebrates certain individuals better than others.” This reflects Tinto’s (1993) concept of a central core culture as compared with peripheral subcultures. Todd, for one,
certainly did not feel at all celebrated by the students in the school. The social ostracization mentioned earlier, really acts of omission rather than commission, lay at the root of his lack of affiliation. As his mother Debbie described it, Todd had no social contact and, “he was just wondering around after school. He couldn’t find any of his close friends . . . [he] felt lost in the school.”

Todd mentioned also that his lack of comfort arose from the ways in which he found the students acted in different types of situations. He gave examples of how he might have been treated in two hypothetical situations, one physical, the other intellectual.

On the physical side, he would have found support. If, for example, he had fallen down some stairs “and got seriously hurt, the people, chances are, would lift me up and say are you OK.” On the other hand, on an intellectual level, things were not so supportive. If Todd had made a “stupid comment” about something, for example, someone at the school would remind of that for the whole year and chastise him continually for having made it. As Todd said, he found the student culture rather intolerant of him and narrow minded in terms of trying to understand his perspective:

There would be a guy who would nag on me for the rest of the year and call me a blockhead or whatever . . . just that I was . . . bigger and some people would make fun of it . . . it’s a bit of narrow mindedness.

Todd mentioned, too, that he found a few students who did things which “truly annoyed me . . . that made me leave.” One student, an “intellectual bully,” as his mother called that student, harassed Todd academically by having meddled with Todd’s class notes. Todd said that he complained to his teacher about this and had “plenty of evidence” for this harassment but found no relief from this complaint process. Todd figured that he could not tolerate this sort of practice “for
another... year. I was [also] ignored three times by the same... teacher... on the same issue, yeah."

Dennis suffered terribly on the social level from the way the students treated him. He summarized the situation by referring to his having been socially separated from the other students on any kind of meaningful friendship level. Whereas he liked the teachers and all the activities, he was actively and completely “shut out” from any student groups:

But you can't feel comfortable in a school where you feel separated from everyone else there... Completely... And it was hard to come from [my home town] and have friends all around you all the time and then go to a place where everyone kind of looks at you kind of funny... And where I come from it was, like, everyone’s really nice to each other. Even if you don’t know people. You still say hello and you’re really nice to people. And you don’t just immediately shut them out. But at [this school], it’s like if you’re not in the group, you’re just not in it at all... Once it had established at the starting of school, it just stayed like that.

Dennis found that older grades socially looked down upon younger grades. He found that difficult to tolerate. He felt demeaned by that. Then, his own peer group regarded him as a “geek,” defined by Dennis as someone lacking in the social skills of a “regular” teenager. Dennis lamented in a most mournful tone of voice that there was nothing more he felt capable of doing such that he could gain access to that student culture:

**Dennis:** It’s the people that completely destroyed it for me... It was the students... all grades. 'Cause I find the upper grades really hard on the younger grades. I think they really like... to put everyone else down, especially behind their backs. I’d walk around and be really nice to people and then I would hear something that people were completely putting me down behind my back. Like you don’t know who to trust... [another boy who left] was like the only guy that [I hung around with]. 'Cause we felt pretty much the same way... [But
that boy] was deemed a loser geek. And I was just alienated I guess . . . And I found that he was probably the nicest person at [the school] because he didn’t pre-judge anyone. He didn’t like put down people. He was completely honest. And I could trust him.” . . .

SG: What’s a geek?
Dennis: A person lacking the social skills of a regular teenager. Like partying. His social life wasn’t up to par compared with the rest of the students.
SG: Did you feel that the other students regarded you as a geek too?
Dennis: Hm hmm [yes] 'Cause I hung out with him. There was nothing I could do [to fit in]. I tried.

Many students, including Dennis, revealed that the students associated with each other in groups. He mentioned that the other students excluded him from groups. He felt intolerable measures of insincerity coming from students and verbal abuse as well. He felt that students openly criticized his manner of dress, and yet later copied it. He found that students criticised his taste in music, yet someone stole all his private library of music tapes. He associated with girls more so than with boys because the girls acted in a more friendly manner. Yet, the informal leader of the girls’ group could sway that group of girls’ opinion against Dennis, as he explained:

It was more like people would be really nice but . . . like, I’m not stupid. They’d be like hi, or whatever, and I’d start to talk to them and they’d start to stare off like they didn’t really give a shit. Or they were too enthralled in their own personal problems to connect with somebody else . . . . Just like . . . insulting me, not necessarily using bad language but just like go away . . . . We don’t want you here . . . all the time. From the minute I woke up to the minute I went to sleep . . . . Seniors were rough on everyone . . . . I have lots of friends [at home]. And like I’m a really friendly person. But at [the school], it doesn’t matter. You basically have to be in the group. And I come from such a different background from most people at [the school] . . . . I’ve seen a lot more, been through a lot more shit than most people
my age . . . experiencing life in general . . . . It was really weird . . . . I associated better with girls. The girls were more friendly than the guys were. But they were still pretty bad. Because they’d do whatever their groups do. So if the head of the group, they don’t have a designated head, but kind of like the role model for the group didn’t like me or whatever, they all kind of didn’t like me.

Dennis found the senior level students particularly oppressive as a group. Instead of having felt support from them, he felt that they carried a “we rule the school” attitude toward him and the other younger students. That attitude kept Dennis apart from meeting other people as well. Rather than assisting with the affiliation, Dennis felt the seniors’ actions driving a wedge within the student body. This, he suggested, came about as a result of a long standing tradition at the school where the current seniors found themselves similarly treated by the then-seniors. As Dennis said:

The seniors pretty well put down all the [younger] grades. That’s pretty much a [this school] thing. Like, they just rough them up. ‘Cause like I heard stories about what happened to some of those seniors. Like they got beaten so bad. They always said how lucky we were that we didn’t get the shit beaten out of us . . . . They weren’t as hard on us as they were treated in grade nine. ‘Cause the seniors should be like really positive and really nice to the [younger] grades . . . . and supportive. But instead they just kind of shoot them down. Like ‘oh you suck, you’re not a senior. We have control over the school,’ kind of attitude. They’re basically continuing a cycle.

Dennis discovered that in spite of his efforts, he was totally incompatible with the social structure of the school. By school, Dennis clearly said that he did not mean the teachers, the administrators, or the school programming. Instead, he referred directly to the students. He felt so strongly about the students, he called them “evil.”

It was just their whole social structure. I was completely incompatible with their social structure and our backgrounds are so different. I
guess that’s why there was such an incompatibility problem in the social structure. ‘Cause I was used to something completely different [regarding friendships] . . . . The kids are so evil . . . . They’re also continuing the cycle.

Dennis mentioned that he could “connect” with students on an individual basis. The group mentality, however, always kept him outside looking in. Tinto (1993) refers to this as incongruence.

Several student and teacher interviewees referred to the group mentality at the school. One student, Anne, referred to these groups, these cliques, by her own interpretations of them. She found the students at the school very intolerant of different people. Various groups form in the school based upon differences among the students:

I think that a lot of people here aren’t very tolerant of different people . . . . See, I guess you could say there are different groups here. And there’s people who are considered really cool. And then there’s another group that are I guess sort of medium [in social stature]. And then there’s another which is kind of not the outcasts, that’s a little harsh, but just different, I guess. And I guess that supposedly cool crowd looks down on the other groups.

Another student, too, clearly felt the effects of not having been included in a group. One of the boy’s friends, Diane, perhaps his closest friend at the school, although she remarked that even she was not really close to him, referred to the fact that this fellow was not really accepted into a group. We were chatting about him at the time of her comments about the fact that the students suffer from a lack of tolerance for sexual preferences among the students:

Diane: I think it’s gonna’ be a transition that the school’s gonna’ have to take, [i.e.] . . . they’re gonna’ have to open up [to be more accepting]. There’s a percentage of them, a small percentage of them, who seem to be more open to a more feminine type of guy. But on the whole I think it’ll take some time for them to learn how to realise that for someone to act not macho and act not jockish is not a bad thing.
And all it is is a test of time . . .

SG: Are the boys here primarily macho? . . .

Diane: Yeah . . . There are a few who are my friends and so on. They’re not [macho]. And they’ve been hassled but I think they get over it. They push it away because they can cope with it. He was maybe just one of those who couldn’t. I don’t know if I could have. And the guys here are very like ‘I’m gonna’ rough you up’ [she puts on a male-type bully voice]. Along that line.

SG: And the ones who are not macho, they’re coping somehow?

Diane: Yeah, and the ones who are like [her friend], the majority of their friends are girls . . . But they [to the contrary] must have found, like, a hook [a bond, affiliation] somewhere and they could do it, and suppress any sort of negative emotions that they have about it, and sort of look at the positive. Because the school does have a lot to offer.

The student in this issue denied any suggestion that he found more comradery among females than males. His father, however, supported the notion that he did find more comfort in socializing with girls. He also pointed to the fact that a rather typical fun, recreational activity for young males at the school, attending a football game as a group, held absolutely no appeal for his son. He was not at all interested and so found himself on the outside of his group of male peers within the student residence:

SG: Did you find more companionship in females than males?

Boy: Nope. I don’t think so.

Father: I always felt that you did . . . He always talked about the girls more than the boys . . . the arts-type guys [however] were more your group. He wasn’t going to hang around with the jocks . . . . When [his housemaster] phoned...that you were going to see the team play . . . it didn’t thrill you! But [your housemaster], I don’t know, he was just a different [type of person, very macho]. He said we’ve got all these activities planned, like football games. And I thought to myself, oh boy, this is not the right activity. This is not his thing. You’ve picked the wrong boy here!
Several interviewees, parents, teachers, and students alike, referred to the arts and academically minded students, as contrasted with the sports oriented students, as being more at risk of finding acceptance into the school. As Stan commented, “it concerns me because sometimes I see the arts student as being at risk.” This, again, reflects the concept of core versus peripheral student subcultures. In one case, Mandy referred to her son, Benny, indeed as being more compatible with the arts students. Stan observed that this, too, caused other students to have viewed Benny as having been “different” from within the student culture at the school:

Students would . . . perceive him [Benny] as being different because, compared to the other students here, he would be, he appeared to be less outdoors oriented. He appeared to be less sports oriented, he had strengths in the arts.

Anne commented that the arts students of the school do constitute a group unto themselves. The arts/academic students clearly occupy only a social status which Anne can only classify as “different” among the students. The students accord the highest social status, in Anne’s view too, to the football playing students for boys, and the basketball players among the girls:

The different group has more extracurricular things like music and stuff . . . . They’re more involved in things like drama and art and music. I guess they’re more down to earth . . . . And the medium group I guess is a mixture of social and sports . . . . Things like football with the guys [occupy the highest status]. And . . . with the girls [it is] basketball . . . I guess it kind of bugs you . . . if I can be [wanted to be] somewhere else and be more comfortable, I guess I would be [too].

One student’s roommate, Jim, and a housemaster, Wendy, made reference to a cultural difference among the student residences. The residence house to which one student leaver was assigned was a very “macho” culture that year, as Jim
mentioned. Wendy referred to it as a “buck up” mentality. Students who were feeling some distress for whatever reason, simply had to “buck up” and deal with it in a very “manly” sort of fashion. This clearly ran contrary to the leaving student’s way of dealing with things. He required a different type of support, as Jim and Wendy both mentioned. In fact, Wendy referred to the boy as being “counter culture” in the residence in which he had to live:

That style [of house] works well for the kids who are in it because that’s what they’re looking for. That style of leadership and management. At least half of the kids in that house would have known each other from the year before. So they would have had a community based upon shared values and beliefs in ways of doing things. So if he were to say anything [about his social discomfort] it wouldn’t be well received. Because he was almost like counter culture in that house . . . . It was a ‘buck up’ culture, you know. Buck up, stop whining. And again that meets the needs [of many boys] . . . . Obviously that’s a style, the shared beliefs, that do meet the needs of a group of kids. It’s just for him, it wasn’t a match.

