Student Perceptions of School: Resistance in Rural Appalachia

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This thesis titled
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ABSTRACT


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Student resistance, an issue for teachers in both rural and urban areas, occurs for various reasons, from resisting the norms and customs of the dominant, oppressive group, to internalizing a feeling of freedom and preservation of ones’ integrity. In rural areas, resistance may be a reaction to the socially reproductive nature of schools. This study examined the reasons that students attending a rural school give for resistant behaviors. Classroom observations and seven interviews with resistant students were conducted in a rural Appalachian high school in an attempt to examine reasons for disengagement in classroom activities. Major finding included the following: Students do not seem to value the education they are receiving, believing that they are disadvantaged by the rural location of the school; students felt that their classes are filled with busywork and are not challenging enough; and many students felt that school subjects did not relate to their lives or their futures. Other factors included family influence, teacher characteristics, and future plans. Recommendations for schools relating to the findings are included.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

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This work is dedicated to the middle school students I had the pleasure of teaching at Alexander Middle School. I cherish my time spent in the classroom, for the uplifting experiences and relationships built, as well as those challenging moments that inspired this project.
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Analysis

Research question one: What reasons do high school students give for displaying resistance in a rural Appalachian high school?

Larger social factors
Identity and peer pressure
Dissonance between school and cultural knowledge
Teacher misunderstanding and culture clash
Desire for knowledge
Rejecting authoritarian school

Research Question Two: What, if any, student resistance occurs as a result of factors specific to the rural area, relating to the issues of school consolidation, leaving the region, or clashing middle class and working class values?

School consolidation
Stereotypes and culture clash
Family influence and beliefs
Student mobility between school districts
Out-migration

Recommendations for Educational Practice

Chapter Six: Summary, Next steps, And Conclusion

Summary
Next Steps: Recommendations for Future Research
Conclusion
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction/Background

Student learning and engagement are important issues to secondary school teachers who seek to lead effective and engaging instruction. As such, many teachers seek discipline and classroom management strategies to keep their students engaged and prevent them from misbehaving. Sometimes these students can be labeled by teachers or school administrators as “trouble-makers” or “problem students.” However, resistance theory, a topic of interest in education research literature, suggests that sometimes students perform acts of opposition, or resistance, “with a social and political purpose” (Abowitz, 2000). Such acts of resistance occur when a student willingly and actively decides to either not participate in a classroom activity, or cause a disruption to the learning environment. However, resistance may be more than mere noncompliance by petulant students; instead, some resistance is noncompliance motivated by oppression (Abowitz, 2000). This study focuses on students who resist and who have the ability to participate in classroom activities and do well, but deliberately choose not to engage in the learning process within the classroom. Instead of doing well, these students often receive poor grades or are seen as a behavior problem. In extreme cases, these students may be removed from the classroom for misbehavior, punished with detentions or suspensions, labeled as “trouble-makers,” or even assigned to special education classes or an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

In my experience as a middle school math teacher in a rural school, I observed many instances of resistance from my students and other students in the school. Some
students openly talked back to teachers, aggressively challenging the teachers’ requests. Other students slumped smugly in their desks, with a balled-up assignment on the floor next to them. I also observed varying methods that teachers used to address these acts of resistance. However, few of the methods used by teachers were successful in changing the students’ behavior in the long term. Although some strategies worked in the short term, a few hours or days later, the student would revert to the resistant behavior. This led me to the realization that the problem the teachers were facing was not necessarily the student; the problem could also stem from a situation within the classroom or a divergence between school and life outside school that causes the student’s adverse reaction to school. If this is the case, the implication is that the solution is not to transform a resistant student into a compliant student who follows directions; the solution involves uncovering and addressing the issues underlying the students’ rationale for his or her behavior. Unfortunately, that underlying issue may not be easy for the teacher or student to find or resolve.

In the education research literature, student resistance has been referred to as not-learning, school refusal, disengagement, alienation, apathy, noncompliance, attitude or defiance (Gilmore, 1985; Kohl, 1991; Manke, 1997; Marshall, 1985). Students may resist passively, such as sleeping in class, not doing classwork, slouching in seats and rolling eyes; or actively, such as confronting the teacher, talking in class, causing disruptions, asking questions at inappropriate times (Kohl, 1991; Manke, 1997). Resistance itself may occur for multiple reasons, which can be divided into three distinct (but sometimes overlapping) categories. First, some students may simply resist school rules due to ill-
temper or petulance, reasons which are not considered true “resistance” and will not be explored here. Second, students may also display resistance as a response to factors affecting their lives outside school, such as societal racism or family issues. Third, students may purposefully resist the school curriculum or factors relating to the school environment. Although these three categories reveal that student resistance can occur for a wide variety of reasons, outward manifestations of student resistance may appear similar and be misconstrued by teachers as simple misbehavior.

Some teacher preparation literature sees all student resistance as a negative behavior problem that must be dealt with (either proactively or reactively) (Foley, 2007; Rubinstein, 1999; Wong & Wong, 2004). Indeed, resisting students may appear noncompliant or disruptive due solely to petulance. However, other literature in the field suggests that resistance is not necessarily a negative occurrence. Kohl (1991) proposes that students may gain a greater sense of self-worth through resistance. Further, students may have legitimate concerns and reasons for their resistance that lie outside the student rather than within (Long, 2005). Resistance may be a reaction to complex social issues, such as racism, classism, or sexism (Kohl, 1991; Gilmore, 1985; Ogbu, 1991). It may also result from classroom material or teaching methods that do not appropriately challenge the students (Delisle, 1992; Holt, 1995; Sidorkin, 2002; Gatto, 2002). Students may not see the value in what they are learning or forge personal connections with the school curriculum (Sidorkin, 2002; Gatto, 2002; Willis, 1977; Weis, 1990; Holt, 1995). Students may feel that the teacher does not care about or respect the students (Brophy &
Good, 1974; Sidorkin, 2002; Richmond, 2002). Thus, students may have many diverse reasons for resisting in the classroom.

However, the main concern with student resistance is that it usually results in student disengagement in the classroom, which may alter their own learning experience and that of other students in the class (Kohl, 1991; Marshall, 1985). Further, students may be incorrectly labeled as unable or unwilling to learn. In one anecdote, a Spanish-speaking grandfather told Kohl (1991) that he purposely refused to learn English. As a result, his grandchildren were forced to learn Spanish in order to communicate with him. This man’s refusal to learn English stemmed from the fear that his descendants would lose their sense of history, culture, and family if they lost the ability to speak Spanish. However, others misinterpreted this man’s resistance as laziness or deficient in intelligence. This type of incorrect assumption can be damaging to students (and their families) who refuse to learn because to do so would have a negative impact upon their identity. Thus, this research intends to explore reasons for student resistance and disengagement, in hopes that teachers and other school employees can become aware of and address some of these issues.

Much of the research on student resistance so far has been completed in urban areas with underrepresented racial and ethnic populations. However, rural areas face many of the same issues as urban areas, as well as other unique issues that may result in student resistance and disengagement. While some of the reasons for resistance may be similar, other issues within the rural setting may not appear in an urban setting. For example, students may internalize negative stereotypes about rural areas, families
frequently move in and out of school districts, education is associated with anti-community values and preparation to leave the area, and residents of rural areas tend to resist school reform (Corbett, 2007; Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Knight, Knight & Quickenton, 1996). According to Knight, Knight and Quickenton (1996), parents in rural areas tend to be suspicious of outsiders coming in to change schools or middle-class teachers whose values clash with working-class families. Some schools and school employees in rural areas tend to have a “saving the poor” attitude toward education, attempting to help the students move into the middle class (Howley, Howley, Howley, & Howley, 2006, p.7). Further, although small schools may not be able to offer diverse curricula, school consolidation has not resulted in a wider variety of course offerings, and instead has resulted in transportation issues and less personalization (Barlow, 2008; Christie, 2001; Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Knight, Knight & Quickenton, 1996; Theobald, 1997). Many students in consolidated rural school districts travel an hour or more to school, and cannot stay after school for extra help or to participate in extracurricular activities (Knight, Knight & Quickenton, 1996). Parents of low socioeconomic status may not have the transportation needed to visit the school during open houses or parent-teacher conferences. In some small rural communities, the local school serves as an important gathering place for community events, including athletic events, music performances, and other family activities. When school districts are consolidated and the smaller schools are closed, these communities lose a significant gathering place (Lyson, 2005). As a result of these negative consequences of school consolidation, communities tend to be opposed to consolidation. Further, many people in rural areas hold a negative
view of school achievement, as students who earn good grades and high test scores often leave the area, and the jobs available in rural areas tend to require technical training only (Corbett, 2007; Lucas, 1971). These issues unique to rural areas may contribute to student resistance to school.

Statement of the Problem

Much of the literature regarding student resistance to education seeks to explain why students resist, as well as provide recommendations for teachers and parents. However, most of this research focuses on the observations of teachers or other adults. Since little research asks students why they are resisting, a student voice is rarely included in the literature. This study attempts to uncover students’ reasons for resistance by observing and talking to the students directly. Further, most of the research related to student resistance and non-engagement is centered on urban areas, and little research is available regarding student resistance in rural areas. Thus, the aim of this study is to identify and examine the student “voice” that address reasons for resistance to education in a typical rural school setting.

Research Questions

The research questions are as follows:

1. What reasons do high school students give for displaying resistance in a rural Appalachian high school?
2. What, if any, student resistance occurs as a result of factors specific to the rural area, relating to the issues of school consolidation, leaving the region, or clashing middle class and working class values?
Purpose/Significance of the Study

The aim of this study is to identify and examine students’ resistant attitudes toward schooling, including reasons for disengagement or resistance toward school and schoolwork. Since the students are central to this issue, research cannot be complete without the inclusion of the student voice. Individual student interviews can provide valuable insight to student perceptions of schooling, and the rationale they have for their actions in class. Previous research in the field mainly concerns student resistance in urban areas where racism or cultural values tend to be large factors. In rural areas, most students and their teachers identify as Caucasian, so in these rural areas racism or ethnocentrism may not be a factor in student resistance as it may be in more urban areas. However, students in rural areas belong to unique cultures that are shaped by their environment and can be misunderstood by teachers who are not from the same area. Poverty rates are high in rural areas, leading to lower levels of school funding and resulting in fewer resources or course offerings (Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Johnson & Strange, 2007; Webb, 2008). Due to fewer job opportunities, many families in rural areas belong to the working class and tend to have a low socio-economic status. In contrast, most teachers come from middle class backgrounds and from outside the community, which may lead to a negative perception of people living in rural areas or a clash of cultures and values (Howley et. al., 2006; Purcell-Gates, 2002).

Through analysis of this study, stakeholders in K-12 education, including parents, teachers, and school administrators, can gain an understanding of reasons for student resistance or apathy from the perspective of the students. The conclusions made in this
research may be beneficial to teachers or administrators who are hoping to increase student engagement in the classroom. Teachers and administrators may become more aware of the diverse factors that can motivate student resistance, and cease blaming students and their families or placing damaging labels on students who display these behaviors in school. When school employees have a greater understanding of students who resist, and address some of the issues students face, these students may have greater achievement in school including increases in grades and standardized test scores, increases in self-esteem, and a better understanding of higher education and career opportunities.

Besides providing research findings that assist educators to engage more of their students, student participants also receive benefits that are significant to them. During the interviews, students had the opportunity to reflect on their academic experiences. Students had the chance to consider the source of their opinions and understand their own actions and reactions. Further, students may have felt empowered and important by sharing their thoughts and beliefs about issues that are important to them.

Delimitations

Students were interviewed from one school district in southeastern Ohio. Ideally, these observations and interviews would be conducted in a variety of school districts within the region; however, due to time constraints, this project needed to be centered on a single school. For this reason, I chose a school that is typical of the region: high levels of poverty evidenced by free and reduced lunch statistics, consolidated to serve students throughout the county, and a low percentage of adults with post-secondary education.
Classroom observations were limited to those teachers from the school who volunteered for the study, so I did not observe occurrences of resistant behavior in other classrooms.

Observations took place over the course of eight weeks. Due to time constraints, I was unable to observe classes every day or over the course of the entire school year. Further, only a small number of the observed students were approached and invited to participate in an interview.

The study focuses on high school students, which may prevent the results from being reflective of elementary, middle, or post-secondary students.

The definition of “resistant students” and the factors used to identify these students has limited the students who were interviewed. The specific definition used for the study describes very specific behaviors displayed by these resistant students. These behaviors were pre-determined by the literature, but may neglect to identify all resistant students. See “Definition of Terms” for a detailed description of the behaviors identified as “resistant.”

Definition of Terms

*Appalachia:* The term “Appalachia” refers to a cultural region in the United States that extends from New York to Mississippi, including parts of Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia, Ohio, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. Much of the region is rural and poverty-stricken. Residents of central Appalachia are frequently stereotyped as “backwoods” or “hillbillies” who are unintelligent and primitive.
**Not-learning:** Herbert Kohl (1991) defines not-learning as a “willing rejection of some aspect of experience” (p. 13). People who chose to not-learn make an effort to reject the educational experience of a dominant group in order to make a political or social point. Although it may occur for similar reasons, not-learning is different from resistance because it implies a conscious choice to refrain from learning, while resistance is usually seen in disengagement and can be enacted subconsciously.

**Resistance:** For the purpose of this study, resistance must be narrowly defined to focus specifically on resistance to schooling, the school environment, and the behavioral and academic expectations of students at school. Resistance can be characterized by the following typical behaviors: sleeping during class, not paying attention during class, defiant body language in class, not turning in assignments including homework and classwork, not working on classwork, distracting other students, challenging the teacher, causing disruptions in class, talking during class, skipping class, making negative comments about the teacher or school. Resistance is often seen as disengagement with school and/or schoolwork. This list of behaviors is by no means exhaustive, but is meant to show examples of typical resistant behavior.

**Rural:** The United States Census Bureau (2000) defines rural areas in relation to urban areas. Urban areas have population density of at least 1,000 people per square mile and include surrounding areas with at least 500 people per square mile. All other open country and settlements with fewer than 1,000 people per square mile are designated as rural.
Researcher Positionality

As the researcher, it is important that I acknowledge the influence that my background and potential biases may have on my research. Growing up, my family moved from small town to small town in various states. After graduating with an undergraduate degree in secondary mathematics education, I taught 7th and 8th grade mathematics for two years in a rural Appalachian middle school. Growing up in small towns and living in the Appalachian region of Ohio for the past twelve years has given me some understanding of Appalachian culture as well as the ability to relate to working-class or under-privileged students. Further, my background in education will allow me a greater understanding of classroom interactions; however, I may identify with the teacher rather than the student. I cannot deny that my background and opinions have formed my beliefs about research and education, but I need to be aware of my biases so I can attempt to acknowledge and minimize the interference with my data. My awareness of biases will help me to identify with students and stifle my urge to align with the teacher. One strategy I will use to mediate this potential bias is to return to the research literature on my topic in order to complete my analysis as it is contextualized in the literature, rather than an analysis that may reflect my own bias. In addition, discussing my data and analysis with my advisor and committee members will provide another perspective that may challenge a bias that is hidden to me.

Organization of the Study

Chapter one provides an introduction and overview of the study. Chapter two contains a review of the relevant literature, with the following major themes: defining
resistance, reproduction theory, manifestations of resistance, reasons for resistance, the rural school, and results of resistance. Chapter three details the methodology used in the study during research, data collection, and analysis. Chapter four presents the data collected during the research, including observation and interview data, as well as a summary of the data. Chapter five discusses my analysis of the data, including connections between the data and the literature, conclusions, and recommendations.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This review of the literature is organized into four distinct parts: the theoretical framework, resistance (the definition, manifestations of it, and reasons for it), the rural school, and the results of resistance. The first section, the theoretical framework, discusses the emergence of reproduction theory, how it led into resistance theory, and how it has formed the basis for my research questions. The next three sections discuss resistance and how it is represented in the literature. The first of these sections, The Concept of Resistance, provides a brief glimpse at how various theorists have chosen to explain the phenomena of resistance and what it is. The next section, Manifestations of Resistance, details the specific actions and behaviors that have been characterized as resistance, including symbolic versus active resistance, verbal and nonverbal resistance, passive-aggressive behavior, and aggressive behavior. The final section about resistance is Reasons for Resistance, which provides a full summary of the reasons for resistance as determined by the literature in the field. I have organized these reasons into the following categories: larger social factors, preserving individual cultural identity, identity and peer pressure, dissonance between school and cultural knowledge, teacher misunderstanding and culture clash, desire for knowledge, and rejecting the authoritarian school. I include information from studies completed in urban areas, in which students vocalize racism as a factor in their resistance. Although students in rural areas may not experience racism, they may experience marginalization due to socio-economic status, and the lack of information about resistance in rural areas lead me to consider the dynamics of resistance
in urban areas. The third major section of this literature review comprises information about rural schools and issues that these schools face. These issues have been organized into the following categories: financial difficulties, consolidation, stereotypes, family influence and beliefs, student mobility between school districts and out-migration. The final section, Results of Resistance, explains both positive and negative effects of resistance as suggested by the literature.

Theoretical Framework

I have chosen to use social reproduction theory as the basis of my theoretical framework, as resistance theory developed as an optimistic response to the more cynical reproduction theories. According to reproduction theory, human societies survive by reproducing themselves through “naturalization,” or methods of making sense of the world (Hebdige, 1979). Specific interactions and specific ways of thinking are taught; however, in the modern world, different groups and classes will promote their various interests. The ideologies that gain the most attention are the ones promoted by groups with power, and are then transferred to youth through education.

Many radical educational theorists have claimed that schools function to reproduce social norms by teaching specific types of knowledge and skills (Giroux, 1983). Modern schools teach students to obey authority, follow directions, and obey the rules, particularly in working-class areas, preparing students for work in the working-class (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Similarly, Anyon (1980) found that schools prepared students for work within their current socio-economic status. For example, children of high governmental officials attended schools that prepared them to act independently,
lead others, and create their own knowledge, while students from working-class families attended schools that emphasized discipline, following orders, and finding knowledge from other people or books.

More recently, Anyon (2005) has argued that state and federal policies relating to jobs, wages, housing, and transportation do not help those in poverty, and in fact merely maintain the status quo of poverty. Although education policies have addressed high-needs schools, these policies do not address the underlying social issues of poor academic achievement, including poverty, unemployment, and housing (Anyon, 2005).

Tracking, a common school practice in which students are separated by ability level, is a form of social reproduction, as it frequently divides students by racial, cultural, or economic lines (Bukky, 2008; Gilbert & Yerrick, 2001; Solomon, 1992). When teachers group students into “quality student” roles or “deficient student roles” according to student social class, they ensure that students receive differentiated instruction and social interactions (Bukky, 2008).

Since reproduction theory casts a rather bleak view of opportunity for lower-status students, reproduction theorists began focusing on the cases in which reproductive schooling was met with opposition (Anyon, 1980; Giroux, 1983; Willis, 1977). Since there is a dominant group, there can be refusal of this group and its ideology (Hebdige, 1979, p. 18). Students who are not content with the status quo of the school experience actively partake in acts of resistance, thereby creating their own agency to develop valuable skills as social agents.
Reproduction theory therefore forms the basis for my study, as it precedes the notion of resistance. I am interested in those students who resist school and attempt to subvert the dominant culture of school or resist actively taking part in the school experience. These students may very well be resisting social reproduction and its manifestation in schools. However, I am interested to hear what the students understand of their school experience and how they rationalize their resistance.

The Concept of Resistance

Student resistance is a powerful expression of rejection of the ideology of schools or the dominant group. Frequently, resistance stems from opposition to greater social factors that are reflected and reinforced in school, such as racism or sexism, or social reproduction taking place within schools (Giroux, 1983). McLaren (1985) defines resistance as “oppositional student behavior that has symbolic, historical, and ‘lived’ meaning and which contests the legitimacy, power, and significance of school culture in general and instruction in particular” (p. 85). McLaren notes that resistance rarely occurs through organized, school-sanctioned channels, such as student unions, since these organizations tend to be led by students of the dominant culture who buy into school and its authority. Further, resistance differs from inability or failure to learn in that resistance is the purposeful rejection of an experience that the student has the ability to complete (Kohl, 1991). For example, Kohl tells the story of Jamila L., an intelligent Black student who spent four years of school in special education classrooms pretending she could not read, in order to avoid her racist peers. Another student, Akmir, rejected the racist instruction of his high school social studies teacher, so not only did he refuse to learn the
curriculum, he also actively tried “to destroy the teacher’s and textbook’s credibility” (p. 26). Without an understanding of his rationale, Akmir’s behavior might be seen as merely disruptive and oppositional.

Although resistance and oppositionality may seem similar on the surface, since their outward expressions may be the same, resistance theorists warn that not all acts of opposition can be characterized as “resistance” (Dickar, 2008; Giroux, 1983, Wright & Weekes, 2003). According to Dickar (2008), “not all resistance is oppositional and not all oppositionality is anti-academic” (p. 18). Some acts appearing to be resistance may be merely self-indulgent, an attempt to appropriate power, or a rejection of all knowledge; whereas true resistance is manifested as an expression full of social significance or a reaction to domination. Further, Lindquist (1994) believes that some current theorists have begun applying the idea of resistance to students in progressive classrooms whose prejudices or intolerance are disruptive to the learning process. Some instructors tend to brush this off as resistance and attempt to overcome it or ignore it rather than carefully consider the students’ perspective.

However, most resistance studies are similar to education studies in that neither tends to “privilege student voice,” making interpretations of meaning without consulting the student perspective (Miron & Lauria, 1998, p. 190; Erickson & Schultz, 1992; Lindquist, 1994). According to Lindquist, “the concept of resistance becomes problematic when someone defines another person’s behavior as resistance, because to do so always requires interpreting (and, therefore, potentially misinterpreting) the other person’s behavior, motives, and attitudes” (p. 1-2). Thus, resistance studies could benefit
through consultation of the resisting students for reasons behind their behavior before making any assumptions.

Manifestations of Resistance

Most student resistance is seen in the interactions between students and teachers (Sekayi, 2001), and attempts to “sabotage the normative codes of the dominant school order” (McLaren, 1985, p. 87). In fact, Abowitz (2000) argues that resistance is a form of communication. Resistant behaviors include active “attempts by students to subvert or sabotage teacher instruction or rules and norms established by school authorities” (McLaren, 1985, p. 87). Many students may act as the class clown, using humor to identify the rules and norms, and yet also understanding the arbitrary nature of these rules (McLaren, 1985). A slightly different form of resistance, “not-learning,” is identified by Kohl (1991) as “an active, often ingenious, willful rejection of even the most compassionate and well-designed teaching” (p. 10).

Not all resistance manifests itself as outward defiance or rebelliousness, although these overt displays may be the most obvious acts of opposition (Giroux, 1993). Students may also passively resist, by minimizing their engagement with school activities and school ideology. Abowitz (2000) believes that student resistance can take one of two forms: symbolic expression and embodied action. Broughs, Kearney, and Plax (1989) developed 19 categories of resistance techniques: giving the teacher advice, blaming the teacher, avoidance of the issue, reluctantly complying with teacher requests, actively resisting, deception, direct communication, disruption, making excuses, ignoring the teacher, giving a low priority to school, challenging the teacher’s power, rallying student
support, appealing to powerful others, modeling teacher behavior, modeling teacher affect, taking a hostile defensive stance, student rebuttal, and revenge. Sekayi (2001) identified three categories of resistant behavior: verbal expression, passive aggressive behavior, and aggressive behavior (p. 417). These categories often overlap, with students simultaneously displaying behaviors from multiple categories.

Verbal and nonverbal expression of resistance includes the use of linguistic codes, verbal insubordination, graffiti (Abowitz, 2000), refusal to use Standard English in the classroom (Dickar, 2008), and styles of dress (Abowitz, 2000; Giroux, 1980; McLaren, 1985). For example, some students deliberately use language consistent with another environment, such as Ebonics or slang, instead of Edited English in the classroom. Students may also dress in a way to assert their individuality while simultaneously subverting the school rules for dress. Verbal and nonverbal displays of resistance frequently relate to the student declaring an identity concurrent with his or her culture and usually counter to the dominant school culture.