Two student interviewees, Diane and Donna, referred to a “mould” to which students must fit within the student body, if one is to remain enrolled in the school. Another boy, being rather non-athletic, “different” and “femmy,” in Diane’s words, did not fit the mould into which a male student must fit. Diane agreed with Paula’s comment earlier where they both said that a student could be “different” and still survive. In Diane’s view, however, basically a male should be a “jock,” a “guy,” to fit the mould best. If not in that mould, any male student risks harassment and lack of understanding from his peers. This boy in question was that sort of “non-jock.” Wayne, the teacher, referred earlier to such a male as being too far from “down the middle.” Diane commented that this scenario as one which worked strongly against this fellow’s lack of connection with the other boys:

Diane: I think when you come to [this school], you have to fit a
certain mould. And sometimes to be different here, you’ll be respected and then sometimes to be different you won’t be respected. And in order to fit in with a lot of the guys here you have to fit the certain mould of ‘I love sports, I love this, I love that.’ Um, and he wasn’t like that. And I think he felt alone for a lot of it. Because all his friends here were girls. I think a lot of the guys here didn’t understand it. Um, I don’t think that they approve of guys who are different . . . . You have to be a jock. You can’t be, to put it in slang terms, ‘femmy’ in any way.

SG: And he doesn’t fit the jock mould?
Diane: No. No. And if you do stay here and are, I guess, not fitting the jock mould, then you probably get hassled and you get the usual sort of harassments from the other guys who, you know, are supposedly being the jock mould. Not all of them. Just, you know, some.

SG: So there are some guys who are not jocks?
Diane: No, there are some guys here who are jocks but they don’t hassle people. There are some guys here who aren’t jocks and they’re accepted I think. I just think in general there’s a lot of that you have to be sort of like masculine . . . macho. You have to be a guy . . . He just got stuck in a rut. He didn’t have any friends in the guys really. He didn’t, I don’t think he felt accepted...He was doing poorly in school. For him, the only was out was to leave. Go back where he felt comfortable, I guess.

Wendy and Candace commented that the girls at the school need to interact with each other, to find a relationship among their peers in order to fit in. Donna made reference to this as a mould into which a girl must fit. She found that Priscilla was not interested in becoming part of the mould, but rather, was “a total individual” who could not make the adjustment necessary to fit into the school. As Donna said about Priscilla, “she just couldn’t deal with anything. I think that [being in the school] was just bringing her down.”

Both Betty, Priscilla’s housemaster, and Donna, Priscilla’s roommate, mentioned that Priscilla withdrew from her peers, and any invitations they made to her on a social level to get her involved in activities. Priscilla, if she attended social
gatherings at all, would simply sit and remain silent, choosing not to interact with others. Priscilla never left her room to eat among other students, choosing instead to attend classes, go to her room, and go to bed early.

Donna said that while the mould included attaining good grades, being “so amazing at sports, arts, and academically,” and that Priscilla met those criteria, the mould also included being socially extroverted. Priscilla, however, “wasn’t that at all.”

For the remaining two new students, the older students, Samantha and Ralph, the issues of fitting in were somewhat different. The school culture includes separating students socially and awarding different and special privileges based upon membership in the various grade levels. Thus, both Samantha and Ralph found themselves unable to establish the kind of strong social bonds that they may have found among students in upper grades and with whom they felt more comfortable socially. As a result, these two new students lacked the necessary affiliation within the school.

Once back at the school following orientation, Samantha was expected, by virtue of her younger grade level, to live by a different set of social constraints than did the very same friends whom she knew at school and from the orientation. Those older students enjoyed extra privileges in terms of curfews, study habits, etc. which Samantha could not enjoy.

As a result of this segregation, when she did make a strong connection, finally, it was with a girl in her grade who caused discipline problems such that the school asked her to leave. That unfortunate liaison, as her housemaster Wendy explained, really helped to move Samantha out of the school. This whole scenario,
including the rather unsavoury relationship, contributed to the lack of Samantha’s connection with the school.

Ralph encountered similar experiences with his new peer group, after having experienced that very lonely time during orientation. This post-orientation social situation further exacerbated Ralph’s established feelings of wanting to leave. Students older than Ralph, but with whom he felt more comfortable because of his own level of maturity, physical size, and academic strengths, were permitted those same extra privileges described in Samantha’s case. Ralph, too, because of his age and grade could not associate with these students, the very people whom he may have gotten to know best. Ralph’s father and mother referred to this situation. Ralph did too. He called the phenomenon unfair “grade divisions” and said, “a lot of my friends were in [older] grades . . . . I found there’s a real division between juniors and seniors.”

All of this worked against Ralph’s bonding. His advisor, Rodney, suggested that Ralph may have begun to integrate once he began slowly to find and associate with his future basketball team mates. The season had yet to begin and Ralph was still injured physically. Ralph never did achieve that level of connection in time for him to remain enrolled. As Rodney explained, “he was tending towards it [belonging to the school community]. I don’t think he was ever fully integrated.”

This leads to a discussion of school rules. That subject arose in discussion by many of the leaving students, whether new to the school or not.

**School Rules**

School rules, and specifically the effect they had upon the students’ lives socially, caused problems to greater and lesser degrees for the leavers while at the school. For eleven of the twelve student leavers, they, their parents, friends, and
some housemasters spoke about the negative effect school rules had upon the students’ willingness to remain in the school.

The issues with school rules pertained almost exclusively to the residential side of school life. Even in the case of one student, Todd, who was not a boarder in the school, the rules which affected him adversely were recognized by his family to have been put in place specifically to keep the residential students busy and, therefore, “out of trouble.” In his view, and that of his parents too, the school also then kept Todd so busy with many mandatory activities, that he, at his younger age, became perpetually fatigued. He also had no social life at all.

Every interviewee who raised the issue of rules understood the need for the school to embrace a set of rules in order to have the school operate effectively, especially for the sake of the residential population. These interviewees, however, found the rules unsatisfactory for those eleven particular leavers.

In addition to the stratification rules mentioned above with Samantha and Ralph, where the school granted privileges to older students only, thereby keeping older and younger students apart artificially in these two cases, interviewees referred specifically to other broad categories of rules. These rule categories included: time (residence curfew times, study hall times, and breakfast times); special “leave” occasions (asking for permission to leave the school property to attend social events such as parties, visits with other students’ families, etc.); and for only three of the students, rules felt to be too stringent regarding alcohol consumption and tobacco use. Adjectives used to describe the social situation which resulted from the school’s imposition of the rules included words such as too claustrophobic, rigid, regimented, and controlled.
Rules: The Discrepancy between Home and School

All of the eleven student leavers for whom rules created an issue in terms of happiness with the school discovered a profound contrast between what was considered acceptable behaviour at home vis a vis rules, versus acceptable behaviour at the school. Behaviour which parents would support at home often fell afoot of the school’s rules of acceptable behaviour.

These discrepancies occurred most in the cases of time factors. For example, study hall rules demanded that students remain in their dormitories for a designated period of time. For Ralph, this represented a waste of his time. He worked quickly and efficiently, did all of his work, scored well academically, and yet had to remain confined to his room until his study period had ended. This situation was particularly acute for Ralph, and indeed Samantha too, in the particular context of the older students with whom they both felt more comfortable socially. Older students were allowed more study time freedom while Samantha and Ralph were constrained by the more stringent rules for younger students.

While Samantha received permission on occasion to work with her older friends, Ralph was not allowed to do so. This entire situation made no sense to Ralph or his parents. Ralph felt “tied down,” as his dad referred to the situation:

He’s the type who studies when he feels he needs to. When he has to spend it, he’ll go all night if he has to but he hated the business of being tied down. Others would be allowed to go out but he had to stay in his room . . . . But all these factors along with the injury I think added up . . . . I think he felt imprisoned in the room . . . . I know that they’re not the same as a private home rules but if you were in your room and had most of your studying done and the material covered, not every student takes two hours . . . . I guess he felt that if he was forced to be there twiddling his fingers . . . those things were all factors in him doing what he did do [i.e. leave the school]. When he came
home he was unhappy . . . . He said ‘dad I’m completely, completely unhappy.’

Time related rules really impacted most heavily upon students’ sense of independence. This, again, related to the discrepancy which the students felt between what was permitted at home and what was suddenly no longer permitted at the school. Priscilla found this particularly trying for her. Compared with home, at school she found no time for herself:

There wasn’t that much time for yourself. You’re up at this time. You’re eating at this time. You came home. You had your sports. Then you had study. Then you’re in bed. And you had like half an hour breaks in between then . . . your day was so planned out kind of . . . . When you’re at home, if you don’t feel like doing something you just don’t.

Compared with home, too, the issue of curfew times arose among the interviewees. Having to be in one’s room by a specified time ran so contrary to the kind of life expected of students at home that the impediment to their social routines became unbearable.

Lois provided a good overview of that situation. She referred to students from large cities, in particular, students who even at the age of thirteen have curfews of midnight as compared with ten o’clock at the school. These same students go out regularly at home during the week, especially on Friday nights, and certainly on Saturday nights. But at the school, the rules pertaining to curfew create “So much more of a hassle!” So, when these same students enrol in the school for them, Lois said, “Oh yeah. Very different. It’s hard.”

Regarding this theme of rules, Howard, a school student, placed an interesting perspective upon this issue. Howard remarked that even if the students did not choose to go out, the point remained that they felt the difference lay in knowing that they could go out, if they so chose, and that they missed something very important
to them by living at the school:

So, I think that the curfew does play a major role . . . you come to school and you have to be back on campus by [the appointed time]. You can’t really go out. It [teen age] sort of is a time for experimentation, whatever, you know, and you start missing that. And if you still have friends like in the city or whatever, you feel like you’re missing out . . . . And so that can almost spur on a bad feeling about the school. Like you know, this damn place. It’s keeping me here. I can’t believe it, or whatever. I think . . . it’s having a place that you can get away and always knowing that you can.

With regard to rules allowing students to leave the school to visit someone’s home or to go for a social event together, the students all found the rules constraining. Again, compared with home expectations, students felt an enormous loss of independence once at the school. Mark, a school student, made a comment about this, summarizing the difference between home and school. It all comes down to families’ values differing from those of the school. The differences create a much different atmosphere for students at school:

It’s all relative. Some peoples’ parents might be more strict or less strict [than the school]. So if your parents are really not very strict at all then obviously coming to a school like [this one] where it’s such conformity like “here’s the rules, you have to abide by them” would be different for someone who already has strict family values . . . . The routine and all that kind of stuff. It’s totally different from public schools.

Rules with which many of these students have become quite familiar, and feel everyone ought to know, can become too major an issue when left to the unique interpretation of the school housemasters. Paula reflected upon how one student leaver, Joanne, requested leave to go to a party. Betty, her housemaster, called home to obtain Joanne’s parents’ permission, received it, then called them again to report that alcohol would be consumed at the party. That second phone call, in
Paul's view, offended Joanne. At her age, this act made her feel "like a kid." This served as another example whereby the whole school process of treating its older students came into question.

Routine imposed by rules became an issue for each of the leaving students. The predictability of life under those guidelines, with little or no source of relief, created much frustration for the leavers. In contrast, at home, one can do whatever one wishes on any different day of the week. As Sarah explained, the school allows, "no exceptions to the rules . . . . It's just that it's kind of like a routine. You just get so bored of it. But here [at home] you can do whatever you want on a Tuesday night."

For the three students who found the rules too rigid to accommodate their use of tobacco and alcohol, the same issues discussed above also applied. Given their relatively greater freedom at home, for these three people, the things they could do at home, even if not condoned by their parents, represented a strong pull back home for the students.

Barb, for example, felt "trapped" by the school's rules. She needed her freedom. Anne attested to Barb's feelings in this way, using the same word "trapped," as did Barb:

Barb is a smoker and drinker. She did both quite a bit. So she liked to, on breaks and stuff, she had a lot of fun. And she'd come back and feel cramped in. Claustrophobic, sort of. She felt trapped I guess. She was always complaining about wanting to get out and go party, or whatever.

Privacy

Learning to live in the new culture presented other problems as well for four of the leaving students. They, and one of the current student students, and one housemaster talked about the lack of privacy at the school. Tinto (1993) talks about
this in terms of adjustment to the new expectations of the school. For these four leavers, then, living with other students in shared dormitories, in residential houses, and in a boarding school, became an urgent point of contention for them.