Passive aggressive behavioral displays frequently take place in schools and may indicate resistance. These behaviors are annoying to the teacher but are not usually punishable offenses. Dickar (2008) uses “infrapolitical” to describe these displays that allow the student to escape the oppressive classroom while not disrupting the class or warranting discipline, such as asking for the restroom pass or arriving late to class, pretending they did not have a pen/book/partner, taking their time with assignments, passing notes, or talking in class. These methods of resistance are political and organized, pushing the limits imposed by the institution by wasting time and avoiding assignments,
but do not result in explicit confrontation or serious disciplinary action as teachers can
never be sure if the student is telling the truth. Another category of passive aggressive
behavior is “clowning” (Dickar, 2008, McLaren, 1985) which includes actions that could
be described as “buffoonery, ribaldry, raffery, hoopl, or open disputation” and often
consists of “anti-teacher verbiage (usually in muted or whispered tones), the thwarting of
a lesson through brusque remarks, constant carping at the classroom rules, nonnegotiable
demands, incessant jabber, insouciant slapstick, marvelously inventive obscenities”
(McLaren, 1985, p. 87-88). These behaviors frequently involve a performance for other
students and are just loud enough for the teacher to overhear. Other examples of passive
aggressive behaviors include skipping school, dropping out of school, silences (Abowitz,
2000), intentionally disrupting a class with humor, attempting to draw teachers away
from lessons or control the pace of the class, purposely ignoring directions from teachers
(Giroux, 1993; Giroux, 1980), passing notes, quietly not doing classwork (Olafson and
Field, 2003), leaning back on chairs and possibly falling over, jostling other students or
engaging in horseplay, talking to other students during class, scowling at the teacher,
complying with teacher’s directions but doing so at a slower-than-average pace, being in
the hallway or other restricted space without a pass (McLaren, 1985). Each of these
behaviors is annoying to many teachers and other school authorities, but is not severe
enough to warrant discipline. At the same time, the student is able to assert his or her
independence and quiet subversion of school rules.

Aggressive behaviors constitute the most extreme form of resistance. Typical
behaviors include physical insubordination (Abowitz, 2000), refusing to comply with
teachers (Walker & Sylwester, 1998), starting trouble or fighting with other students, escalating power plays with teachers (Olafson and Field, 2003), violating school rules, and undermining the teacher’s lesson plans (Giroux, 1980). These behaviors frequently result in disciplinary action taken against the student.

Reasons for Resistance

Students display acts of resistance for a variety of reasons. According to Bullough, Gitlin, and Goldstein (1984), resistance must be discussed with an understanding of the roles of the teacher and student, both in terms of a cultural-historical perspective, as well as limitations imposed by the educational institution. Although some resistance may be collective and organized, some studies have identified resistance to be individual acts that represent common themes (Sekayi, 2001). According to Aggleton (1987), resistance can be differentiated into two groups: resistance that challenges power relations and inequality within society, and resistance that opposes control and knowledge taught directly within schools. Although many resistance theorists attach a social aspect to student resistance (Anyon, 1980; Kohl, 1991; Willis, 1977), others believe that working-class students merely resist controlling aspects of the school process itself, such as such as the content of the curriculum or the teaching process (Aggleton, 1987). In such instances, the curriculum simply does not relate to the students’ culture and the students resist the curriculum, not realizing that the curriculum may be a broader reflection of society. Although most reasons for resistance can be fit into Aggleton’s categories of social inequality and school knowledge, within these narrowly-defined categories can be many diverse and overlapping student reasons for their resistance,
including larger social factors, preserving individual cultural identity by rejecting the ideology of school, the struggle for identity and peer pressure, dissonance between school and cultural knowledge and success, misunderstandings by teachers with a different cultural identity, a desire to learn conflicting with an ineffective school curriculum, and rejecting school’s authoritarian nature.

**Larger social factors**

Sometimes students resist because they see a reflection of larger social factors, such as racism, classism, or sexism, played out within school or between students and teachers (Dickar, 2008; Munns & McFadden, 2000). Munns and McFadden’s study focuses on students who were “consciously aware of their educational powerlessness” caused by inequalities and social disadvantage, and so they rejected their “unequal experience” and the educational system that allowed this inequality (p. 60). These students see school as an agent to promote inequality and prevent students from achieving academic or future economic success. Occasionally, students will see their teachers as representatives of racism, classism, or sexism, and resist cooperation with these teachers.

Institutional racism can also play a factor in resistance. According to Fordham and Ogbu (1986), historically, White Americans did not believe African Americans could succeed. African Americans began to internalize this belief, but took pride in their own version of success, thereby devaluing school and its messages. Similarly, students in rural areas may perceive schools as an instrument preserving their low socio-economic status and preventing them from achieving future success.
Preserving individual cultural identity

Frequently students’ personal or home culture clashes with the culture taught by school institutions. These institutions may try to push the dominant ideologies on students of dominated cultures, by either stripping the students of their own identity and culture and forcing them to take on the ideology of the school in order to succeed, or alienating students who retain their cultural norms (Fordham, 1996). For these students, school success means giving in to the dominant middle class White culture. In this case, resistance is a student reaction to oppressive school cultures and an attempt to retain their cultural identity by not doing well in schools. According to resistance theorists (Finn, 1999; Kipnis, 2001; Rueda, 2005), racial or ethnic minorities and working class students may become disengaged with school when they cannot identify with the ideology promoted by schools. Sometimes these schools promote behavioral norms inconsistent with students’ sense of culture, identity, and dignity. As these students do not believe that school and graduation will improve their social or economic status, and they see school norms in conflict with their racial or class identity, they proceed to develop oppositional identities against school.

Some students reject school with cultural support from their community. When students are forced to choose between the ideologies and values of their family and culture and the ideology of school, many students choose to value family success over traditional school values (Fordham, 1996; Munns and McFadden, 2000; Starcher, 2005). For example, the Gypsy culture in the United States opposes public school, because the individualistic values of school take away from the Gypsy family ties and cohesion.
throughout the group (Riley, 1996). Similarly, in some Navajo communities where group success is valued over individual success, Navajos distrust schools that are controlled by a few powerful Anglos (Dehyle, 1995).

Resistance is sometimes seen as a byproduct of oppositional identity. According to Ogbu (1991), immigrant minorities, who choose to move to the United States for better opportunities, perform differently in school than involuntary minorities, who became United States citizens as the result of the slave trade or colonization. Immigrant or voluntary minorities choose to adapt to American culture and believe that school leads to upward social and economic mobility. On the other hand, in general, the values of involuntary minorities do not align with those of the dominant culture, and these groups tend to believe that complying with schooling is equivalent to surrendering to the dominant culture. Ogbu sees school resistance as a method of rejecting the oppressive, dominant group, remaining loyal to one’s own culture, and expressing one’s freedom. A further example of oppositional identity is evident in Gilmore’s (1985) study of the students admitted to the Academics Plus Program. According to Gilmore, minority students continued cultural activities such as “stepping” or “stylized sulking,” defining their “bad attitudes” in defiance of the racism portrayed by the teachers of the dominant White culture. One can see that members of some cultures have a difficult time assimilating to the dominant culture due to their own powerful beliefs and identities.

When the teaching of dominant cultural values disrespects a student’s culture or present “unavoidable challenges to his or her personal and family loyalties, image, and integrity,” students may choose to save face by defying these dominant cultural values
Resistance or not-learning can stem from cultural and societal beliefs internalized into preserving one’s integrity.

*Identity and peer pressure*

Resistance can also be viewed as students’ struggle for individual and collective identity (Miron & Lauria, 1995). Student social identity, including gang member status, can clash with the school’s cultural curriculum that devalues the students’ identities, creating conflict and resistance (Smith, 2003). Student resistance in this case symbolizes the students’ struggle to reject powerlessness and assert their agency and voice, reflecting student identity development (Miron & Lauria, 1998). According to Sidorkin (2002), adult society perceives childhood as a stage to becoming an adult rather than an aspect of life deserving of its own identity. Student resistance is thus an assertion of student identity, power, and agency.

According to Sekayi (2001), students who resist often feel as though they have control over their destinies. Other studies reveal that students who achieve positive self-esteem and identity development do not resist (Miron & Lauria, 1998).

Often, students perform poorly in school or display resistance in order to retain peer affiliations. For minority students tracked into lower classes, part of remaining in a group of friends means sharing their experiences in poor grades and test scores (Gilbert & Yerrick, 2001). Even African American students who can succeed academically may value community over individualism and avoid taking advanced courses or studying in order to avoid appearing better than their peers and to retain their kinship with a peer.
group. These students try to retain their “Blackness” and not be seen as the “Other” by their African American peers (Fordham, 1996).

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) suggest that African American students may not try in school due to a fear of being ostracized for “acting white,” or achieving academic success as a result of buying into the dominant White version of success and selling out the African American culture. As a result, many intelligent African American students who are perfectly capable of doing well in school do not put forth the effort needed.

Lundy and Firebaugh (2005) found that oppositional culture, as described by Ogbu (1978), exists in males who receive lower grades than females with similarly high standardized test scores.

*Dissonance between school and cultural knowledge*

Frequently, the culture of the school and the knowledge valued by educational institutions clashes with the valued knowledge of a students’ home culture. Further, when community and school ideologies clash, community members may (rightly) believe that schools cannot provide upward mobility for students. Thus, students resist the idea promoted by schools that education can help them in their futures, and they stop trying to succeed in school. Dehyle (1995) found that Navajo students believe that racism against them will prevent them from success, and Starcher (2005) found that triracial minority students in rural areas do not see school as a route to achieving a higher socio-economic status. This belief is mirrored in the culture of White students in rural areas. Many families in rural areas have not seen advancement based on schooling, so school is not seen as a way to escape poverty (Starcher, 2005).
Fordham and Ogbu (1978) suggest that African Americans do poorly in school as an adaptation to limited economic opportunities later in life. In many instances, students see their parents’ inability to achieve a higher socioeconomic status despite high education credentials, and so the students believe that school is either unfair or does not lead to socioeconomic opportunities, and it therefore cannot help them either (Fordham, 1996; Fordham & Ogbu, 1978). Willis (1977) believes that the “lads” in his study “see through the false promises that the school holds out to them” with the realization that school cannot help them find a meaningful job (Giroux, 1980, p. 78). Similarly, MacLeod’s (1987) study of working class youth found that the Hallway Hangers, a group of Italian and Irish males, reject the ideology of upward mobility promoted by the schools. They believe that society’s negative views of their families have kept their family members from success. On the other hand, another group in MacLeod’s study, the Brothers, made up of mostly Black males, attempt to join the dominant culture and abide by the rules of the school, hoping for social mobility. The Brothers view racism as the main cause for their relatives’ past failure and believe that school is still a gateway to success.

On the other hand, other marginalized groups of students still buy into the power of education. Students in Miron and Lauria’s (1998) study feel that they can improve their economic standing through academic success. Similarly, the Jocks in Solomon’s study (1992) believed in the power of education to help them “make it.”

Many resistance studies find that students resist when the school curriculum is not relevant to their needs (McFadden, 1995; Miron & Lauria, 1998). According to Holt
students are frequently bored and confused in schools because the information presented “flatly contradicts other things they have been told, and hardly ever has any relation to what they really know” (p. 6). In general, students resist disempowerment by schools, realizing that the knowledge taught in schools will not help them succeed and move out of their socio-economic status, and that the knowledge contradicts the working-class knowledge that is more valuable to the students’ everyday lives (McFadden, 1995). Willis (1977) found that groups of people have developed certain skills that are useful in their cultural circle, but are not helpful in developing other skills, such as school. Similarly, Riley (1996) found that Gypsies or Romani descendants in the United States do not value formal schooling because public school provides skills that are irrelevant to the Gypsy lifestyle and economics, and prevents children from learning the work skills they will need in Romani life.

Willis (1977) believes that “the lads” who resist schooling through attempts to undermine the authority of educators and of the school system do not see high status knowledge as valuable to the working class. Instead, the knowledge valuable to these students can be learned through practical experiences at home or on the job. Similarly, Weis (1990) studied behaviors of working class students in an American community in which the working-class was slowly crumbling due to job loss in the steel mills. These resistant students at “Freeway High” realized the value of obtaining high school diplomas and college degrees, but merely as a means to acquiring a good job. The resistance displayed in these schools was usually depicted through apathy toward schoolwork, revealing that these students did not value the knowledge present in schoolwork.
Students may resist school as a reaction to the incongruence of the pressures of the street culture and the thinking skills emphasized in classroom instruction (McLaren, 1985). Teachers who attempt to help students succeed by teaching the skills for success in mainstream society may in fact exacerbate student resistance by devaluing students’ own knowledge of survival skills (Miron & Lauria, 1995).