Howard, a current student, mentioned that this closeness of living together can take its toll upon people. Howard expressed his views in terms of the lack of independence and then finding it difficult to “escape” in order to be alone:

‘Cause your whole life is sort of planned out for you . . . and everybody always knows where you are. Always knows where you live. It’s hard to escape. Hard to be alone. Hard to express yourself . . . I think about it a lot.

Wendy, felt that the issue of privacy profoundly affected at least two of the leavers, Benny and Adriane. Both students did in fact dwell upon the issue of lack of privacy in the school as having caused them considerable anxiety while enrolled. Wendy referred to this lack of privacy as a “problem” at the school, and that some students learn where to find a more private place but they need some help in doing that. Wendy referred to private places such as a classroom, going for a walk in a nearby conservation area by a stream, and the school gymnasium:

It’s [privacy] a problem there . . . . There are kids who need to learn where to find the privacy because they don’t know where to look for it. Because there’s definitely places at that school you can find privacy but they need some help, some guidance where to find it . . . . The classrooms at night . . . . They don’t have to have privacy where they’re the only one as far as they can see. They have to privacy in terms of being able to do their own thing without being interrupted . . . . They [students] can . . . go for a walk. The conservation area can be [a private place]. There’re some nice places to go. Or if you go by the stream . . . The fields. There’s often nobody at the fields except for sports times. The gym. The hill near the gym . . . . A place to make sense of their day.
Adriane raised the privacy issue in a different light. As a returning student, having been enrolled for more than one year, she did talk, too, about that need for a place and time to reflect, or make sense of her day, as Wendy called it. Adriane, however, also referred to a different kind of privacy. She talked about how her time having lived in a boarding school really put the school front and centre in her mind. She felt the constant demand to deal with things all the time.

Adriane described the school as being “in your face.” Instead, she needed her own “space.” She referred to her needs having become everything from the chance to come home and find shelter from the world for a night or even longer, to the little things such as having a snack and watching television. Adriane called privacy, “one of those things that I need; a bit of time every day where I can just be by myself and like reflect and breathe and just sort of calm myself down . . . . I really missed my privacy.”

Barb, the other returning student who mentioned privacy, expressed her needs for different reasons. Barb’s personality and lifestyle with tobacco use and curfew challenges, meant that she fell under particular scrutiny from her housemaster. As a result, Barb could find little place where she did not feel “like you were always being watched. And that you could never actually have time alone without being watched or people being suspicious about something.”

The two newly enrolled students, Benny and Priscilla, experienced profound issues with privacy once at the school. For both of them, their home life represented a dramatically different lifestyle with respect to privacy. This contrast created great friction for them both at the school.

Benny’s mother, Mandy, mentioned that he had the use of an entire floor of the house to himself. She knew before he went to boarding school that this privacy issue could arise for him. Much to Benny’s chagrin, Mandy put into context the
nature of Benny’s very private domain at home by having referred to Benny with, “he’s the King at home!”

When Benny arrived at school, he had a very small room and shared it with another student. This boy had a large circle of friends who then used his and Benny’s room as a central location for their social time. Benny said he was never alone there. As a result, he never went to his residential house or his room, except to sleep. He then felt dislocated from his own “home,” and as Mandy exclaimed, “and there’s no privacy. My God!”

Benny also found that when he did return to his residential house, the nature of the activities of the other boys in his house ran completely contrary to the kinds of things to which Benny was accustomed or enjoyed. Wendy commented that “each house definitely has its own personality. And . . . the students that tend to get attracted to certain houses, it’s because of that personality.”

Benny was assigned to that residence, one which his roommate described as “rowdy” in nature. He described the sorts of activities that went on at night, the very time when Benny would have returned to his room to sleep. The residence life became a major issue for Benny. Instead of finding privacy, Benny encountered that rowdy male atmosphere in the residence:

You know, guys, like at night for instance, we would like . . . be wrestling in the halls or you know during sports and stuff, like ball hockey, inside. With helmets and gloves and stuff. Wrestling. Like things like that. That’s how they got along in there. Maybe Benny, you know, maybe that’s not his thing, you know. Maybe if he was in a less rowdy house.

Priscilla’s case bears some similarity to Benny’s regarding privacy. She is someone used to having her own room with lots of floor space to call her own at home, and with few temporal boundaries around her either. She, however, found
the boarding experience quite enjoyable at first. It felt to her much like a “big slumber party or something,” with so many girls around all the time. Then, Priscilla soon discovered that the party never ended. She recalled that, “at some point [I realised that] there’s always people in your house.” She had needed privacy but could find none at school.

The School as an Unreal and Sheltered World

In distinct contrast to the privacy issue, three other student leavers, a school official, Stan, two parents, and two current students, talked about the school environment in terms of its contrast with the external world. Some students can find the school too sheltered from the “real” world.

Several new and returning students, as well as parents, described the school in terms such as sheltered and shielded from the reality of every day life. This issue had an adverse effect upon four of the leavers’ desire to stay at the school.

The concept of the school representing an artificial world took upon contrasting meanings, depending upon who used the term “real world.” Stan thought that the school placed stringent demands upon some students. He thought that Alice, for example, may have left because she sought a less arduous experience in the “real world.”

Stan saw the school as placing strenuous demands upon Alice in the context of her personal issues. He figured that Alice was “jaded on private schools.” He thought that she may have been looking for what he called a “real world” high school experience, one which she may have found “less stressful, troublesome, [and] competitive...she just wanted to experience the real world a little bit.”

Each of the remaining interviewees, however, who spoke about the school in contrast to the “real world,” felt that the school was indeed too sheltered, too
protective from reality. This played a role in Todd’s, Dennis’, and Joanne’s departure.

For example, Todd felt that it was a matter of being enrolled at the school with students too similar in a higher socio-economic status. His mother, Debbie, commented that the students at the school “do not represent the reality of the outside world . . . . If he went to a normal [city] high school, he will meet children from every aspect of life. More like the real world.” Todd felt that, instead, he needed to be prepared for life by attending school with students in a publicly funded secondary school. In Todd’s words, he would rather have classmates who represent, “from welfare to wealthy. I’ll always meet them there.”

Lois talked about the kinds of “shock” that students coming from the larger urban areas feel when they attend the school which guides so much of their daily lives with its routine. To her, the school removes some of that independence, that freedom, that larger urban dwellers experience from an early age.

Joanne’s father, Mario, explained how his daughter felt that she needed to be more in the “real world,” given her age. She needed to experience life in better preparation for university where Joanne would encounter that real world and be expected to cope with it. Linda referred to Joanne’s fondness for the school and expressed, too, that the school represents an ideal world, but certainly not the real world:

It’s a reality you’d love to have but it doesn’t really exist very many places . . . . A lot of that comes from being a . . . boarding school where everybody lives with each other. You know each other so well . . . . You know a lot about personalities and quirks and what’s going on in kids’ lives. Joanne’s remark really captured it. She said, ya’ know, at [the school] the teachers were my friends. I mean they cared about her, cared how she was doing, whether she was sick whether she wasn’t . . . it’s like a family . . . . I think it was a reason she gave us.
Dennis found the school very "shielded" from outside influences. He found that his own life's experiences placed him on a different level compared with most others at the school. Dennis' friend, Tony, recounted that Dennis found the school too "surreal" and that represented a problem for Dennis. This contributed toward making it difficult for Dennis to bond with his peers.

Tony agreed that he could see the school as somewhat "fake" for someone who experienced a life with violence and drugs. The school might indeed appear "too safe" for someone like that. This would also mean that the school became a place where one's acquired social coping skills became of little value in the new environment. Tony mentioned that Dennis referred to the school as being so idyllic that it reminded him of a children's television show which depicted life as simple and full of good manners. Tony mentioned that Dennis felt, "like a fish out of water . . . . He often compared this to Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood!"

Other School Related Issues

Attrition literature also addresses the issues of extracurricular, academic, and physical space as potentially problematic in terms of hindering persistence (e.g. Allen & Nelson, 1987; Johnson, 1994; Tinto, 1993). In this case study, too, interviewees reported such concerns as having contributed to their lack of desire to remain in the school. Rather than acting as major contributing forces in the students' decisions to leave the school, however, these considerations played more of a supporting or contributing role to varying degrees. Even when the students talked about these largely non-socially based concerns, the social side of their lives still came through in several instances as laying at the root of the problem for many of the students.
Extracurricular Sports

Five of the leaving students talked about some aspect of the extracurricular sport program. Todd, Priscilla, and Benny, all referred to their discomfort with such an emphasis upon athletics in the school. The school insisted that all the students in this study participated in an athletic endeavour each term of school. None of these three people embraced athletics. The demand for them to participate in sports contributed to their lack of opportunity for more interesting pursuits for them, such as academics or arts for Todd and Benny. As Ed, Todd’s father commented about Todd, “he’s not a sports enthusiast as some others are. He likes it, but it’s not his whole life.”

In Priscilla’s case, a person who described the sports demands as “a big change for me, someone who doesn’t do sports, is not very active,” the demand on sports meant that she had less time for herself. Her father, Don, also regarded this as “just another impact on your [Priscilla’s] independence,” with which Priscilla agreed.

In contrast, Joanne and Ralph both desired competitive sport training at a higher level of competence than the school programs could provide. For Ralph, it became a matter of a lack of physical training. His mother, May, commented about her son’s attempts to recuperate from his condition and maintain some continuity in the level of training he received at home. She said that Ralph’s basketball “training is very, very important to him. He’s an athlete . . . . I don’t think he got what he felt he needed.”

Joanne played tennis at a highly competitive level. For her training, she travelled routinely back to her home city, rather than remain to participate in the school’s program. She and her friend at school, Howard, both mentioned that she could not get the training she need at the school. At her level of participation,
Joanne commented that, "it's more of a commitment." She and Howard both mentioned, too, that the social comradery found among other students at that level and in those social circles remained a strong incentive for Joanne to continue training with her home team rather than with the school's program. As Howard noted, "You could almost see that she [Joanne] was missing the . . . lifestyle. Because that was part of the embodiment of it . . . . Oh yeah, for sure."

**Non-Athletic Issues**

Of the three remaining students who raised extracurricular concerns, Alice, and June talked about the lack of activities on the weekends. This provided them with lots of free time, but time during which they became very bored. Due to their young age, neither girl could obtain "leave" to go off the school grounds for a Saturday evening. June called the situation "not exactly exciting" and "monotonous." As Alice summarised their perception, she felt complete frustration at the lack of anything to do.

Adriane’s mother, Laura, reported that her daughter also had too much free time on the weekends “without being involved in something. She got sad and depressed.” Adriane lamented more that she chose to avoid an extracurricular pursuit in which she would have liked to participate. With her building feelings of self doubt and lack of friends, she did not enter the school’s public speaking program because “I think I felt I wasn’t good enough . . . . I found myself getting really shy. Like, I was shying away from people all the time . . . . My self-confidence was, like, the pits.”
Academics

Academics became an issue for six of the leavers. The academic concerns created starkly contrasting problems for the students. Either the academics proved too difficult or too easy for them. This supports the findings of Allen & Nelson (1987), Johnson (1994), and Tinto (1993).

On the one hand, for Todd, June, and Joanne, the academic program lacked something which they needed. As Todd explained, his primary reason for attending the school related to the superior academics he thought the school offered. He and his parents found the academic situation not substantially different or better than the program Todd’s friends received in publicly funded schools. Todd said that, “it made me change my mind about spending a whole lot of money to get [stay] in.”

June and Joanne both looked for a more academically rigorous program too. Joanne in particular worried that, in her view, the school’s academic program may actually have prevented her from either gaining access to a university of her choice eventually or from succeeding once enrolled in university. Having missed many classes for her tennis schedule, Joanne did work hard and still achieved very strong marks in school. Her father explained that Joanne felt that marks may still have been too easily attained at the school when compared with other schools. She may have felt she experienced a “false dawn” at this school.