**Teacher misunderstanding and culture clash**

People tend to be more understanding of those with similar cultural backgrounds and values that govern acceptable behavior. As a result, teachers may discipline students for behaviors that reflect a family or cultural identity, but are inconsistent with the teachers’ values (Sheets, 1996).

Linguistic patterns of teachers and students from different cultures can also cause discord within the classroom, mostly due to a lack of understanding. According to Delpit (1995), school classrooms contain a “culture of power,” with specific linguistic rules for achieving power in the classroom (p. 25). Teachers and schools often require students to communicate and act in very specific ways in order to be heard and respected. Students who do not participate in this dominant culture of power are labeled deviant and are not heard. Delpit advocates for the explicit teaching of the hidden rules of the dominant culture, to provide all students the opportunity to gain power in the classroom. One particular strategy Delpit describes is teaching students the codes of power while simultaneously valuing the codes of the students’ home culture (p. 40). Teaching students code-switching helps them understand the difference between the codes that need to be used at school and the codes that can be used at home.
In Solomon’s study (1992), students exploited teachers’ ignorance of cultural practices by performing sometimes-vulgar dances to reggae music, and insisting it was a cultural custom and they should not be in trouble for it. Further, the students openly challenged the school rules against domino playing, a genuine cultural practice, by playing during lunch. These students rebelled against and took advantage of their teachers’ ignorance.

Studies have shown that positive relationships between students and teachers can have a positive effect on students’ grades and standardized test scores. According to Burroughs (2007), student resistance occurs when teachers are perceived by students as not approachable or are not respected by students. Burroughs et al. (1991) identified student rationales for resistance that blamed the teacher, citing the teacher as boring or not engaging when they felt that the teacher did not care about the students. Rueda (2005, 2006) studied the development of resistance through an ethnographic study of Mexican-origin students entering middle school. Rueda found that for younger students, engagement or disengagement with schooling depends on whether the students form meaningful relationships with teachers, develop a sense of belonging in school, and develop a self-concept as a “good” student.

Teacher impressions of students can also affect how students react in the classroom. McFarland (2001) suggests that teacher reactions and behavior in front of the students can greatly impact student resistance. Good and Brophy (1974) revealed that teacher expectations can greatly influence their behavior toward specific students, thus influencing student behaviors and forming the basis for a student-teacher relationship.
Teachers behave differently towards different students; more frequently praising those students they believe to be high-achieving, and more likely to criticize those students they view with low expectations. As a result, students begin to behave the way they are perceived. Similarly, Gilbert and Yerrick (2001) found that resistant students in a lower-tracked science classroom correctly believed that their teacher did not think they were intelligent. The teacher felt these students had lower abilities because of their past academic failure. Gilmore (1985) found that teachers in a low-income Black community used assessments of students’ good or bad attitude rather than grades, standardized test scores, or intelligence as the primary factor in determining students’ promotion to a special, high-level program. Despite displaying advanced reading skills, African American students displaying a “bad attitude” were denied admittance to the high-level literacy group. Further, the “bad attitude” was often marked by two cultural displays, “stylized sulking” or “doin’ steps,” that were distinctly part of the Black culture and not meant to portray an oppositional attitude. Walker and Sylwester (1998) suggest that teachers struggling with noncompliant students consider whether he or she is doing anything to frustrate the student.

*Desire for knowledge*

Occasionally, students resist school because they feel it is preventing them from learning (McFadden, 1995). Further, some theorists (Gatto, 2002; Sidorkin, 2002) believe that public schools exert exploitative power over students and neglect to teach anything of value. School requires students to produce massive quantities of work that all end up in the wastebasket (Sidorkin, 2002). Holt (1995) believes that teachers assign busywork in
order to control students by not giving them time to think. According to Delisle (1992), regular school curriculum can be boring to gifted students, leading to more resistance exhibited by bright students. Holt extends this idea to all students, writing that teachers bore students “by filling up their days with dull, repetitive tasks that make little or no claim on their attention or demands on their intelligence” (p. 276). According to Flanders (1987), elementary school math books contained 40% or less new material each year, leading to the conclusion that textbooks largely repeat previously learned material. The notion of a repetitive curriculum is extended further beyond gifted students: students in an alternative education program resisted because they did not feel the school was challenging them enough to prepare them to return to high school (Sekayi, 2001).

According to Kipnis (2001), some student resistance exists not because of an anti-school culture, but because of a pro-school culture, in which students want to learn. For example, in Kipnis’s study, some students in Hong Kong ignore their math teacher simply because they believe he is a poor teacher, not because they want to resist the entire school culture. In this case, the students have internalized the ideology of the school more than the teacher has. In a second example, students resist the school’s focus on examinations, choosing to participate in underground developmental activities, such as reading nonschool books or writing for local newspapers. The other examples given by Kipnis are ostracizing students who use academic success for social mobility, and cheating on exams. Each of these examples is important not because of the action, but because of the rationale for the action. The Chinese culture described by Kipnis leads to resistance against an ineffective school or a desire to learn and succeed.
Rejecting authoritarian school

Some resistant students are reacting to the institutional and authoritarian nature of schools. Many students who do not experience a culture clash with educational institutions reject unequal functions of school, like tracking (McFadden, 1995). Frequently, working class students break rules as a reaction to oppressive classrooms (McLaren, 1985). Others take a stance against the curriculum and legitimacy of schooling by engaging in classroom power struggle with the teacher (Dickar, 2008; Manke, 1997). Sidorkin (2002) focuses the matter of resistance and escalating violence on teachers’ need for control, citing student resistance as a “crisis of authority” occurring in schools (p. 53). Since teachers normally have power, students can claim pieces of that power by disrupting the classroom activities, ignoring teacher directions, or speaking out of turn (Dickar, 2008; Manke, 1997).

Similarly, many theorists agree that school officials actually promote student resistance by insisting on metal detectors and scanning for gang signs (Dickar, 2008; Olafson & Field, 2003; Solomon, 1992). Student resistance escalates when the school administration imposes more rules and discipline. According to Solomon (1992), the Jocks in Lumberville felt that teachers and administrators abuse their power to administer discipline, ignoring the student voice during conflicts. As a result, these students reacted through increased resistant and defiant behavior, creating an escalating cycle of resistance and discipline.
Enrollment in rural schools has been increasing, but fewer opportunities exist in rural areas (Johnson & Strange, 2007). *Why Rural Matters 2007*, a report issued by the Rural School and Community Trust, reports that enrollment in rural schools has increased up to 15% from 2002 to 2004, but student achievement in rural schools (measured by grades, standardized test scores, and educational attainment) has been poor (Johnson & Strange). Further, rural areas in the United States “lag behind the rest of the country in income, employment, and measures of education” (Knight, Knight, & Quickenton, 1996, p. 88). Rural schools face unique issues that are not factors in other areas of the country, including high poverty rates, low levels of future education, younger and less experienced or educated staff and lower salaries (Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Johnson & Strange, 2007). In rural areas, students tend to complete less education than students in other areas. High school completion rates are lower in rural areas than urban areas, and fewer students from rural areas graduate from college each year (Herzog & Pittman, 1995). In particular, factors that have had a negative effect on student standardized test scores in rural areas are funding difficulties, bussing and consolidation, stereotypes and culture clash between teachers and students, family influence and beliefs, student mobility between districts, and out-migration.

*Financial difficulties*

Rural schools tend to be poorer than other schools, resulting in fewer teachers, less technology, and fewer high level or specialized courses, such as Advanced Placement courses (Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Webb, 2008). Further, rural schools with
low salary packages struggle to retain high quality teachers (Webb, 2008). Small school districts suffer from reduced course offerings and a more standardized, rather then individualized, curricula for all students (Barlow, 2008; Knight, Knight & Quickenton, 1996; Webb, 2008; Starcher, 2005; Herzog and Pittman, 2005).

**School consolidation**

One recent issue in rural schools has been financial difficulties that require school districts to consolidate, or combine school districts in order to save money (Barlow, 2008; Herzog and Pittman, 2005; Knight, Knight & Quickenton, 1996; Starcher, 2005; Theobald, 1997; Webb, 2008). From 1930 to 1980, the number of school districts in the United States had dropped from 128,000 to 16,000, and the number of schools had dropped from 238,000 to 61,000 (DeYoung, 1995, p. 172). Although consolidation is intended to save money and provide equal educational opportunities for all students, many of the consequences have been negative, and communities have strongly opposed consolidation in their area (DeYoung, 1995; Theobald, 1997). Since school consolidation throughout a county replaces small schools scattered throughout a county to one centralized location, students at the edge of the district travel an hour or more to school each day. According to Knight, Knight, and Quickenton (1996), research has shown that students who live further away from the school tend to participate in extracurricular activities and classroom events less frequently, as students may not have any method of transportation to and from school and rely on the bus schedule. School consolidation can also be academically disadvantageous to students because their bussing schedule may not allow them to stay after school for extra help. According to Lyson (2005), studies show...
that as school size increases, academic achievement declines. The larger districts can lead to less personalization and less individual student attention. Another result of consolidation and increased bussing is the transfer for funds that could be used for instruction to instead pay for the extra costs associated with increased transportation (Barlow, 2008).

Parents are also impacted by school consolidation. Parents or family members who do not have transportation may be prevented from attending school activities, parent-teacher conferences, or parent-teacher organization meetings. Not only does this effectively shut out economically disadvantaged parents from participation in school decisions, it also leads to a negative stereotype about parents in impoverished areas (Barlow, 2008; Knight, Knight, & Quickenton, 1996; Lyson, 2005).

School consolidation can also remove the community aspect that is common to small local rural schools. Small schools in rural areas frequently serve as social and cultural community centers for community members, including those who do not have children attending the school (Lyson, 2005). Community members attend athletic events, theater and music performances, and other cultural events put on by the school, because they know each other and most of the children. The school may be the “social hub of the village,” but it also relates to the viability of the community, as it may “contribute to the sense of survival of adults in the culture” (Lyson, 2005, p. 23).

Stereotypes and culture clash

Students can internalize common negative stereotypes about people living in rural areas. Rural schools face the challenge of fighting these stereotypes about rural areas
while compensating for economic disadvantage (Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Knight, Knight, & Quickenton, 1996). Teachers may adopt these stereotypes, blaming parents and families for living in poverty, believing that the family does not act in the best interests of the children (Howley et. al., 2006). Further, most reforms for schools in rural areas are not “designed to eliminate many of the perceived cultural disadvantages of district rurality, isolationism, and poverty” (Knight, Knight, & Quickenton, 1996, p. 89).

Teachers in rural schools frequently move into the area from a more urban or suburban setting. As a result, these teachers sometimes make assumptions about the students in the school. According to Purcell-Gates (2002), some teachers prejudge students who speak an Appalachian mountain dialect, equating the dialect with ignorance and inability to learn. In Purcell-Gates’s study, one young boy with barely literate parents entered school not knowing how to read or write and speaking with the Appalachian accent and dialect. Instead of introducing this child to books and working with him to develop literacy, his teachers assumed the boy had intellectual deficiencies and wrote him off as unable to learn how to read well. Most teachers have a middle-class background, which can be incongruent with the values and knowledge of their students. Sometimes, members of the middle class mistakenly attribute poverty to habits associated with poor people, believing the stereotypes that the poor inflict poverty upon themselves through laziness, lack of hygiene, neglect, and indolence (Howley et al, 2006).

*Family influence and beliefs*

In rural areas, such as the Appalachian region, students highly value a sense of community and family relationships (Deaton, 2008; Herzog & Pittman, 1995). As a
result, students in rural areas are less individualistic and more focused on the well-being of the family group, focused less on individual achievement or personal goals (Deaton, 2008). These students tend to value the needs and beliefs of their parents over the values promoted by schools. Schools, frequently portraying a message of worldliness and broadening horizons, tend to be inconsistent with place-based local values and local knowledge. Teachers and school administrators frequently come from out of town, lacking the history and relationship with the town that the students have and lacking an awareness of the local knowledge, values, economics, and social networks of the town (Corbett, 2007). These teachers have difficulty understanding and relating to students.