Benny, Sarah, and Alice, instead, found the academic program too rigorous for them. Mandy, Benny’s mother, commented that “he’s just hopeless at academics . . . . He’s a smart guy but it just doesn’t interest him.” Benny, however, maintained that the lower marks he attained merely reflected his unhappiness from other sources at the school. He did find the academic work load very “heavy,” as his mother said, and she commented that “you [Benny] were desperate!”
Diane, Benny’s friend, may have summed up best the circuitous nature of this argument. She commented that one issue certainly built upon the other, regardless of which came first, and that the net result was that Benny had to leave to get out of his “rut:”

I don’t know if it’s that he first was doing poorly in school which made him depressed and then he wasn’t making friends. Or maybe it was the social aspect which then led up to the more curricular aspect of it. He probably fell into a rut and had to get out.

Sarah and Alice found themselves in an academic situation where they felt incapable of achieving well. This created a problem for them not only academically, but also in the social sense of feeling terribly inadequate much of the time.

Sarah wanted an academic challenge from the school and said, “Yeah, I thought I could handle it. But obviously not!” Having come from a school where her marks were very strong, Sarah’s marks dropped substantially. This led to her feelings of great frustration and low self worth. Sarah mentioned that she would have felt better about herself had she done better academically. People around her tried to help her succeed but she felt the lack of self worth personally:

Cause if I had done better, I would have been happier with myself; I think . . . . It was an internal thing. If anything, they [the people at school] were trying to help. It was more an internal thing.

Alice felt a great pressure to succeed at a level higher than she felt capable of doing, compared with her peers. She did call this a “good pressure” and one that spurred her on to try harder. Alice did reveal that she felt herself intellectually less capable than so many of her peers:
The education there is like, second to none . . . . It’s so good compared to a normal high school . . . . It [my decision to leave] wasn’t based on any academic type thing. The expectations for your school work are really high . . . . I don’t see myself as being a really smart person or anything, not super intelligent like some of the people there.

Alice’s mother, Angela, and Alice’s friend, Sally, however, both mentioned that Alice felt terribly negative pressure due to her lack of academic success. Angela called Alice’s feelings those of “inadequacy in herself that she wasn’t as smart, not as bright, and never going to be able to succeed.” Sally mentioned Alice’s frustration with having been incapable of maintaining the pace toward academic excellence. This resulted in Alice’s having given up trying:

I don’t think she [Alice] did very well in school. I think that was also really frustrating . . . . I think a lot of people feel here that there’s so much emphasis placed on excelling academically. And she didn’t excel academically and I know she struggled with that. She tried really, really hard and toward the end she gave up on that too. She wanted to stop trying ‘cause she didn’t think she could do it.

**Physical Issues: School Location and Dormitories**

Six of the leaving students, Benny, Priscilla, June, Alice, Dennis, and Todd, all raised concerns with the physical location of the school. Essentially, they found it too far removed from the friends they had back home and/or the kinds of larger urban centre activities they liked to do when at home but which were not available close enough to the school for their liking.

Alice and Priscilla both referred to feeling “weird,” “trapped,” or “constricted,” ”as they said, when having compared the school’s proximity to larger
urban centres with their home towns. Benny also referred to the “freedom” he missed by not being close enough to a large city.

Priscilla’s friend, Brenda, explained it as a problem Priscilla encountered with something as ordinary as going to see a movie. At the school, to see a movie becomes, “just such a big production. Whereas at home, those people could probably hop the bus and go into town.” Betty, Priscilla’s housemaster, summarised the situation with having said, “She [Priscilla] would rather go into town and hang out in a mall rather than go to a sport and get involved with a team.”

June shared those same feelings of needing a larger urban centre. For her, the feelings came about as a result of her increased age and maturity. Whereas she was attracted to the school by its location when she was only twelve years old, June wanted the same kinds of movies, coffee shops, parties, and other such attractions of a larger urban centre when she left the school at the age of fourteen.

Sarah and Benny both expressed concerns with their dormitories, a scenario as suggested by Van Maanen & Bartley (1985). Sarah found herself in a “sterile cement block atmosphere,” as her father Eugene phrased it. He commented that: “The house did [have an impact on her decision]. The dorm . . . . Well, she hated it!” Eugene thought that this had an impact but was not certain of the extent of the impact upon his daughter. Sarah mentioned the dormitory, too, and said that it would have made a difference to her. Ultimately, however, being in a more pleasant dormitory, “would’ve [made a difference to me]. But it wouldn’t have made me stay.”

The most poignant example of a lack of physical space came with Benny. The size and location of his dorm clearly had a negative impact upon Benny’s enjoyment of the school. His roommate called the dormitory’s location one of the worst rooms in the school. The placement of the room was such that the two boys felt constantly
bombarded by sound and traffic in the house. It bothered Benny’s roommate a great deal, too, including the fact that the room was so small:

Actually our room was one of the worst rooms. Our room was located like right outside the common room. The common room is where like all the guys meet, like, all the time. You could open our door and you could see the common room and the T.V. So at night you’d always be hearing whatever someone’s watching on TV, people laughing and talking. And it’s just like all the traffic of the house goes right by our door. Like there’s no buffer zone or anything. Everything people are doing out there, socializing, you can hear. And that’s like wrestling and all that stuff . . . . It bothered me . . . ’cause you’re trying to sleep . . . . Benny always complained about the room actually . . . he very much disliked this room. We could hear everyone upstairs and everyone downstairs . . . . It was pretty small too.

Benny admitted that the room played a role in his overall unhappiness and so, finally, his decision to leave the school. When he first saw the school, his tour guide showed him a very spacious room. Then, once enrolled, Benny found himself assigned to this room which others in his house also knew to be unusually small. Benny’s mother described the room. She commented on the fact that they felt let down by the school because of what the family was led to believe would be the kind of room Benny would be assigned:

But God, it’s really tiny! . . . There was one cupboard and there was one set of drawers . . . . I think when you show people the school, [they] should show them the best and show them the worst. Ya’ don’t show them just indiscriminately. It’s a mistake! Because you go and say, oh, all rooms are like that.

Benny confirmed his mother’s remarks about that dorm. When he first saw his new room: “I was surprised. Very . . . . Just by the room . . . . I mean, people called it the closet . . . . My roommate even called it that!”
Summary

Once they had enrolled, the students’ personal characteristics, including issues with which they had to deal in their family backgrounds, interacted with many aspects of the school’s culture. This resulted in the creation of problems for the students within the school’s environment such that they decided to withdraw from the school.

The problems which arose came primarily from the social forces. The leavers failed to affiliate with a combination of peers, housemasters, and teachers. Roommate problems resulted in strongly negative situations for all the students who had roommates. For most students, these roommate issues proved directly problematic in terms of affiliation. For the other leavers, the more benign but equally ineffective roommate relationship failed to create the necessary residential happiness or bonding required.

New students encountered dramatic problems with integration into the new culture at the school. These students failed to find friends, fit into groups, and suffered problems within the residential life of the school.

Finally, for all the students who failed to persist, external forces played a major role in drawing them back to their home vicinities to attend school. Whereas family issues played a role for some students, these adolescents experienced the most powerful and overwhelming forces unquestionably from their old friends whom they needed so desperately for peer support, indeed, for survival.

The following chapter deals with retaining students. Interviewees in this study spoke about ways in which the school might have retained at least some of these leavers.
CHAPTER SIX

Changes Recommended

Hey, there’s got to be something more that you can do to help them with this adjustment . . . it’s kind of sink or swim. (Don, a parent)

Each of the student leavers decided that withdrawing from the school represented the best solution to problems which they faced while enrolled. This chapter explores comments concerning whether or not the school could have retained or should have attempted to retain all of the leavers. In cases where interviewees felt that retention may have been possible, they readily offered suggestions as to ways in which the school might consider implementing changes within its organization to accomplish that goal.

The following comments and suggestions came from the perspective of the tremendous support still held by the interviewees for the school in which the students chose voluntarily to enrol in the first place. All parents but one, for example, stated that they did not blame the school for the child’s failure to persist and, indeed, all interviewees continued to hold the school in the highest esteem. The one parent who did apportion blame to the school regarding her daughter’s failure to persist, felt that the school remained only “10% responsible” for her daughter’s departure. All of these suggestions, then, came purely in the context of helping the school which interviewees felt already had done an excellent job of attempting to retain the students

The School Cannot and Should Not Retain Each Student

It may be true that, for some students in this case study, nothing could have been done by the school to have retained them. From the families’ perspectives, a
combination of personal factors may have indicated that a particular student needed to move schools for those personal reasons. As Barb’s mother commented, for example, “the bottom line is that I appreciated the school having [enrolled] Barb, [and] I feel that our withdrawal is reflective of where we are/were at as opposed to any direct concern regarding the school.”

From another perspective, too, sometimes the school may not actually wish to retain every student. This may be true notwithstanding that each student in this study was welcomed back to the school. Some students, with their personal characteristics, may present such challenges to school policies that the school may not be able, or may not choose, to make the programming and other adjustments necessary to accommodate potential leavers.

Stan reflected upon this notion. He commented that to have attempted to accommodate some of the student leavers in this case would have placed demands upon the school in excess of the school’s desire to “move its edges” of what the school considers acceptable programming for its students.

Moving the edges of the school’s programming to accommodate these leaving students may not have been in the best interests of the students either. In other words, as Stan said, such students may be better served by leaving the school, as would the school, sometimes:

Could they [the leavers] have been kept? Probably yes. Was it in the best interests of the student[s] to create a setting where they could have been kept? No. Not necessarily . . . . Because in order to move the edges that [much] further out and in order to meet the program needs, and this is the huge issue now in residential schools . . . it would have been hard [to have kept them] . . . . It’s a very tall order to keep some of these people. Like, it’s not simply done. The question would be wait a minute, yes, one could have done that with Alice, but would we need a full time counsellor to do that? We’re just not equipped for that . . . . We’re not dealing with hard science here.
Pat affirmed that attrition actually may have served the school in that it lost one of its students, Barb. Pat commented upon how Barb's personal characteristics influenced others at the school. Although the school would not have asked Barb to leave, it is better for other students that she did not return:

At home she [Barb] would have been a big fish in a small pond. I'm sure that felt really good . . . . And here she was a leader but it was negative. It was a negative for us and I think it was a negative for her . . . . From the school's point of view, I think it is, in a sense, a positive [thing] that she left. She was making somebody as wonderful as [her roommate] feel small. She had a negative undercurrent in all that she took part in.

Paula noted, too, that perhaps the school ought not attempt to help some students more than they had been helped already. The school appeared to be at least consistent in its approach with its leaving students. Paula talked about this with reference to her friend Joanne:

I think [the school] did pretty well. Because she [Joanne] was pretty catered to when she came. I know [a school official] picked [for] her the best roommate and that kind of stuff . . . . [The roommate] was fine in grade . . . . She didn't get sick until grade . . . . I don't think so [regarding offering more help to Joanne]. The school did what it does for every person. Maybe even a little more for her [Joanne]. I can't see . . . babysitting everyone until they feel that comfortable. You're not going to learn anything.

**Enhancing Retention: Some Proposals for Consideration**

As a means of retaining other students, many of the leavers themselves, their friends, teachers, and school officials made suggestions which addressed some of the very problems and concerns given by the interviewees as explanations for the students having left. Issues of a social nature clearly represent the primary source
of retention concerns in this study. Interviewees talked about any attempted intervention strategies addressing two key areas of social concern for students.

One area involves the social bonding process, or affiliation. The other involves making adjustments to specific school rules which may permit students to enjoy a way of life while living at the school which provides them with a measure of "freedom" more akin to the socially oriented lifestyle which they enjoy when living in their own home locations.

**Toward Enhancing Affiliation**

Several subthemes came to light from the interviewees regarding enhancing the success of the bonding process. These themes include timing of any intervention strategies, and enhancing the quality of existing levels of nurturing regarding student relationships within the school. Interviewees also spoke about where any strategies ought to occur for the greatest effect, primarily at the residential house level. This becomes the place where students spend much of their time and do much of the relationship building within the school. Discussions also raised issues pertaining to the housemasters' role with respect to the bonding process. Still other suggestions dealt with providing counsellors to act as resources for housemasters and students, improving the roommate/residence selection process, and strategies aimed at the removal of social boundaries among the students toward a more tolerant student culture in the school.