Family relationships and levels of education can affect the educational achievement of children in rural areas. According to some (Deaton, 2008; Scheidegger, 1998), the education level and socioeconomic status of parents in rural areas significantly influences their adolescent children’s aspirations for furthering their education. In fact, one study found that father’s level of education is significant in determining student motivation and educational achievement (Osbourne, 2007). Gender issues may also impact students’ achievement in rural areas. Traditionally, most women in rural areas work solely in the home, leading young women to a perception that higher education is unnecessary for their futures as housewives (Scheidegger, 1998).

Students in rural areas believe that education does not offer escape, and even those students who perform well in school may not do well in the real world (Corbett, 2007). To some youth, formal education is presented as “preparation for elsewhere,” which can be a terrifying thought (Corbett, 2007, p. 18). In fact, students who leave home
for work or higher education tend to feel less control over their lives and have negative thoughts about their lives (Corbett, 2007). Further, since education is strongly associated with leaving the area, students experience family and community pressure to stay, and consequently, not pursue higher education (Corbett, 2007).

Parents and other members of rural communities tend to distrust schools that are reformed or run by outsiders. According to Knight, Knight, and Quickenton (1996), Appalachian families “may regard organizations, such as schools, with suspicion,” resulting in tension between schools and families (p. 4). Members of rural communities view outsiders with plans for change and national curricula with suspicion, partly because high school or further education is not valued. Over 80% of parents in rural areas have not earned a high school diploma, and many single mothers lead their families (Webb, 2008). People in rural communities may also oppose increases in school funding, as it will mean less funding for other vital needs.

**Student mobility between school districts**

One common but under-addressed issue for rural schools is student transiency or mobility between school districts. In particular, the impacts on low-income students or for low-income school districts can be profound (Paik & Phillips, 2002; Schafft, 2005). In the United States, people who rent homes and who live below the poverty line tend to move frequently, often taking the children into different school districts (Schafft, 2005). Sometimes renters cannot pay rent and are evicted, and other times they may move in with family members or find a cheaper apartment elsewhere in the area. Children may also move with divorced parents. Mobility is highly correlated with low socioeconomic
status (Paik & Phillips, 2002; Schafft, 2005). According to Schafft (2005), students who have moved and changed school districts several times tend to score below grade level on achievement tests and are more likely to drop out of school before earning a diploma (p. 2). Mobility disrupts the continuity of school lessons as well as relationships formed with peers and with adults (Paik & Phillips, 2002).

Student mobility also causes problems within a classroom. Teachers frequently spend time reviewing or reteaching material when students move in and out of the classroom, and the classroom environment itself is disrupted with new students learning the rules (Schafft, 2005). Further, new students create extra administrative duties for the teachers. Occasionally, schools reorganize classrooms based on student transiency, either combining two smaller classes into one, or splitting a growing class into two different courses, further disrupting the educational experience of the students (Schafft, 2005).

*Out-migration*

With the decline of farming, mining, and fisheries, employment opportunities in rural areas have been declining (Corbett, 2007; Lucas, 1971). Further, a high proportion of working adults in rural areas are employed in working-class, low paid jobs with little opportunity for advancement (Herzog & Pittman, 1995).

Many young people in rural areas move away from the community after high school graduation. According to Carr and Kefalas (2009), high school students face the choice of whether to stay or leave- and for those who leave, they later must decide whether or not to return. High school graduates were grouped into four categories: Achievers, Seekers, Stayers, and Returners. The Achievers are students who are
supported and encouraged to succeed, but who usually leave the area after graduation. Seekers also leave the area, in search of larger cities, but they lack the grades to get into the major universities. Most of these students join the military in order to travel and get away. Stayers do not attend college, but begin working in blue-collar jobs, get married and have children earlier in life. Returners are the college graduates, usually with associate’s degrees, who return home and start families. According to Carr and Kefalas (2009), these graduates usually have more in common with Stayers than Achievers. In another survey of high school students, Herzog and Pittman (1995) found that fewer than 50% of students plan to stay in the community, and 85% of those who do stay intend to teach. According to Lucas’s study about small Canadian towns with single industries (1971), about 60% of youth in small towns leave.

Further, students who attain higher education levels have a much more likelihood of leaving, resulting in a loss of “talent and vitality” those educated youth could bring to the benefit of their communities (Corbett, 2007, p. 20). In Lucas’s Canadian study (1971), almost 80% of students who did not reach grade 10 stayed in their small Canadian communities, whereas only 18% of students who graduated high school stayed. Most jobs in rural areas do not require high levels of education, so students who attain higher education may educate themselves out of a job in the area (Starcher, 2005). Good students may also leave to further their education or find jobs because they have internalized the individualism promoted by schools (Corbett, 2007; Deaton, 2008; Scheidegger, 1998). Better-educated youth realize that higher-paying jobs exist in more urban areas, causing a “brain drain” or outmigration of educated youth from rural
communities (Corbett, 2007; Lucas, 1971). Residents of rural areas also realize that students who do well may move away, finding a better-paying job elsewhere and weakening family cohesiveness, something highly valued by students in these areas (Herzog & Pittman, 1995). Thus, according to Corbett (2007), “to resist schooling is therefore to resist mobility” or at least to understand the problems presented by mobility, as well as to commit oneself to membership in the community and the social group of those who stay (p. 57). To students in rural areas, higher education means having to leave their hometown for a more urban area (Corbett, 2007).

This brain drain results in negative returns to rural communities. According to Carr and Kefalas (2009), about half of the Achievers who attend college end up leaving the state. However, the school and the community pour energy and resources into educating these students, only to lose the talented youth to larger cities once they come of age (p. 20). The other students, the Stayers who never leave and end up staying in the area, stop their education early and find that not having a college degree prevents them from moving into better jobs. The result of this phenomenon is that the students who are groomed to succeed leave the area, while those who have been neglected in their education stay.

Results of Resistance

Student resistance may have both benefits and drawbacks to the students. Many resistance theorists believe that students gain knowledge, self-awareness, and leadership skills through resistance (Giroux, 1983; Schultz, 2005). On the other hand, some
resistance theorists have begun to warn against glamorizing resistance, stating that students may in fact resist so much learning that they perpetuate social reproduction.

*Positive effects of resistance*

Resistance can be seen as a positive behavior that should be “applauded and encouraged” (Lindquist, 1994, p. 2). Some instructors (Blair, 1994) actually encourage resistance in their classrooms, believing that resistance to popular culture can encourage “strategies of inquiry” to “help students reinterpret these cultural values and versions of society exposed to them” (p. 113). Resistance can be a powerful tool in critical thinking and self-evaluation.

Both resistance and critical education encourage students to ask questions and evaluate the status quo, empowering students and helping them to grow as individuals and develop critical thinking skills (Shor, 1992). Resistance can result in beneficial critical education by enhancing student understanding of society, power, and knowledge. Further, student resistance to authority can lead students to becoming critical, engaged citizens of a democracy (Schultz, 2005). Democratic societies need skeptical citizens to coordinate groups of resistance to challenge the status quo.

Acts of resistance can also represent a stage in student identity development (Giroux, 1983; Schultz, 2005). According to Giroux, resistance allows students to develop a fleeting sense of freedom. Kohl (1991) believes that “not-learning” has positive effects on the student, as taking a stand will “strengthen the will, clarify one’s definition of self, reinforce self-discipline, and provide inner satisfaction” (p. 15). Solomon’s
account of the Jocks in Lumberville (1992) reveals that these students’ resistance to domination has had positive impacts on their autonomy and identity formation.

According to resistance theorists, resistant students in oppressive schools can grow into social agents striving for change in culturally oppressive social situations (Giroux, 1983). Commonly, student resistance is seen in a positive light when describing “social and political activists,” or “when the students’ behavior is considered a challenge to the dominant culture” (p. 2). According to Giroux, student resistance “contains a critique of domination and provides theoretical opportunities for self-reflection and for struggle in the interest of self-emancipation and social emancipation” (p. 109). Resistance is emblematic of a students’ examination of inequalities and realization that society is not static and students can exercise agency to create change.

Negative effects of resistance

On the other hand, resistance can have harmful effects for the resisting students as well as other students in the school. When oppositional behavior is destructive to the classroom environment and effects on-task behaviors, it can harm the learning process for the student and others in the class. Students who reject the knowledge of school may in fact reject the acquisition of all knowledge, including positive transformational knowledge. MacLeod (1987) suggests that the group of Italian and Irish youth known as the Hallway Hangers have the potential to work toward progressive social change, but may be held back by their criminality and racism. Further, students may limit their own opportunities in life through a lack of academic credentials.
Kohl (1991) warns that if not-learning involves defiance of social customs or the dominant authority, the student may experience negative consequences of being unable to advance in society. For example, Akmir, one student described by Kohl, was denied a high school diploma due to a lack of “citizenship,” hindering his admittance to college later on.

In Willis’s study (1977), the teachers do not understand the social and resistant nature of the lads’ disruptive acts, and so dismiss their behavior as personal issues and use ridicule to control these students. Thus, the students’ resistance leads to further oppression by the school, taking what could be a politically powerful situation for the lads, and instead denigrating it to a self-determined situation for the students. Their “acceptance of not only their future work roles, but also their rejection of intellectual labor” results in their self-determined, prescribed careers (Giroux, 1980, p. 79). Solomon (1992) finds that, similar to Willis’s study of working class students, the power struggles and methods of circumventing authority will continue for the Jocks in Lumberville as they grow older. Solomon found that the Jocks’ oppositional reactions to tracking and authoritarian strictness made it less likely that the students would succeed in the classroom and move on to higher education or better jobs.

In such instances, resistance can unwittingly perpetuate the reproductive cycle of schooling, keeping students stuck in their culture group and unable to gain higher socioeconomic status or better jobs (Giroux, 1983). By resisting education and dropping out or refusing to learn critical thinking skills, students limit their future options. The working class students in Willis’s study rejected schooling, instead mimicking the antics
of the shop floor. As such, the students cemented their future of manual labor through lack of other opportunities they may have gained through school achievement (Willis, 1977). Willis (1981) has since explained that resistance should not be romanticized, and that, rather than merely reproducing the same situation, resistance can actually result in worse situations for the students.

Summary

Student resistance generally represents a rejection of the dominant school or social ideology held by the school system as well as individual teachers. Many students resist the reproductive and oppressive nature of educational institutions, choosing to assert their identity and knowledge through resistance. Students in rural areas face unique issues, which may impact student resistance. These issues are related to economic disadvantages as well as the clash of middle class teachers and working class students. This resistance, sometimes misinterpreted for mere misbehavior, can take the form of language or nonverbal expression, passive aggressive behavior, or aggressive behavior within the classroom. Although students may lose educational opportunities when they resist, they may gain a greater sense of self and critical thinking skills.

A major limitation with the literature regarding resistance is the lack of previous research literature relating to resistant students in underfunded rural schools. As such, this study is mostly reliant on past research studies in urban areas. This study attempts to fill some of the gaps in determining if students in rural areas provide similar reasons for resistance as those students in urban areas, and if these students provide reasons that may be unique to the rural setting. As most resistance studies focus on urban areas with
underprivileged ethnic groups, these studies frequently discuss reasons relating to culture clash. However, in rural areas, most students and their teachers identify as Caucasian, so misunderstandings between ethnic groups may not be an issue. However, as the literature shows, other factors in rural areas may lead to culture clashes of a different kind.

Further, with a few notable exceptions, much of the literature regarding student resistance to education takes the perspective of the teacher or another adult. Few address the perspective from the students who are resisting. Therefore, this study privileges student voices by asking students to describe their behavior and rationale for that behavior, rather than asking a teacher or similar authority make assumptions based on what they see.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative methodology. Qualitative research “takes place in naturally occurring situations” and focuses on gaining understanding and attribution of meanings through “verbal narratives and observations rather than numbers” (McMillan, 2004, p. 9). According to Taylor and Bogdan (1984), qualitative research consists of several characteristics. First, some qualitative research is inductive, allowing for the data to present patterns and insights, rather than beginning research with preconceived ideas. Further, situations and people are viewed holistically, taking backgrounds and experiences into account. Qualitative researchers must be sensitive to the effect that their presence may have on the subjects, and attempt to minimize these influences. The researcher becomes the instrument, using his or her frame of reference to interpret situations and understand research participants, while attempting to set aside preconceived notions. Qualitative research allows for multiple perspectives, including marginalized voices (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

This type of research is ideal for a school setting, particularly one that involves such personal and emotional considerations as resistance. By utilizing emergent themes, as described later, this study allowed themes to emerge organically from the data rather than imposing a specific analytic framework on the study’s results. The observations and interviews employed a holistic approach, understanding that classroom occurrences may be the result of events taking place in a different environment. I attempted to refrain from interaction with the students and teacher during classroom observations in order to
minimize any influences on the nature of the classroom environment. Further, during student interviews, I attempted to gain rapport with the students, encouraging honest answers. My background as a teacher is useful, as it helped interpret findings and encourage dialogue from the students during interviews. The subjects of study, resistant students, may not be accustomed to sharing their perspective, and may need encouragement.

Case Study

This research utilized a case study design. Case studies involve “organizing the data by specific cases for in-depth study and comparison” (Patton, 2002, p. 447). The case study may have multiple layers; for example, one school can be the subject of a case study, and within that school, case studies can also center on multiple students. Case studies attempt to take a holistic view of the person or site, and utilize multiple methods of inquiry, including interviews and observations. Each case study is understood as a unique, valuable situation, but later may be compared and contrasted to the other cases.

One benefit of using case studies is the depth of detailed information included in the study. The detailed information contained in a case study yields greater understanding of the particular situation. Further, the case study is flexible and allows data to be gathered as it arises. On the other hand, since case studies only represent one site or individual, case studies do not often generalize. However, for this study, I do not intend to generalize my findings. I want to represent the feelings and beliefs of selected students at one school in rural Ohio.
Phenomenology

A phenomenological approach was taken in this research design. According to phenomenology, human behaviors are viewed “as a product of how people define their world” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 9). Phenomenology concerns “how human beings make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness,” including how they “perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). Studies that use phenomenology include in-depth interviews with participants who actively experienced a phenomenon. In this study, students were asked to explain situations in their lives and how the student perceives and interprets these situations. The student’s view of the world and understanding of specific situations may be very different from a teacher or parent’s understanding, and can provide information that teachers or parents do not have. Since this research is concerned with student behaviors, the student can provide the most accurate rationale for these behaviors. The phenomenological approach emphasizes the importance of the student voice as a tool for gaining a more holistic understanding of this phenomena in this research.

A weakness of phenomenology is that these approaches focus on the lived experience, and so the accuracy of the data is dependent on the openness of the participant. However, the strength of phenomenology is that it places value on the perspective of the individual. Phenomenology requires extensive observations and interviews, and it should be examined in context of the phenomena. Phenomenology usually assumes that an essence of an experience exists. In this study, however, I have
combined phenomenology with case study to show that the essence of the student’s experience is specific to that particular student. Thus, I have used the phenomenological perspective without relying on a phenomenological study to define the essence of the student experience (Patton, 2002, p. 107).

A phenomenological case study combines the two approaches in order to maximize the strengths of each. Combining a case study with phenomenology grounds the phenomenological perspective within a cultural and social experience. Further, the use of phenomenology allows for a deeper look at a situation, as it allows the researcher to glimpse the thoughts and understandings of the participants.

Inductive Data Analysis

This study utilized an inductive approach for analysis, which allowed themes to emerge from the data. Inductive research begins with no presuppositions about the important themes of the research. As data analysis and coding begins, the researcher works from the ground up to allow themes to emerge organically, grouping specific observations into general patterns or themes. These emergent themes are grounded in the data, which allows for flexibility of the analysis but requires the researcher to remain open to adaptations (Patton, 2002). As I began to analyze the data, I noted words or phrases of interest, and began grouping these phrases together into categories. I had to be aware that interview participants may not necessarily use the same word to describe the same idea, so occasionally I had to create my own word to use for that category. These categories are seen in the interview data section of Chapter 4. Next, I arranged these
categories by themes identified in the literature review, and finally, I organized the themes by research question.

Setting

This study was conducted in a high school located in southeastern Ohio, in a county designated by the federal government as part of the Appalachian region. This high school is the only high school in the school district, and one of only three high schools in the county. The school also contains a vocational career center on the campus, which is attended by students from all three high schools. According to the 2000 census, the city in which the school is located has 1,966 residents, 94.91% of whom were white. The city has a median household income of $19,971, while the national average is $41,994. In the city, 61.8% of residents under the age of 18 and 39.2% of the population live below the poverty line. Nationally, 12.4% of the population have income levels below the poverty line. Of the population 25 years or older, 9.2% have a Bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to the national rate of 24.4%. In this city, 53% of the population ages 16 years or older are in the labor force, compared to 63.9% nationally (US Census Bureau, 2000).

The state of Ohio issues a yearly report card to each school building and school district, evaluating schools based on state indicators for student academic performance on standardized tests, graduation rate, and attendance. To meet the 12 indicators at the high school level, 75% of tenth graders must have scored proficient or higher on each section of the Ohio Graduation Test: reading, mathematics, writing, science, and social studies. Further, 85% of eleventh graders must have scored proficient or higher on each section of the same test. The other two indicators are attendance rate, which must meet the state
requirement of 93%, and graduation rate, which must be 90%. The school is evaluated based on these indicators and three other measures of performance (performance index, adequate yearly progress, and value-added), then issued one of six designations: Excellent with Distinction, Excellent, Effective, Continuous Improvement, Academic Watch, or Academic Emergency. Schools that do not make adequate yearly progress are required to draft an improvement plan, and must show improvement or risk being taken over by the state Department of Education (Ohio Department of Education, 2009).

According to the state report card, in the 2008-2009 school year, the high school serves approximately 634 students, 97.3% of whom are white, 53.7% economically disadvantaged, and 17.4% are students with disabilities. The school met 6 out of 12 state indicators and was rated Effective by the state of Ohio. The academic indicators met were 10th grade reading, mathematics, and writing, as well as 11th grade reading and writing. The school also met the indicator for attendance rate, at 94.2%. The academic indicators not met were 10th and 11th grade science and social studies, and 11th grade mathematics. The school also did not meet the state indicator for graduation rate, with 84.4%. 36.2% of graduates had taken the ACT assessment, and the mean ACT score was 19 (Ohio Department of Education, 2009).

Participants

Potential student interviewees were determined through purposeful sampling. Students were selected for interviews based on classroom observations of resistance (see “resistance” in definition of terms for sample behaviors). After inviting all students in observed classes to indicate their interest in participating in an interview through a
student interest form (see Appendix F), those students who displayed resistance and
indicated interest in an interview were sent consent forms and invited to participate in
interviews. Students had the right to decline to participate at any point.

Classroom observations took place within one rural Appalachian high school
building in southeast Ohio. All high school teachers at the school were invited to
participate in class observations through an e-mailed letter (see Appendix D), and seven
teachers responded. These teachers’ classrooms were selected for observations. The
teachers recommended classes for observations based on class size and subject matter.

Student participants were high school students at the same southeastern Ohio high
school. Participants were selected for individual interviews based on my observations and
poor grades (D’s or F’s) as recommended by the teacher. My observation of students was
the primary source of subject selection, as teachers may have bias against particular
students or may misunderstand the notion of resistance. I observed each student in two of
his or her classes. The teachers were asked general questions about how the students were
performing in their classes to ensure that the resistant students chosen were earning poor
grades. Participants were chosen based on behaviors that the literature suggests indicate
resistance, including displays of apathy or resistance towards schoolwork, teachers, or
school in general, as observed by myself, familiar with the literature (see the definition of
“resistance” in definition of terms for a description of sample behaviors). I interviewed
five male students and two female students. Both female students were juniors (although
one was repeating her junior year), and three of the five male students were juniors
(although two were repeating their junior years), and the other two were seniors.
Data Collection Strategies

Data was collected through classroom observations and individual interviews.

Observations

I observed classes selected by the teachers, as a non-participant observer. I made anecdotal field notes based on the behavior of the students (i.e. interactions with teacher, interactions with other students, reactions to teacher requests, confrontations, completion of work, etc.), as well as reflective notes consisting of my interpretations of classroom activity.

Observations are valuable because they allow for a holistic understanding of people and “the context within which people interact” (Patton, 2002, p. 262). Observations also allow a researcher to be inductive rather than reliant on “prior conceptualizations of the setting” (Patton, 2002, p. 262). Another benefit of using observations is that they allow the researcher to see things that may escape the notice of people immersed in the situation. Observations also allow the researcher to see things that may be uncomfortable to discuss in an interview, and to see things from beyond the singular perspective of the interviewee (Patton, 2002). However, to gain effective observations, the researcher must be skilled at noticing everything that is happening around him or her, writing descriptively, taking good field notes, separating important and trivial facts, and understanding his or her own perspective. These skills may be difficult to develop, and researchers must carefully prepare for observations. Other limitations to observations include the potential for the researcher to unknowingly impact the situation, or for the researcher to include personal bias in the observations. Observations are limited to
external activity, as the researcher has no way of knowing what people are thinking or feeling (Patton, 2002). To mitigate these limitations, I made an effort to take detailed field notes as events occurred around me. I constantly evaluated my note-taking to ensure that I was writing information relevant to the study goals. I attempted to refrain from injecting my opinions into the situation while taking field notes. I used a combination of methods, including both interviews and observations, in order to capture a fuller sense of the situation.

I chose to engage in non-participant observations rather than participant observations. Although participant observations allow researchers to engage in the activity and experience it for themselves, I did not believe that participant observation would be beneficial for this study. I did not want to participate in the classroom as an authority figure or a teacher, because I did not want the students to associate me with the authority of school. During the interviews, I wanted the students to speak to me as an outsider, not as someone affiliated with the school. I felt that engaging with them in the classroom might compromise how much the students would be willing to tell me during the interviews. Further, I wanted to observe how students normally behave in the classroom, not how they behave when a guest is in the room. For the most part, I was able to arrive before class and settle into a seat near the back of the room. Other than the first day I was in a class, during which the students usually asked the teacher or myself who I was, the students barely noticed I was there. Occasionally, a student would glance at the back of the room towards the end of class and seem surprised that I was there. I felt
assured that students’ behavior during class was genuine, and was not manufactured as a performance for me.

To gain teacher participants, I sent out a mass email to all teachers in the school, explaining my study and asking for their participation (see Appendix D). I heard back from a few teachers who wished me good luck but explained that they had only sophomores or freshmen. I also heard from the college prep junior English teacher, the senior government teacher, the family studies teacher, and a general mathematics teacher. I began observing these classes, but quickly realized that I needed to visit more classrooms. I then picked out the teachers who taught junior and senior classes and emailed them individually, asking if they would be willing to let me observe their classes. I heard back from the general junior English teacher, the general senior English teacher, and the advanced mathematics teacher. Many of the students I observed in mathematics were also in the junior English class, and students I observed in senior government were also in the senior English class. This gave me the opportunity to observe students in multiple classes. I spent a total of 48 hours observing 67 classes over 29 different days in February and March 2010. I observed in 25 different classes, but most classes were only observed once or twice. Classes that I observed more than five times were general junior math, general sophomore math, two sections of college-prep junior English, general junior English, general senior English, and general senior government.

**Interviews**

I used purposeful sampling to select individual students for interviews. Purposeful sampling is useful when the researcher is interested in participants who display particular
characteristics. In this case, the desired participants were students who frequently displayed resistance in the classroom setting. All students in each observed class were told about the study (see Appendix E for the script I used when speaking to each class) and asked to fill out an interest survey (see Appendix F), indicating whether or not they were interested in participating in an interview and filling out their contact information. I distributed 124 forms in seven different classes, and 65 students indicated interest in an interview, while 59 said no to an interview. Each class had approximately 12-25 students, and some students had already completed a consent form in another class. From those who indicated yes to an interview, I selected 17 students who had exhibited resistance in the classroom observations and appeared to be earning poor grades. Three other students who exhibited resistance but checked “no” were approached between classes and personally asked if they would be willing to participate in an interview. After being personally asked, each of these students said yes. An introductory and explanatory letter (see Appendix C) as well as an informed consent form were mailed to each of these 20 students’ home addresses with stamped return envelopes. Most students returned consent forms using the envelope, while some students chose to return the consent forms directly to me at the school.

After receiving consent forms from the students, I talked to them to find out what period they have study hall. I was also willing to meet students after school, but each of the students I interviewed had at least one study hall period. At the scheduled period, I would stop by the office, and one of the secretaries would call the classroom to request the student to be sent to the office. I explained to the secretaries that I was doing
interviews with a variety of students. I was given access to the school conference room in
the office to conduct the interviews in a quiet location.