**Timing of Intervention Strategies**

Intervention processes intended to assist with the bonding process must occur from the very outset of the year. Ten of the student leavers explained that they experienced feelings similar to Samantha's when she said, "I had little feelings [of
leaving] sort of all year.” As Benny said, he was very unhappy from early in the year, “but then I thought, you know, I’d give it a chance to see how things went for the first term.” All of the leaving students experienced an internal struggle as they came to grips with the decision to leave. Alice reflected that these feelings of leaving occurred “kind of off and on the whole time I was there . . . . I could never really decide where I belonged or where I fit in really.”

The students in this study had decided to allow for some time to pass before making that final decision to leave. By the time the students made that final decision to leave, however, the chances of retaining them became almost non existent. When asked what the school could have done to have kept them, at that point in their thinking, the typical response came as “nothing.”

Four of the students did report having experienced some lingering uncertainty about the correctness of their decision by year’s end. Two of them declared that they would have re-enrolled during the summer holiday following their departure, had they been asked back by the school, following a period of time during which they thought about things further.

Four students left the school prior to having completed the full year. Three of those students left during the first term. The fourth student left early in January, at the start of the second term. This certainly supports Tinto’s (1993) assertion that the first term represents the most difficult period of adjustment for students. As for the remaining eight students, four made their final decision to leave as early as the winter term, January or February. The remaining four students reported having decided as late as the Spring term.

The winter time can present special challenges to the happiness of the students’ spirits, as Stan, and parents Mario and Linda explained. This time of year can make students feel especially inclined toward leaving given, as Linda noted,
that, "it's dark when you get up in the morning. It's dark when you get out of school. It's cold. It's wind swept. I mean, I think that's a long, tough term for those kids."

Eight of the twelve leavers, then, had decided already to withdraw before or by the mid-point of the school year. Intervention strategies would need to occur very early in the school year especially for those students who sense the failure to persist so quickly. Early intervention can only help, too, of course in the cases where the decision lingers throughout the year.

The Need for Active Intervention

One problem associated with an intervention strategy involves identifying students who require intervention to help them to persist in the school. In this study, the interviewees, for the most part, tended not to discuss their feelings about leaving with anyone. As a result, they continued at school, largely unnoticed as having problems, while the ill feelings about their life in the school accumulated. Then, the only release came in the form of withdrawal.

Wendy found this to be true in her experience, especially with the sensitive students. For these kinds of students, "they just burst out crying or they get really angry . . . . It escalates before any adult hears about it, or even their roommate . . . . They can be well into the problem." By then, Wendy agreed, it is usually too late to intervene effectively.

Sally, a student, recognized that students who are in need will not come forward necessarily and ask for assistance. Embarrassment may prevent a student from reaching out, as Sally experienced. Typically, in her view, the student with low self confidence becomes the very person requiring assistance and remains the least likely to ask for it. Such people, "might think they're stupid and not as good as the
rest of the class.” Even teachers who may sense a problem with a student may not necessarily make it clear that students can approach them and instead choose to “let it go.” Little remains to do toward helping to retain such students with problems, therefore, unless others intervene actively once they notice that “something is wrong,” as Sally commented.

Tony referred as well to this notion that students with problems will simply drift apart from other students and thus fail to integrate and bond. Tony determined that this happened with Todd. Orientation had ended and it became all too easy for Todd to spend time by himself. Todd described the situation as a rut in which students can find themselves and in which they can remain “once that’s [orientation] through.” He said that typically a student can spend, “all your spares by yourself just going back to your room and just going to classes and not really trying to spend any of your free time with friends.”

Linda, Joanne’s mother, recognized, too late in terms of her daughter’s decision to leave the school, that Joanne required supportive recognition that she lived with a burden within the school. Linda said that she would have thought the school had experience in “picking up problems arising through the course of the school year. And the impact these difficulties might have.”

Typically in this study, Linda, too, confirmed that her daughter kept her problems to herself. Joanne clarified that, at the time of the problems she experienced at school, even she did not know that she was suffering from lack of help at the time. She simply “didn’t realise it until later on.”

Students may actively attempt to conceal their problems as well. This can make intervention even more challenging an endeavour. Joanne, Linda thought, assumed the role of a student who had no problems. Joanne “never complained about it [her problems at school]. Probably never articulated any kind of
resentment . . . only played along at school . . . . So nobody picked up on the notion that she [needed support].” In the end, then, Joanne needed someone to, “Ya’ know, just help. And her solution is ‘I’m outta’ here! . . . . By then she had other reasons for leaving. But I think that is what severed the real bond with the school community.”

Dennis admitted that he felt he simply could not be the one to approach an adult and request help with his problems. Dennis needed an adult to approach him, instead, and suggest that Dennis looked unhappy. Then, Dennis claimed, he “would have said ‘let’s talk.’ ”

Essentially, then, students require the assistance of someone within the school who can actively and effectively nurture the students by watching over them to help ensure that affiliation occurs. Stan referred to this nurturing person as the “guardian angel.”

Stan felt that the key to retaining students pertains to one concept after all. He said that students must feel needed within their school environment. He stressed that those who leave do not feel needed, and “if you want to solve attrition, you want the one line answer? Make them feel needed. They are just not talked to.”

The Housemaster as Intervener and Nurturer

Don, Priscilla’s father, expressed his view that an adjustment period exists for students new to the school. Don felt that the housemaster remains, “absolutely key in that environment . . . in terms of drawing things out of the students.” The housemaster lives among the students each day while at school. Don recommended that more actual nurturing take place with these students, rather than adopting more of the “sink or swim” mentality that can occur.
The reality at the time of this study, however, indicated that the housemaster typically did not experience daily contact with the students in the residence. Wendy mentioned that a misconception existed in this regard. Referring to notions of daily contact with students, Wendy exclaimed “but that’s not true!” Ideally, Wendy said daily contact would occur but the reality reflected that, “everyone has things that they’re preoccupied with.” Eugene, Sarah’s father, affirmed, too, the need for housemaster contact to occur on a one to one basis. Contact, he said, must be deliberate and premeditated if it will assist people such as his daughter in persisting at the school.

Angela, a parent, referred to the fact that the housemasters ought to display a consistent degree of social maturity themselves. When acting as a surrogate parent to the students, the housemaster cannot act as a “buddy buddy” one day and then as a disciplinarian the next. She recommended that whereas the school would like to offer a form of family-like atmosphere in its residences, the housemasters should be perhaps older and demonstrate a maturity necessary for the role:

It seems to me that the natural order ought to be that the teaching staff are the housemasters. They are, as a rule, older and more experienced, they are qualified in terms of their academic qualifications, and so on . . . I know that what the school is aiming to provide is a nice, cozy atmosphere that in some way replicates family. Ya’ don’t really, but that’s the aim. And so if you look at the housemasters as sort of substitute parents, then you want somebody who is a little older and a little more experienced doing that job which is essentially authoritarian . . . [the housemaster] just did not have the maturity that I would have looked for in a substitute parent . . . . I feel that the situation arose too often that [the housemaster] was a buddy one day and an authoritarian the next. Kids don’t buy that. They won’t swing back and forth that way.

Wendy, too, referred to the lack of consistency in the way in which housemasters run their residences. She questioned whether it is even possible to ask
that some housemasters operate their houses with a type of family value system. This, Wendy said, must come from the housemaster her/himself, as a person. Some housemasters, "are doing it and some people are not aware that it’s [the family value system] missing."

Perhaps, then, housemasters can place a higher priority upon consistency of approach regarding both the frequency of contact with each student and the quality of that contact. It appears that actively pursued daily contact with each student would serve as a check in determining to what extent bonding has occurred for him or her, toward maintaining higher levels of persistence. That contact, too, ought to be nurturing in nature, especially for those students who appear lacking in self confidence or who have drifted apart from peer friends, particularly in the residence.

Providing Personal Background Information about Students in the Residences

Toward nurturing students more effectively, Betty, Priscilla’s housemaster, wished that she had been provided with more background knowledge about her students before they came to live in her residence. Betty commented about the specific sort of information she required. It ranges from the student’s interests to any other pertinent information which the family believes the housemaster should know in order to help the child. Betty placed responsibility for providing that kind of information upon the student’s parents. They must make full disclosure about relevant facts and details pertaining to their daughter’s or son’s background in order to assist the housemaster as much as possible:

That’s really important to know . . . . What are their interests. I know that admissions give us the general [information] . . . . But, is there anything more that they can tell us to help us just a little bit? [Coming from] admissions, or the family, or the student in particular. I don’t want to put it [the responsibility to inform] in the lap of the school ‘cause I think it’s also the parents’ and the students’ responsibility to
provide that information to make their well being at the school even better.

Wendy, another housemaster, offered the same sort of comment regarding the need to know more about the individuals with whom she will share the residence. She cautioned, however, that the housemaster must use such information judiciously so as not to pre-judge a child unfairly:

It’s always good to have more information. Because then you could always make good decisions. . . . I think it’s a mistake to jump to conclusions or to take information and to make assumptions . . . for example, [a student]. I read the reports from her teachers and I thought she was the devil! Then I met her and thought she was wonderful! . . . I was told she was a bad girl. She was wonderful! If I had just read and made assumptions, I would have missed out on a great kid! . . . I don’t think you should make any assumptions . . . my concern is that if you give some people information some information, there’s going to be emotional reaction.

Resource Counsellors

In order to facilitate the support and nurturing of students, two housemasters, Betty and Wendy, advocated the presence in the school of a resource counsellor. Such a person ought to be a specialist in the area of dealing with adolescents’ social concerns. Even if housemasters were to be provided with more and better information about students, in their residences challenges remain in knowing what best to do to help a student who has been identified as needing assistance but who may not even be talking about that need.

Both Betty and Wendy described the characteristics of such a resource counsellor. She or he ought to have professional training as a psychologist or social worker, and be available on an informal basis rather than by formal appointment and only at additional cost to the parents. This latter method, reflecting current
practice, delays the counselling process and makes it too inaccessible. As Betty said, the more formal current practice also remains too big a “deal” for the needs of the housemaster because she must call the parents and say, “would you mind paying . . . so your daughter can go to counselling?” That’s huge. I just think it would be a lot easier . . . instead of it being this huge deal.”

The counsellor would be someone to whom housemasters, teachers, and students can go for the purpose of obtaining good information for assistance in making an informed decision about student social concerns. Betty and Wendy explained that the counsellor should be someone with special personality traits as well. Wendy would like to see someone who is “with it” socially, who has practical experience in dealing with adolescents, and who, “is not a paper pusher. Somebody you could go to and say this is what it looks like to me, what does it look like to you.”

In speaking about counselling, Betty looked more to the students’ perspective. She referred the fact that while this need clearly exists in the school, the whole concept of counselling can be daunting for students especially. Such a resource person, then, must be more familiar to the students on a social level. The counsellor ought to be, “someone who knows the kids . . . someone the kids feel comfortable with. Because I think counselling is such a big word.”

From the student perspective, Adriane emphasized the absolute necessity for confidentiality in the counselling process. She referred to the fact that when she received counselling, a large measure of her comfort was in knowing that she could talk and the conversation would “not get back to anybody.” Adriane mentioned the informal communication process around the school. She called that communications “network” the “grapevine,” and explained how “like, you tell one person and, like, the next day everybody will know but the story will be completely bent out of
proportion." A key point for Adriane’s comfort in the counselling process became the fact that her counsellor was a person with whom Adriane could speak and obtain sound advice, and “didn’t have any reason to blab. Like, she was all in confidence . . . like, she could help me with it [my problem].”

Brad commented that if a student has no one to whom she or he can really speak candidly about what bothers her or him, that student “can feel awfully alone.” He said that if he were thinking of leaving the school, Brad would need support from someone who came from within the school, who could acknowledge for the him that he was not having a wonderful time at the moment, and that who could confirm that, “this place [the school] isn’t always the greatest.” Then, that person could also help the Brad to understand that eventually “you’re going to have a great time . . . here . . . . Maybe giving the person a little more help.”