Student interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, with a list of possible
questions and prompts, as well as prepared questions specifically for the student
interviewee relating to his or her resistant classroom behaviors. Each interview began
with a standardized script (see Appendix E) explaining the process. Each student was
then given a paper with three questions about school and a Likert scale (see Appendix B).
After completing the questions, I began the interviews by asking the student about his or
her responses to the questions on the paper. I then worked from a general list of interview
questions to guide the interview (see Appendix A). The questions asked were partially
determined by the student responses to previous questions. This provided enough
guidance and prompts for the interview to continue, while allowing for questions to be
asked naturally. The interviews each lasted between 20 and 40 minutes.

Interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. This allowed me to fully
listen to participant responses without worrying about recording every response, allowing
for a better conversation and rapport with the participant. Further, since the conversation
was preserved in its entirety, no verbal data was lost. At the same time, I also marked
notes regarding body language or other factors that were not audio recorded. Field notes
were also taken to remind me of key points or follow-up questions as the students spoke.
For the first few questions, students were given a small sheet of paper with a Likert scale
of 1-10 and asked to circle the value that best represented their feelings about the
questions. The Likert scale was used to help me build rapport with the students, while
allowing the students to gather their thoughts and focus on the interview topics. Further, the answers provided on the Likert scale provided me with information to guide the subsequent interview questions. See Appendix A for a list of interview questions.

Benefits of interviews over observations are that the interview allows the researcher to find out about things that are not observable, such as interviewees’ thoughts and beliefs (Patton, 2002). Semi-structured interviews, or the interview guide approach, allow the researcher to probe topics as they arise, but also provides a general guideline of topics for the researcher to focus the questions around. However, to successfully utilize probes and follow-up questions, the researcher has to carefully listen and observe the interviewee’s nonverbal signals. Using a tape recorder can free the researcher from the need to record everything that is said, and can allow the researcher to observe the interviewee and focus on follow-up questions (Patton, 2002).

Using interviews has drawbacks, as well. Interviews are dependent on the interviewee’s emotional state, and responses can be inaccurate due to “personal bias, anger, anxiety politics, and simple lack of awareness” (Patton, 2002, p. 306). Validity of interview data can also be compromised due to “recall error, reactivity of the interviewee to the interviewer, and self-serving responses” (p. 306). In order to minimize these limitations, it is important to use clear questions that the interviewees can easily understand. The researcher should react to the interviewee responses with neutrality, while at the same time attempting to establish rapport with the interviewee. To establish rapport, the researcher needs to communicate respect and interest in the interviewee, while refraining from judgment of the interviewee’s responses. To establish rapport, the
researcher should attempt to provide “reinforcement and feedback” to the interviewee throughout the interview to let him or her know that the interview is proceeding well (Patton, 2002).

Since both interviews and observations have limitations, I have used both data collection methods to provide a check on the data. Using both data methods, or triangulation, helps increase validity of the data. Triangulation allows the researcher to maximize the strengths of each method of data collection, while minimizing the limitations of each (Patton, 2002).

Data Analysis

After the interviews were transcribed, the notion of emergent themes was used to organize the data into categories. According to Patton (2002), emergent design requires coding and forming categories to take place after data collection, allowing the categories to arise organically from the data. To follow this research method, the researcher first reads through the data, making notes or marking the transcript at key points. At this point, topics or ideas that repeat may begin to form rough categories or themes. The researcher then combs through the data once again, marking the key points with codes relating to these rough categories. Once the data are arranged into groups based on these codes, the groups may be split up or combined.

The data gained from student interviews was coded and organized into concepts and categories for student reasons for resistance. When first beginning to organize and code the data, I began looking for themes that might align with prior literature in the field regarding student resistance in urban and rural settings. However, as coding progressed,
the use of emergent themes allowed categories to emerge from the data. Since prior research mainly focuses on urban settings, the categories found in the literature may not be inclusive of the themes found in this rural setting. As the data was coded and placed into concepts and categories, some of the original categories were expanded, split into two separate categories, or deleted altogether. In some instances, observational data was also used to create codes, concepts, and/or categories. In particular, I noted repetition of phrases or themes within student interviews.

Data gained from classroom observations was used to guide development of interview questions for students.

Credibility and Validity Measures

Effort was taken to maximize credibility and validity of the study.

Triangulation is a valuable technique for enhancing credibility of a qualitative study. According to McMillan (2004), triangulation is “the use of different methods of gathering data—or collecting data with different samples, at different times, or in different places—to compare different approaches to the same thing” (p. 278). Triangulation was used in selecting multiple students for interviews, and searching for patterns repeating within different interviews. Further, data gathered from a combination of interviews and observations were considered together. The use of both interviews and classroom observations enhances the reliability of each by maximizing the strengths of each method, while providing a check on the data gathered.

Triangulation was also employed in the selection of students for interviews. Students were selected for interviews based on researcher observation over of a number
of days and in multiple classes. I looked for convergence of resistant behavior when selecting students. This method of student selection ensures that interviewed students truly are resistant, lending validity and credibility to the study. Data that does not converge may be explained through further research.

Reliability was enhanced as much as possible by creating very detailed field notes, and utilizing the audio recording during interviews. As a result, the loss of interview data was minimized. Further, verbal member checks were utilized throughout the interviews to ensure that I understood the students’ meaning and intent.

To maintain internal validity, I refrained from communication with the students and teacher during classroom observations. I also attempted to refrain from interfering with the class. Detailed, objective field notes were taken in order to promote internal validity.

Limitations

Not all students approached for interviews returned the consent form, so I was unable to interview some students who displayed resistance in the classroom. Some students were not interested in participating in an interview, some did not have a study hall and were not willing to meet after school, and many others repeatedly forgot to take the consent form home and return it to school. This may be because some of the most resistant students may resist everything taking place in school, including these interviews.

Students seemed to have an influence on each other when I passed out the interest forms. In some classes, students joked around with me and asked questions about the interviews. In these classes, most of the students tended to mark “yes” to the interview.
However, classes that remained completely silent when I talked about the interviews had very few “yes” answers. It seems as though students are influenced by their classmates: If others seem to be interested, they are more likely to be interested, too.

The accuracy of the data may also be limited by the honesty of the students interviewed. My research is dependent on students sharing accurate data, such as how frequently they submit homework assignments or how they really feel about classwork.

Ethical Considerations

All participants were given an informed consent form to be signed by themselves and a parent or guardian, if under the age of 18, before the interviews took place. The informed consent form explained the purpose and risks of the study, and allowed the student to opt out of the interview at any time.

Subjects were not pressured to participate in any way. Consent forms were either mailed home and/or given directly to the student to take home. Signed consent forms were either mailed directly to me, or turned in to me directly in the classroom. Teachers were not aware whether students opted to participate or not, and the students were assured that participation or non-participation will not affect their grade in any way. They were also assured that anything they said would be held in confidence, and not heard by anyone other than the researcher (unless there is potential harm to themselves or others). No teachers or administrators would hear what they said. Any records were stored under a pseudonym, promoting anonymity. Interviews were conducted in a private room at a time selected by the student, usually during the students’ study hall. Other students were not aware of interview subjects, unless the interviewee chose to inform others.
Students were selected for interviews with disregard to race, gender, age, socio-economic status, or any factors other than behavior and interactions in class.

Approval for the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board.
CHAPTER FOUR: STUDENT PROFILES, OBSERVATIONS, AND INTERVIEW DATA

Student Profiles

In the following section, each student is presented with a brief summary of his or her goals, self-description, relationship with family, family education and background, and plans after graduation. I have also included a description of typical behaviors that I observed from the students in each class I observed.

Dan

Dan describes himself in the following manner: “I’m just like a normal student that just comes to school to learn.” He enjoys going to school, but says that sometimes he is a slacker and only does enough work to get by. He does not like government or English, because those are boring classes. He likes that school is a safe environment because of the discipline and rules, but does not like having to be there all day. Dan lives and works on a farm, raising animals to take to the fair each year. He wishes he could take Ag classes, but is in the Welding program, which takes up too much time. He plans on attending college a few hours away from home, and wants move back to Pierce after college to work. Eventually he wants to own a mechanic shop or garage. His family encourages him to go to college. His father, who passed away 7 years ago, had never attended college but owned his own business, and his mother is a registered nurse.

In senior government class, Dan sits near the back corner, in the second to last row. Sometimes he appears to be paying attention, looking at the teacher and jotting down notes while she lectures, but most of the time he has his head down, fiddles with
his pen, or turns to the boy in the seat behind him to exchange grins or whispers. The two boys whisper to each other frequently and make each other laugh. When class starts, he is frequently sitting sideways, with one eye on the teacher and one eye turned toward the back of the room, ready at a moment’s notice to turn back around to whisper with his friend. At one point, the teacher directs her gaze at the boys in this back corner and says that although she has never made a seating chart before, she might have to for this class if they cannot pay attention. Later, she says to these students, “There’s a line, and you guys are dancing all over it.”

In senior English, Dan sits in the back right corner. A friend sits directly in front of him. Often, during the class discussion, the two of them are whispering to each other and grinning, talking to each other rather than engaging with the rest of the class discussion. One day, the students were supposed to fill out a guided notes worksheet during the class discussion. Dan had only answered two questions of about ten. I wondered why he was not writing the answers down- Did he already know them? Was he not paying attention? Did he think it was not important? At one point, the teacher even said, “Be sure you write this down!” and yet Dan only stared at his fingernails, not writing it down. In English class, the teacher frequently engages in a lot of class discussion, allowing students to speak out and engaging with the students’ ideas. However, Dan very rarely asked a question or made a comment in class. One day, the teacher was carrying on an engaging discussion with the students on the left-hand side of class. Dan put his hand up, and left it up for about ten minutes. She never called on him, or even glanced to that side of the room. Meanwhile, other students just spoke out when
they had something to say, not bothering to raise their hands or wait to be called on. Eventually, Dan put his hand down and continued talking to his friend. A different day, many students are asking questions about the development of language and place names in the area, and the teacher seemed very interested in each question, taking each topic and expanding on it. Dan asked the teacher, “In Old English, did they have different words for the same thing?” The teacher did not seem to understand, asked him to repeat the question, and then asked him to ask it in a different way. After he asked the question again, the teacher said, “Yeah, maybe!” and then moved on to a new question. This interaction may seem benign, but the teacher’s response was starkly abrupt compared to her enthusiastic, detailed responses to the other students’ questions.

Mark

Mark is a student at another school in the county. He goes there for five periods, and then comes to Pierce for English, government, and the vocational welding program. However, a few weeks ago, he left the welding program. He said the feeling was mutual, but he did not want to talk about it, and I did not probe any further. From his comments, as well as things he had said to other students in class, it seemed as though he left the program on negative terms. Mark serves on the volunteer fire department, and says that he wants to start racing cars again. He plans to go to college a few hours away to start building a racing business. He is not close to his family, and he says they cannot stand each other. He says his parents are “ignorant towards the fact of what’s required for college” and they are not fond of the idea of him going away to college. Neither of his parents graduated from high school, and his mother only finished middle school. Mark
went to school in Kentucky before moving to Pierce County. He thinks he would like to come back here after college, until he moves down to North Carolina “where the big racing is.”

In senior government class, Mark participates frequently. He, like the vast majority of the students, never raises his hand, and this is never an issue with the teachers. Mark never sleeps during class, and always seems to be fully engaged. Even when he is doodling or looks distracted, he seems to be listening, as he will then mention a related topic to the teacher. In government, Mark frequently connects the topic with current events (once saying, “isn’t that what’s happening with health care right now?”), although occasionally his comments are very off-topic (during a discussion of the Constitutional Convention, Mark said, “Maine? I’d love to go there and see the lighthouses.”). He does occasionally talk to the boy sitting beside him, and when this happens, the teacher continues to lecture, while looking directly at Mark until he stops.

One day, while students were silently copying notes from the board, Mark started to ask the teacher a question, saying, “I have a question. Did you ever have….” The teacher cut him off with a finger to her lips and a “shh!” A few days later, when Mark interrupted her with a comment, she said, “I’m going to see if they have medicine for ‘I-can’t-hush-itis’ because every time I talk, you have a response!” Another time in this class, he tried to use another students’ planner to go to the restroom. The school rule is that students must have their official school-provided planner and it must be signed by the teacher every time they leave the class. The teacher refused to sign the planner for Mark, because she knew it belonged to someone else. One day, as students are leaving the class, I hear a
discussion between Mark and another student, in which Mark says, “No, I didn’t get alternative school.”