Peer Counsellors

Brad and Dennis referred to the need for peer counselling in the school. Sometimes, as both boys clarified, a student will not feel comfortable speaking with an adult. Brad spoke about peer counselling occurring more on an informal level for him at the school. The key points remained that he could talk with a peer openly and without feeling that his peer was judging him. As contrasted with an adult, with a peer, “you can say what you want without the fear that you’re constantly being judged.”

Dennis felt that “at that school, there are so many kids with so many problems...and if they had someone to talk to” it would really help them to cope better. He, of course, included himself in that category. Dennis remarked that sometimes an adult cannot be the right type of figure to whom students, “kids” as he called them, will seek assistance. Instead, Dennis suggested the implementation of
a student support group. He explained how that might work and how he has seen it work at his new school. Different support groups can exist within the school. Each group is run by "kids." Each group remains completely confidential. Some adult, a teacher known to the students, must organize the group system. The students must have faith in the integrity of this adult as someone who does not pass judgement and who listens well. As Dennis said about student membership in such a group, "none of the other teachers know. The parents don't know. Other students don't know." Timing of the meetings needs to be worked out with a time compatible to school hours.

The groups all deal with different themes running through the students' lives. One theme could be the use of illicit drugs. Dennis explained that the group's purpose is not to simply tell students not to use drugs. They already know that sort of thing. Instead, "they talk about it and they try to help you. They do a kind of a life chart. Stuff that happened to you like major events. They try to see if those events are what are causing the problems you are having now."

Training for leaders of these groups clearly remains an issue, perhaps especially for peer counsellors. Dennis' experience was that "I'm sure they probably have some kind of background with dealing with this . . . . You need somebody who's been there." Other characteristics include friendliness, honesty, allowing people to speak, and being non judgmental.

Dennis saw teachers as being the people who look for the "warning" signs that someone may need help from such a group. He included signs such as "he's unfocussed or he's always talking out in class, or whatever." Then, "the teacher who runs it . . . will step aside, meet them [the student in question] one day in the hallway . . . . Very subtle."
Dennis believed that he could have and would have availed himself of this kind of support group. The point remains that the organizer can approach the students in a non-judgmental way, but that "you can't make them join [a] support group. It has to be their choice . . . . It would have helped me deal with it [his problems]."

Sarah, the student who referred to teachers as "the bad ones," agreed that she would have accepted some assistance with her problems at school. That assistance, she acknowledged, could have come only from another student.

Roommates and Residence Selection

Roommate issues figured prominently in interviewees' explanations for student departure. Suggestions follow pertaining to ways in which roommate conflicts might be prevented or, if not, at least resolved more efficaciously than by having a student leave the school.

Interviewees made it very clear that roommates need to be matched on the basis of compatibility, not only with each other, but with the tone of the house and the housemaster. Issues that pertained to traits such as completely different study habits, levels of noise tolerance, different athletic or artistic passions, personal hygiene, and/or negative influences upon each other caused more social problems with roommates and housemasters than did utter dislike for a dorm partner or a housemaster.

Wendy mentioned that the person or people making roommate assignments must consider the process very carefully and take into account many factors. Wendy addressed the necessity of making certain that the person(s) making the roommate pairings knows what she/he/they are attempting to do with this match. Roommates should go together for well thought-out reasons. Merely because two
students know each other does not validate their being paired in a dorm. Finally, the roommate allocation process must include careful matching with the personality and the values practised by the housemaster. Housemasters, said Wendy, tend to set the tone for the house, much as a principal does with a school:

One of my suggestions is to look at how it’s determined and who determines what house that kids will go in to. There must have been a reason why [a student] was put in there. Maybe he knew other kids in there. Maybe he knew them, but maybe he didn’t like them . . . . That’s a problem. Just because a kid knows another is not a good reason to put them together . . . What is the personality of that person and match it to the housemaster. Because the students will change, but the housemaster will attract the same value system as they have. Just like the principal sets the tone for the school, the housemaster sets the tone for the house.

At least two of the students who left suggested that they would have preferred the privacy of a single person dormitory, something which the school did not offer. Single person dorms, the students said, can provide the privacy necessary when needed, but still allow for special interaction in more public parts of the residences when desired.

Once a roommate assignment has been made and then found lacking in suitability for one or more parties involved, the opportunities for changing that roommate match appeared to be rare indeed. Almost all interviewees reported that if there did exist some school policy for changing roommates, they did not know about it. Wendy said that a roommate change could be possible in the school. Essentially, however, such a process demanded that the student’s parents complain to the school before any real action can occur.

Students and parents reported, however, that a key social deterrent exists toward making a roommate change within the school. Making a change causes enormous social upheaval and creates social stigmas for the student requesting the
change, as well as for the list of students involved in making the change. If someone changes roommates, each must find a new roommate. This upsets other delicate social balances already existing in the residences.

Students referred to social upheaval usually with the term “uncomfortable.” Adriane, for example, knowing that if she had talked to her housemaster about a change of roommates, knew that intervention would have been likely and commented that, “I just felt uncomfortable with [Wendy] talking to [the roommate] about how I didn’t like her and how things were, like, tense between us.”

Even when the school offered to make a roommate change for Ralph, typically he declined. Given that no formal policy existed for making such a change, Ralph knew the social implications all too well. He felt that others would have regarded him as being disloyal to his house mates. Ralph’s father, Hugh, suggested that his son would have felt like a quitter while having still remained among the students. Hugh commented that there must be a better way of accommodating such conflict within the residences:

**Ralph:** They offered me to change rooms but I didn’t really want to go ’cause that meant me changing houses and that, I think, that would’ve caused more problems. I didn’t want them to say ‘oh, I’m abandoning [the] House’

**Hugh:** I think he [Ralph] felt people were going to call him a quitter. He’s not that type of person . . . so he said ‘no way, I’ll suffer it out no matter what.’ But there’s got to be a way for somebody who’s quiet like that and doesn’t want to upset the apple cart. There’s got to be a way that somebody lines it up better in the future.

Laura, a parent, made a relevant suggestion regarding a change to current school policy for new students. Whereas returning students have the benefit of choosing roommates whom they know already, for the most part, new students usually find themselves simply assigned to someone whom they do not know. In her
view, the school could provide for roommate changes without the social stigma currently attached to such a process.

Referring to the policy in use in another residential school, Laura recommended that new students take a roommate on the clear understanding that the school will revisit the roommate pairings at the conclusion of the first term together. In that way, students expect a review. Nobody need fear living in an unsatisfactory situation for long. Everyone knows, under that system, that the school considers roommate changes quite understandable, normal, expected, and without negative repercussion. As Laura commented, "kids knew that they weren't locked into a bad situation...they always knew that there was that option."

Laura's daughter, Adriane, upon having heard this suggestion, offered that given the expected nature of change under such a system, she would have felt comfortable making a much needed change in her circumstances. As Adriane quickly remarked, "I would have taken advantage of it... It would have made changing rooms a lot easier. I wouldn't have had to stir the pot."

The literature, too, speaks to the use of early intervention strategies with respect to roommates (e.g. Hawken, Kelly & Duran, 1990; Lovejoy, Perkins & Collins, 1995). Commensurate with early detection of problems with roommates, students should receive benefit of counselling so that they learn about productive ways in which to cope with roommate conflict.

**Toward a More Tolerant Student Body**

Students referred often to the nature of students at the school moving in social circles or groups. One student called the groups "cliques." Interviewees who left the school found themselves either by choice or by exclusion standing outside of the
social barriers established around such groups. This contributed toward the leavers’ lack of affiliation, of fitting into the school.

Student interviewees who addressed this issue offered ways of bringing about changes to that situation. The students saw that social barriers could be made more permeable. In this way, students could come to know, and hopefully understand and become more tolerant of, those peers who represented the social “extreme,” as Wendy noted, or not “up the middle,” as Wayne referred to such students.

Six of the student leavers, many of the current students, and three of the teacher interviewees talked about the existence of student groups or cliques. A few of these interviewees actually described more about the formation and nature of these groups. Cory, for example, spoke often about how she and her friends moved about in social groups by virtue of the residential house in which they had been assigned a dorm. It is difficult for students to move in other than those firmly established groups. She said that students tend to label each other as being one way or another, having one skill or another, etcetera.

Cory mentioned that she had come to know another student at the school only very recently at year’s end. Cory lamented the fact that she did not get to know this person who travelled outside her own social group much earlier in the year. Cory explained that one of the group’s members deemed that other person not worth getting to know. Only when Cory took the time to speak with this “outcast” girl, and only at the conclusion of the year, did Cory realise what a fine relationship may have become established earlier in the year had she but made the effort.

Anne spoke about tolerance among her peers. She said that, “I wouldn’t say [the student body here is] totally intolerant. But less tolerant than it should be.” Anne referred to membership in the students’ informal groups as laying at the root of the issue. So noticeable had the group structure become, that the senior students
at the school met as a larger group to talk about the very existence of these smaller groups.

Each group has a name, in Anne’s terms. She referred to them as the “too cool” group, the “middle” group, and the “different” group. Unlike Cory’s experiences, Anne explained that the students in these groups exist within each grade level at the school. The students find each other by virtue of activities at which they excelled.

The group name of “too cool” represents a term recognized and used regularly by the senior students, as Anne explained. Members of the “too cool” group “party” heavily. They are “too cool to talk to you” if you are not in their group. Non-membership in that group for a student means that the group members will, “completely ignore them. [Group members offer] no eye contact, no conversation whatsoever.” Anne explained, too, that in this group “you care more about looking good than having good friends . . . looking cool, I guess. It’s an issue that’s not talked about a lot but I know it bugs everyone.”

The “medium” group and the “different” group, as Anne explained, “are sort of the same except the ‘different’ group has more extracurricular things like music and stuff . . . . They’re more involved in things like drama and art and music. I guess they’re more down to earth.” Anne saw the “different” group as including more arts and academic students whereas the medium group “I guess is a mixture of social and sports.”

Ruby talked about ways in which group boundaries could be lessened. For her, the residential houses, and team membership all reinforced the group boundaries. Members of another “clique,” in her words, “sort of talked to us. But they never really did.” Ruby noticed that events which brought the students together as members of a specific grade level in school worked to lessen effectively the
existing boundaries. These events included barbeque parties and "stuff like that" held at the end of the year for all the students within her grade level at the school.

Anne suggested that working toward tolerance and the breaking down of barriers will occur more readily when the "students themselves" focus upon such a goal. She did suggest similar activities to those explained by Ruby. Activities which "force" the students within each grade to work together will help this disintegration of boundaries. At the time of the interview, Anne lamented that "there's nothing [presently] that brings the whole grade together, that forces us to work together." Anne discovered that even something as relatively minor as planning a group Christmas party can reduce those boundaries among the students. In her experience with that process, the entire grade of students came together to accomplish a common goal. The teacher input must be minimal, in Anne's view, because the success of the venture lay in the students finding their own way and really listening to each other:

I guess the first thing we had to do was the [social event]. It was kind of new and hard . . . . We learned a lot from it. Because we all had to work together. And we all had to get something done. It's hard to get everyone involved. . . . we really learned a lot doing it all on our own. Not having someone tell us what to do and where to go and what to get. We had to figure everything out . . . . When you put a student in charge [of the activity], you have to be really careful. Because if it is one of the 'too cools,' um, . . . if it is someone who's really worried about their social status and stuff, they may only listen to their 'too cool' group and do what the 'too cool' group wants. So you have to have someone who's willing to be open and listen to everyone and have the patience to listen to everyone and not just the vocal people. Some people have the patience to say hang on a second, I want everyone's opinion here.
Diane agreed that an increase in tolerance becomes a necessity for the school wishing to retain students who represent something “different.” She said that such a transition toward more tolerance rests with the student body, as opposed to any official school policy. Diane called it all a “test of time,” and that the society outside the school needs to change as well in order for that tolerant attitude to strengthen inside the school.

**School Rules**

The school’s rules regarding student conduct, when compared with the kinds of rules by which the students had to abide when at home, seemed too strict, too severe, and/or caused life at the school too become to routine in the cases of eight of the student leavers. At the same time as student interviewees discussed the school rules, however, these same students quickly added that they recognized the need for school rules and for the school to enforce certain standards of conduct. Students understood that parents help certain expectations and even that issues of liability lay at the root of some school rules. As Dave suggested, some of the changes needed to retain some of the people who felt the rules were too strict “aren’t the kind of changes that we’d [the school] want to make. To please the minority would be to displease the majority and the parents.”

Still, some of the rules caused friction for students, perhaps unnecessarily. Some interviewees encouraged the school to reassess the value of some of the rules to discover whether any changes can be brought about. With respect to rules which partition younger grades from older at study time, for example, the school might provide for more discretion in allowing students such as Ralph, Samantha, and Benny to work and study with those older people with whom they felt socially
comfortable. As it was for those three students, they were kept apart artificially from the older students with whom they had a social rapport. As a result, the three felt segregated in such a way as would never have occurred had they been attending school at home.

The school grants certain social privileges, too, related to everything from study hall location to curfew time for senior students. Strong academic students, such as Ralph, found himself bound by the rules necessary to keep less focussed students on an academic path, rules which he found oppressive and demeaning. Samantha’s friends at the school all enjoyed social privileges which she did not. This fairly tormented Samantha and embarrassed her unnecessarily. More discretion in some cases such as these would certainly make a profoundly positive difference toward retaining someone like Samantha. Wendy went so far as to suggest that Samantha “would have stayed had she been [treated with the same privileges as] a senior.”

From the interviewees, senior students like to socialize when at home by visiting coffee shops just to sit and chat. Senior student interviewees suggested that anything that the school could do toward making it less difficult for senior students to leave the school for a short while for a coffee or even to visit another student’s dormitory on campus without it being “such a hassle,” as Lois said, would be a welcome relief. By the age of seventeen years and older, students do not need to ask for such detailed permission when at home. They found it quite socially demeaning to need to do so when at residential school.

Laura, Adriane’s mother, suggested that making it easier for students to leave the school on weekends when they may want to come home may help to alleviate some anxieties among the students especially in “those long cold January months.” As Laura remarked, when Adriane was so depressed at school, had she been “able
to come home when the chips were down [it would have been better for her].”

Giving students the option in that way can relieve some social pressures they may feel from time to time.

Sometimes the rules can make the school patterns too predictable, too routine. This has the effect of removing “control” from the students, people who are used to having more control over their own lives at home. Alice commented, for example, that “you had to talk to a million people before you were allowed to go to someone’s house [residence] to watch a movie . . . . In a lot of ways, it was ridiculous.”

Lois offered that, while school planned social activities can be fun from time to time, senior students found much more enjoyment in the informal activities that they had planned. It may mean leaving campus for a house party, going to a movie, or to a coffee shop, but the underlying issue remains that it becomes a matter of independence and control for the older students. As Pat and Wendy, housemasters, both said, it typically affects students by grade eleven and older.

The balance between granting students privileges permitting too much freedom so that they may jeopardize their careers at the school and having the students feel “trapped” in this school setting remains a delicate one. As Howard remarked, “There’s a lot worse places [schools] you can be at...you have to realise what kind of an institution you’re at . . . . You’re at a boarding school [after all].”

**Summary**

Some interviewees expressed their view that the school may not have retained all of its leaving students. In some cases, it may have been and may be still in the best interests of both the student and school for a student to move on to another school, even when the school would welcome that student to re-enrol.
In other cases, however, interviewees spoke about their views concerning what the school might have done to have retained other students and what the school might consider doing toward improving future student retention. Most comments in this regard centred about improving the affiliation process.

Some interviewees also mentioned that any intervention strategies must begin early in the year. Housemasters in particular must actively nurture each student in the residence through deliberate and individual contact. Students must feel needed, cared for, and must find friends, rather than being left to “sink or swim” on their own. Families should provide complete background information about the students such that housemasters in particular can prepare for dealing with the students as they attempt to integrate. The presence of counsellors available informally to both students and teachers, as well as peer counsellors, would provide for much needed and welcomed support for all in the residential school as they cope with the complexities of life in that environment.

Comments from leavers and other interviewees demonstrate that roommates played a critical role in the affiliation process. Interviewees suggested, then, that the people at school responsible for roommate allocations must know what the school is attempting to accomplish with these assignments, make them carefully, base them upon daily living habits of the students involved, and allow for change as well as counselling to occur with roommate assignments as a regular, rather than an extraordinary, aspect of school life.

Some respondents suggested that the school can break down social barriers among student cliques by having the students work together on their own large scale social activities and projects. This process can provide for greater understanding
among the student groups and allow for increased levels of tolerance through improved student integration.

Finally, with respect to school rules, all student respondents reported that they recognized the necessity for any residential school to enforce its rules in order to function effectively. Some student interviewees and even some adult respondents, however, suggested that school officials might revisit those school rules which impinge upon students' social lives a little too much. This may be true especially to the extent that some rules appear so contrary to the home life of the adolescents, and particularly the older students, that school life becomes too rigid at the students' stage of life.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Summary and Conclusions

I think probably the reason why everyone leaves the school . . . voluntarily is due to some sort of social conflict between the student body and that individual. 'Cause people don’t leave schools because, 'oh, I want a change.' If they were having a good time and they had lots of friends, and the school is good, they would stay. So naturally, you have to assume there was something within, like, the school that is causing a problem. And if the curriculum is good and the school is well run, and the teachers are friendly, then you have to look to the students. So obviously there’s some kind of social concern. (Dennis, a leaving student)

This chapter provides an overview of the significance of voluntary attrition as it impacts schools, whether of tertiary, secondary, or primary levels of education. A summation follows which outlines the nature of the problem investigated and the questions arising therefrom, and where and how this study was accomplished.

A discussion then summarizes this study’s findings. This research provides a point from which to further enhance our understanding of student voluntary attrition and suggests other avenues of research toward that end.

The Importance of Understanding Student Attrition

Concerns over student retention continue to place the issue at the fore of research particularly at the university and college levels of education. As Tinto (1993) comments, “once the concern of several ‘enlightened’ institutions, the goal of enhanced student retention has become . . . a common part of institutional . . . planning” (p. ix).
Private schools, too, particularly in the United States, recognize that student attrition issues raise concerns which run to the very core of the existence of such schools. As Dalton (1993) says about attrition, it can be “do or die” regarding a private school’s survival. He suggests that Canadians can learn from the United States’ situation so that we may see what lies ahead for Canadian schools.

Still, we know comparatively little about the issues surrounding student voluntary attrition, particularly with respect to private schools, and especially in Canada. The information we do have in the literature pertains primarily to survey studies which ask survey respondents to attribute student attrition to single categories of explanation.

A Very Complex Issue

From the literature available, it seems that the forces which shape attrition arise from a very complex interplay of issues. A myriad of studies from the university and college levels suggests that some common themes do emerge in the mosaic which culminates in student withdrawal. It appears that the dispositions of the people who enrol, the character of their interactions with the institution upon entry, and the external forces which influence their behaviour in school all play a role in a student’s failure to persist in her or his school (Tinto, 1993).

This Study in Review

This research attempted to enhance our understanding of voluntary attrition at one private school. Given the apparent complexity of voluntary attrition, the study sought to investigate the problem by means of a qualitative research
methodology, in this instance, a case study approach. This case study examined the stories associated with each of the students who voluntarily departed from a Canadian private school in a given year.

This research explored the ways in which students’ personal background characteristics and any external forces acting upon the students who withdrew from a private residential secondary school, and the organizational characteristics of that school contributed to the students’ decisions to withdraw voluntarily from the school. This problem, of course, raised a number of research questions requiring examination.

These research questions included a study of the personal and/or family characteristics which existed in each of the leaving student’s background which may have placed that student at risk of withdrawal once enrolled in the school. Then, looking at the students’ experiences once enrolled in the school, the study investigated how those characteristics interacted with elements of the school’s culture, and how external factors affected the students such that they decided to withdraw from the school.

Specifically with regard to culture, research questions focussed upon how the norms, values, beliefs, and assumptions widely held within the school culture or within subcultures in the school affected the students’ decisions to withdraw voluntarily from the school. Given that teachers can play a role in this attrition process and in the school’s culture, questions probed ways in which the qualities of teachers, including relevant personal qualities, the view of a teacher’s role, the teachers' disposition toward students, and the teachers' disposition toward collaboration with other teachers affected the students’ decisions to withdraw from the school. This study also examined the ways in which the school's curricular and
co-curricular programming, and physical characteristics of the school environment affected the students' decisions to withdraw from the school.

The site for this study was a private school which had an attrition rate of 16% for the year in which this study took place. Even with this attrition statistic, the vast majority, i.e. 84%, of the students who attended the school that year chose to re-enrol in the school in the year of this study. Clearly, those students found what they needed from within that school, and it served and continues to serve its student clientele very well.

This research, then, focussed upon only that minority of students who withdrew voluntarily from the school and takes the form of a situational analysis. Twelve of these students, their parents, friends and roommates still at the school, and teachers/housemasters from the school all provided data through interviews for the study.

Although they left the school, from the interviews it became abundantly clear that the students who withdrew, and their families, continued to hold this school in very high regard. One parent, Eugene, summarized well the prevailing and positive attitude toward the school in general from among the leavers and their families in this study. Eugene emphasized that, "if I had . . . more children, I would be calling the school to reserve places for them right now without any hesitation whatsoever."

Far from blaming the school, then, the leavers and their families recognized that a combination of circumstances, including personal and school-related issues, occurred such that leaving the school proved to be preferable in their cases to remaining enrolled. The interviewees graciously shared with me their experiences leading up to the decision to withdraw from this school.
The Findings

This study demonstrates that each of the departing students brought with her or him into the school at the time of enrolment some form of "personal baggage," personal character traits or issues arising from her or his personal background, which affected the ways in which the students interacted with the internal characteristics of the school. These personal issues varied widely and included traits pertaining to family problems, age, health, mental health, independence, sensitivity, physical size, and maturity.

Once enrolled in the school, these same students experienced problems largely of a social nature which adversely affected the students' ability to affiliate within the school's culture. These problems included the failure to make close social connections with peer friends, and/or an adult in the person of a teacher or housemaster; roommate conflicts; orientation program issues; school rules; a lack of privacy; an "unreal" or too sheltered environment at the school; extracurricular activities; boredom; academics; and issues pertaining to physical location and space. Some gender related issues came to the fore as well, particularly as they affected the affiliation process in the context of each student's personal characteristics.

External forces also played a prominent role in the unique formula of events leading to each student's failure to persist. These external attractions included some family issues. By far the most compelling external forces, however, came in the form of old friends back home with whom leavers remained in contact while enrolled in the school.

Of all the many relevant issues raised in this investigation, two seem to pervade the discussion most strikingly. One relates to the need for students to make that vital social connection through finding the person or persons with whom to bond at the school. The second pertains to the rather sports oriented, or as one
student referred to it, the "jock" culture of the school, in terms of the male students' experiences.

Allen & Nelson (1987), Johnson (1994), Pascarella (1982), Stith & Russell (1994), Tinto (1993), and University System (1994) all indicate that two essential challenges face students regarding their assimilation into a school. One challenge is academic, the other social. Whereas academic issues played a role in the decision to withdraw for six of the students in this study, that role assumed minor proportions, even for those people who mentioned it at all. Without question, respondents in this case study demonstrated clearly that social issues lay at the core of the ultimate decision to leave the school.

With respect to both persistence in a school and the needs of adolescents, many studies (e.g. Arhar & Kromrey, 1993; Eaton, Mitchell & Jolley, 1991; Gallagher, 1996; Pascarella, 1992; Tinto, 1993) point directly toward a strong need for students to affiliate or bond with other people, and especially with their peers. Gallagher (1996) equates this need as being almost as strong as the need to survive. This research strongly endorses that position. Indeed, each of the respondents in this study showed very clearly and directly that survival at this residential school depended upon having friends for emotional support. Establishing those bonds of friendship at some profound, deep level as good, close friends rather than as mere acquaintances, made the difference between a student having decided to remain in the school or withdraw from it. These leavers did not establish the necessary bond or affiliation.

Further, it became clear that such a relationship, or bond, must also assume a positive nature. In this study, having established a close bond with someone who became bent upon engaging in activities contrary to the development of a positive
social role in the school, or who desired strongly to leave the school, also influenced substantially the close friend's decision to withdraw from the school.

Studies (e.g. Arhar & Kromrey, 1993; Tinto, 1993) also note that having a relationship with at least one adult member of the school, for example a teacher, plays an important role in the bonding process for students. This study confirms that view as well. In those few instances where such a bond did exist, however, the bond with an adult did not constitute enough of a positive force to retain a student in the absence of the more influential peer bonds for the leaving students.

A key component of this peer bonding or affiliation process in this residential school involves the roommate. Many studies (e.g. Carey, Hamilton & Shanklin, 1986; Hawken, Kelly & Duran, 1990; Lapidus, Green & Baruh, 1985; Lovejoy, Perkins & Collin, 1995; Waldo, 1982; Waldo, 1984) address this same issue from the university perspective. Just as the many studies suggest, in this research respondents reported that poor roommate relationships lead to the student leavers having developed very negative feelings about the entire school and their experience while at the school at that key social level. Poor quality social relationships severely impeded the establishment of positive affiliation.

As the studies indicate, too, the respondents in this study reported that for those eleven students who had roommates, problems with that relationship arose very early in the school year. Left largely ignored, and/or without sufficiently early or effective intervention strategies, these poor roommate relationships reinforced a powerfully negative downward social spiral in the lives of the students who withdrew.

Group membership plays a critical role in the affiliation process for adolescents (Gallagher, 1996). Non-membership in a group can result in alienation and withdrawal from a school (Arhar & Kromrey, 1993). Goldberg & Chandler
(1989) show that adolescent peer groups recognize highly valued student members within a school, and for male students in particular, a high degree of athletic skill remains a key ingredient toward achieving popularity and acceptance among their peers. This study also supports that notion from the perspective of the male student leavers and their peers at the school.

Respondents who spoke about the male students who left, and indeed those males themselves, referred to the “jock,” or athletically dominated male group culture at the school. In this study, the male students who left were physically smaller, or weaker in some physical way, or less interested in engaging in sports, or even physically injured, making them athletically less capable than their male peers. Some of the male leavers also demonstrated a greater preference for participation in the arts or academics as opposed to sport, and/or showed a distaste for adolescent male physical game playing, whether formal or informal. These males then found themselves as “social isolates” (Gallagher, 1996) and without those strong peer bonds necessary for survival in the school. Having female friends proved insufficiently strong an affiliation in terms of the necessary peer bonding. In the absence of that rather natural avenue toward affiliation for these male students, and perhaps especially at a school wherein respondents reported strong evidence of a prevalent male “jock” culture, and unable to find affiliation through other means, such as a sound roommate relationship or other peer friendship, the male students did not find a strong social bond and left the school.

**Toward a More Complete Understanding of Voluntary Attrition**

This study, based upon qualitative evidence, provides an investigation of the issues underlying the attrition process for the twelve student leavers involved. As such, it represents a strong beginning toward understanding the details as to how
many complex factors, both personal and school related, interact so as to motivate students to withdraw voluntarily from their private school.

This research occurred at an early stage in the research of this issue in terms of the literature available on private schools. Further and similar studies can enhance our understanding of voluntary student attrition. Such studies might include an investigation as to what prompts students to choose a particular private school, and how this may relate to their personal characteristics and ultimate decision to withdraw from their school. Research might also include a closer investigation of gender issues pertaining to the ways in which students interact with the internal characteristics of their private school.

Another interesting and informative approach to this issue may include a study of students who choose to remain enrolled in their private school in spite of having experiencing personal background issues and external forces comparable to those brought to light through this study. Surely, similar and/or equally compelling types of issues revealed in the lives of this study's respondents must affect the lives of other students too. The question remains as to whether any other students have undergone similar personal life's experiences and yet for some reasons still chose to remain enrolled in their school rather than withdraw. If so, how did they cope, how did such people find affiliation within their school? How did they find that necessary affiliation in spite of their problems and external attractions? We might learn, then, how a school's culture worked positively and in favour of retaining students with "problematic" backgrounds, notwithstanding those very problems.

Applications of this Study

At this stage, hopefully private school administrators can benefit from understanding more about the complex issues involved in student voluntary attrition
from a private school. Perhaps, then, we may use the results of this study and its implications regarding the significance of a student's personal background characteristics, the school's organizational characteristics, and the interaction of all of these factors in key areas of school life, toward enhancing student retention.

At another level, university and college administrators, too, may benefit from the unique insights offered in this study regarding the nature of the personal background issues at play in students' lives as they attempt to cope with the culture of a residential school environment. Similarly, public school administrators may understand more about the kinds of issues facing adolescent students as they strive to cope on a daily basis with school life in the context of their own personal problems.

The twelve students who took part in this study left the school prematurely. From my experience working with and understanding each of these respondents, and indeed from the comments made from the other respondents who know these students, clearly each one of these twelve leavers possessed the potential to have made unique, continuous, and outstanding contributions to the school community from which they left. Conversely, each of these students could have continued to benefit from the remarkable school from which they withdrew and which they still hold in high regard. They needed to experience the affiliation from within the school such that they would have chosen to remain enrolled. Viewed from either perspective, these students left too soon.

The more we understand about voluntary attrition, the better we can enhance retention in our private schools. Only then can other students such as these delightful twelve find their niche in their chosen private school, much to the profound benefit of everyone concerned.
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APPENDIX ONE

Introductory Letter to Parents:
Request for a Personal Interview

November 1995

Dear [name of "departed" student and her/his parent],

I hope that all is well with you and that you are enjoying [name of student]'s new school. I certainly miss your presence here at [name of the school under study].

You may know that I have been working toward completion of my doctoral degree for the past few years at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, the University of Toronto. My area of study is student voluntary departure from private schools. I am trying to determine why students and/or their parents decide to leave their private schools.

I would appreciate very much your assistance with my study. I would like to interview [name of student and parents] so that I may understand as well as possible your own reasons for having left [name of the school].

I have two goals in acquiring this information. One is that I personally, and we as a school, did not wish to see you leave us. We would like to understand as well as we can the reasons for your voluntary departure from [name of school].

The second goal, of course, is that I would like to complete my degree! This is an area of particular interest to me, both as an educator and from my former role as admissions director. This is a natural path for me to follow with my research.

Information which you give me may appear in my thesis. If I do use some of this information, I assure you that you will retain complete anonymity in my project.
Neither your name, the school's name, nor any other identifying characteristics will appear in my research. You may also withdraw from the research project at any time, of course.

I will give you a telephone call in the next few days to ensure that you did receive this letter. Then, if you will allow, I would appreciate very much a chance to visit with you. I hope to meet with you in your home or in some other location of your choice, at your convenience, to chat about your reasons for leaving.

If you would like to contact me at any time, please feel comfortable calling me at home. My number is [home telephone number]. If I happen to be out, I am likely to be at school. You could either leave a message with my wife, Judy, or on our answering machine. I will call you back as soon as possible. Of course, you can also reach me at school. My number is [school phone number].

Thank you very much. I really look forward to seeing you again and to chatting with you.

Sincerely,

Stephan Grasmück
Dear [name of "departed" student and her/his parent],

I hope that all is well with you and that you are enjoying [name of student]'s new school. I certainly miss your presence here at [name of the school under study].

You may know that I have been working toward completion of my doctoral degree for the past few years at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, the University of Toronto. My area of study is student voluntary departure from private schools. I am trying to determine why students and/or their parents decide to leave their private school.

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Neither your name, the school's name, nor any other identifying characteristics will appear in my research. You may also withdraw from the research project at any time, of course.

I will give you a telephone call in the next few days to ensure that you did receive this letter. Then, if you will allow, I will either call back at a more convenient time or have the interview at that time over the phone. I would appreciate so much the opportunity to chat about your reasons for leaving.

If you would like to contact me at any time, please feel comfortable calling me at home. My number is [home telephone number]. If I happen to be out, I am likely to be at school. You could either leave a message with my wife, Judy, or on our answering machine. I will call you back as soon as possible. Of course, you can also reach me at school. My number is [school phone number].

Thank you very much. I really look forward to chatting with you again.

Sincerely,

Stephan Grasmück
APPENDIX TWO

Questions for Students
(also for their parents and former roommates)

General Context for the Student
How long had you been at the school before deciding to leave it?

Why did you (your son/daughter/roommate) leave the school?

Who made the decision to leave: you alone, or in consultation with someone? With whom?

When did you first sense those initial feelings of wanting to leave the school?

What triggered those initial feelings?

What were any other contributing factors to these feelings?

What was the final factor in helping you to make your decision to leave?

Expectations About the School

What characteristics were you looking for in a school?

Who made the choice to attend this school?

What made you/that person decide to choose this school?

How well were these expectations met or not met? In what ways?

School Culture

For all students interviewed:

1. How did various aspects of the school affect your decision to leave with respect to?
   (a) the curriculum (courses offered, marks achieved, etc.)
(b) the co-curricular programming (sports, arts, clubs, etc.)

(c) the social aspects of the school:

(i) with whom did you interact most frequently in the residential house and your grade?

(ii) how did any of the people at the school individually or as a group influence your decision to leave the school, e.g. were there any things which they do or believe in as either as a group or as individuals which prompted you to leave?

(d) the physical setting of the school:

(i) how did this affect your decision to leave the school, e.g. the location and setting of the school, your residential dorm, the house, etc.?

(e) the teachers of the school:

(i) did you feel especially close to any teachers while at the school? Why?

(ii) how do you view the teachers' personal qualities, their role, their disposition toward their students, and teachers' disposition toward other teachers

(iii) how did any teacher(s) affect your decision to leave?

Additional questions for the students new to the school:

1. Did you find yourself interacting with any certain group of people at the school? With whom did you interact or find yourself involved with most often?

2. How did you react to the various activities and beliefs of your new group of friends/peers at the school?
Closure

What other factors, which I have not mentioned, may have contributed to your decision to leave?

What would you have changed/change now at the school such that you would have stayed in the community?

How could we have helped or what could we have done vis a vis the school's curriculum, co-curriculum, and/or social life to have encouraged you to stay in the school?

When you have other thoughts about these issues, please give me a call and I would like to chat with you again.

Questions for the Former Teachers and/or Housemasters

Why did this student leave the school?

With which group of people did he/she befriended/associate at the school?

How is/is not this school a good "fit" for this student?

When did this desire to change schools begin in her/him?

How could we have helped/what could we have done vis a vis curriculum, co-curriculum, social life to have encouraged this student to stay in the school?

When you have other thoughts about these issues, please give me a call and I would like to chat with you again.
CONSENT FORM

I, ____________________________, give my permission for Stephan Grasmück to use information which I give him toward his research on student voluntary departure from private schools. I understand that my identity and that of the school will remain anonymous throughout this research. I also understand that I may withdraw from the research project at any time.

___________________________

(signature)

___________________________

(date)
Letter to Telephone Interviewees Requesting Them to Sign and Return the Consent Form Document to Me by Mail

Dear [Interview Participants],

Thank you, again, for your assistance with my research on student attrition issues. Things are moving ahead, but slowly. There is still so much for me to do on this project.

I mentioned in our telephone conversation last winter that the University of Toronto Ethics Review Committee demands that all of its doctoral students have our work approved by that committee. As part of the process, the committee must have evidence that you have agreed to participate in the research, that you know your names will never appear in the final document, and that you may withdraw from the research at any time.

I enclose two copies of the consent form for the Ethics Committee. Would you mind reading through that document and signing it for me? I enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope for your use as well.

I truly appreciate your help so much. As I said, it's a long road and you have been wonderful with your support.

Hope to see you before too long!

Sincerely,

Stephan Grasmück