In senior English, Mark frequently answers the teacher’s questions and participates in class discussions. However, unlike the government teacher, this teacher always engages with his comments and discusses his ideas, even if they are very off-topic. One day after class, the teacher told me that the students usually give Mark a hard time for not being very bright, but he sometimes says incredibly insightful things in class. Once, he walked out of the classroom in the middle of a discussion. When another student asked the teacher if she saw, the teacher said, “Yeah, it’s okay.” That same day, Mark answered the teacher’s question in class by summarizing the story assigned for homework, comparing it to another story they had read. The teacher complimented him for his thorough analysis and said, “because you made that comparison, I know you read the story.” After a lengthy class discussion about the story and its meaning, Mark got up to borrow a pen from the teacher. He had not had one the entire class period, so I wonder if he wrote down any notes during the discussion. While the teacher elaborated on their assignment, Mark was busy writing down his ideas. He brought his paper up to the teacher to share them with her as soon as she finished giving directions. During class another day, the students worked in teacher-assigned groups of four to create a comic strip. Almost immediately, Mark stood up and left his group to wander around the classroom, talking to different groups. When asked by the teacher why he is not with his group, Mark said that the other students in his group are doing the drawing, and she encouraged him to think of the text while he waited. Mark eventually went back to his
group and said, “Alright, I’m ready!” but another student in his group replied, “No, it’s okay, we got it.” Mark continued to visit other groups to talk.

_Cody_

Cody is a junior taking the A+ computer vocational program. Last year, he missed approximately half of the school year because he was suspended from school frequently. He is now taking sophomore biology, math, and social studies to make up the credits from last year. He was in trouble twice last year, and he explained them both as “mistakes” or misunderstandings. One involved a knife that he had left in his backpack from the weekend, which he showed to a student on the bus and accidently cut his hand. Another involved a verbal altercation with a bus driver that went to court. Cody will graduate halfway through his senior year, and he is thinking of entering the military, and possibly going to college afterwards. He has lived in Pierce his entire life. According to Cody, his parents say he can do what he wants, as long as he does not do anything stupid and end up in jail. He says, “No one else in my house has been to college so far, so they’re hopin’ I’m the first.” I found his choice of words interesting- that his family was hoping, rather than encouraging or expecting him to attend college. He wants to move away from home for a while and travel, but thinks he will eventually come back. Most of his family lives in the area.

In sophomore math, Cody frequently sleeps through part of the lecture. Instead of writing the examples from the board, he frequently stares into his lap, picking at his fingernails or playing with his pen. Sometimes he jokes to other students that they just copy answers from the board. When he is awake, he talks out loud frequently, making
comments that sometimes make other students laugh. He came into class late one time, and once he was in his seat, said loudly, “How come I don’t know what’s going on?” Later, the teacher called on him, asking a question about the triangle. He responded, “I’m not even doing this,” to which the teacher said, “I can see that! Now turn your calculator on.” He jokingly responded that he turned it off because it was getting hot. One day, he said, “I hate this class, I swear.” Another day, he walked into class and loudly asked the teacher, “Are you in a bad mood today?” When she said yes, he responded, “Ruin my day, why don’t you!” She said, “I don’t ruin your day, you guys ruin mine,” and he responded, “I dread coming to this class.” When he comes into class, he usually stands at his desk for a few minutes during the class before finally taking his seat, sometimes after the teacher asks him. Other times, Cody participates very frequently in class, telling the teacher the next steps and answering her questions, even at times when he appears to not have been paying attention. He helps the student beside him, explaining what the teacher just put on the board. One day he asked the teacher twice if he could go to the library. She said no, because he had a math worksheet to work on- so Cody finished his worksheet quickly, finishing 15 minutes before the end of class and spending the remaining class period in his seat. Another day, he asked the teacher what would happen if he just guesses and writes answers down. She said that he would probably get a 50% and fail. He replied, “Well, that’s better than nothing.” She quickly added that if she sees him just scribbling stuff down, she would not give him any credit. He came into class late on a test day, but finished early, before anyone else in the class. When the teacher asked him about it, he showed her his test to prove that he did the work. When I talked to this
teacher once after class, she said that it is a sophomore class, but mostly juniors are
taking it. She said they all passed the Ohio Graduation Test last year, so “they don’t care-
one of them.”

The first day I visited Cody’s junior English class, he recognized me from
observing his math class, and loudly (yet jokingly) asked me why I was following him
around. He then said, “Man, you picked the worst class to come into. Why do they
always do that?” At the end of the period, the teacher told me, “You really did come in
for the worst class. They weren’t kidding.” In class that day, the students were supposed
to be working on a family tree. About 30 minutes into the period, the teacher walked
around to the various tables, and asked Cody why he had not started yet. He said that he
would start, but he was still thinking. A little later, the teacher came back and looked at
Cody’s work. She pointed to a few places on his paper and said, “Those aren’t names.”
Cody responded loudly, “Yes they are: Grandma, Grandpa!” Another day, a former
student stopped in to talk to the teacher. When he left, Cody slowly and dramatically
sauntered out the door after him. When the teacher told him to get back in, he laughed
and came back. Another day, the students were reading a book aloud in small groups.
Cody’s group had not started reading yet, so the teacher stopped by and said, “Stop
listening to Cody’s ridiculous stories and start reading!” Cody said he had not told the
story yet- he just started. He then continued quietly to his group, “I’m gonna fail this test
anyway. I cheat on the reading tests.”
Jody

Jody plays softball and works at a dairy farm. She is interested in horticulture classes and Ag classes. Next year, she will take two class periods of horticulture as a “Skills USA” program. She is also working toward her State Degree in Ag. She plans on attending college about an hour away from home, but does not want to live at home. When I asked what her family thinks about her plans, she said, “They don’t mind it,” which leads me to believe that they do not really care either way if she gets a college education. Eventually, she wants to open up her own daycare. She said that one of her sisters is in college right now, and another sister went for a while before quitting. Her dad went to college for a while, and her mother went to the career center to earn a nursing license.

The first day I observed Jody’s math class, she was sent to the office for talking. She said, “Oh, I don’t care! Go right ahead!” before storming defiantly out of the room. She frequently makes loud, off-topic comments in class or complains about work. At one point, when the teacher looked at her and said to the class, “Get out paper. This is math—we’re going to work today,” Jody responded, sounding exasperated, “It wasn’t me! See, I told you it wasn’t me! Quit blaming everything on me!” When Jody addresses the teacher, she frequently sounds disrespectful. At one point, the teacher was collecting worksheets, and Jody, waving a paper in the air, said loudly, “Did you want this one? Hey! Did you want this one?” One day, Jody sat in the back of the classroom. The teacher immediately noticed and told her to move closer to the board. Jody remained where she was, so a few minutes later, the teacher said, “If you don’t get up here and sit,
Jody, you’re going right on back to the office.” Jody moaned, “Oh my God,” picked up her bag, and shuffled up to the front, where she dropped her bag and slumped down in a chair. Another time, the students were asked to bring in a picture, and were given one more chance to bring it in. Jody had been absent when this was first assigned, so she said, “I get two more chances, right?” The teacher said no, she has to bring it in the next day just like everyone else. Jody argued, “But it’s not my fault! It was a school field trip.”

The next day, Jody did not have a picture, so she found one on the internet and printed it out. The teacher said that it was too simple and she needed to choose a different one. Jody sighs loudly to her friend, “Nothing’s gonna please her.” Jody seems to be confused in math frequently. Once, the teacher addressed the class, “Does that help you figure out how to do numbers one through four? Now let’s work on the others on your own.” Jody sat at her desk, silently shaking her head “no” in response to the teacher, but the teacher did not appear to see. Sometimes, the teacher goes to Jody’s desk and works with her one-on-one. At these times, Jody answers and asks questions about the math, and it seems to go well.

In English class, Jody is not outright defiant like she is in math, but she seems to try to get out of work as much as possible. She likes to read in the hallway, and usually comes back in at the end of the period, stating that she had just finished. However, in our interview, Jody said that she did not read much of the book. Sometimes she sleeps in English class, and when she has a hall pass, she stays out of the class for up to ten minutes.
Colton

Colton’s goal is to go to Ohio State, and he really wants to play football there. However, he said a few times that these are “out-of-reach dreams,” since, according to him, he probably will not get in, and probably will not be able to play there. His dad said he would pay for college if Colton goes. He thinks he might join the military, but eventually he wants to do ghost hunting, storm chasing, or acting. Right now, he works at Wendy’s after school, sometimes working from 4 pm until 2 am. Next year, he will be in the program where he works during half the school day. He repeatedly said that other people are smarter than him, that he is not very intelligent, and that his opinion is less important than other people’s, like the principal. Growing up, Colton moved around a lot with his dad, who builds smokestacks all around the country. He says he attended 23 different middle schools, sometimes leaving after a week or two. Because of this, he says, he is a grade behind. He has currently been at Pierce for one year, living with his mother while she is ill. He plans on moving back to Pierce or another place that he has lived after he finishes college. He said that most of his family thinks he should drop out and get his GED, but he wants to finish.

In math class, Colton rarely talks or participates. He frequently has his head down, asleep. Even when the teacher wakes him up, he just goes back to sleep a minute later. When he is awake, he stares off to the side, ignoring everyone in the class, appearing like he is not paying attention. He does not write anything down. One day, he came into math class right when the first bell rings, put his books on his desk, and turned to go back out into the hall. The teacher called after him, “Hurry back, Colton!” He
turned at the doorway, with an indignant sneer on his face and said, annoyed, “I know!” Colton did make it back to class before the next bell rang, and immediately put his head down to sleep.

In English class, Colton usually lets one of the girls fix his long hair, putting hairspray in it and making it messy. The teacher always tells them to stop, but they do it again the next day. Colton was absent several days that I attempted to interview him. He also missed a few days of class while he took the Ohio Graduation Test. Although the test is for sophomores, Colton just moved back into the state and had not taken it yet.

**Kelsey**

Kelsey started school in Pierce, but in elementary school, her parents divorced and she started attending a different school in the county. She did not want to live with her father, so she stopped doing any work in school, hoping that they would move her back to live with her mom. She just moved back to Pierce this school year, and thought she would do better. She said that she has gotten into the routine of not doing well, and she sleeps through a lot of her classes. She came back to participate in the Cosmetology program. Although she is a senior this year, it takes two years to earn the cosmetology license, so she plans on staying for an extra year. When she graduates, she wants to move to New York City to attend college and study fine arts, design, and photography, before opening up an art gallery/club. No one in her family other than her brother know about her plans- they only know that she wants to go to New York City and they discourage it because it is so far away. Her family does encourage her to go to college, just not in New York City. She really dislikes Pierce County, and thinks that residents are not smart and
just do a lot of drugs. Kelsey was very confident during our interview, sounding very sure of herself and her opinions, and always justifying her actions.

In math class, Kelsey follows along from the board most of the time, writing notes or filling out a worksheet. Kelsey sits in the front row. Occasionally, she will make a loud, dramatic remark, like, “I don’t have enough paper!” or “My pen just exploded all over me!” When the teacher is not at the board, Kelsey usually turns around to watch the antics of the rest of the class. The teacher frequently asks her to turn around. Once, the teacher asked her to turn around twice, and Kelsey mumbled, as she turned around, “I am turned around.” On the day that Kelsey’s pen exploded, she was facing the boy sitting behind her and was asked by the teacher to turn around several times. The teacher finally went back to her desk and said she was going to write up “all four of you.” The students all looked around at each other, trying to figure out who was being written up. Kelsey and the boy behind her silently pointed at each other. The teacher saw and said, “How many times have you been told already to be quiet? I shouldn’t have to say it. Now you’re playing games like little two year olds.” Kelsey was one of the students who was written up and sent to the office, and when the teacher said her name, Kelsey’s jaw dropped. She got up, speechless, and headed out the door to the office. In the next class, Kelsey complained to her friends and the teacher about it, saying that the math teacher accused her of making a scene. She did not think she did anything wrong. She frequently justifies her actions when the teacher looks at her. Once, the teacher just gave her a look, and Kelsey said, “What? I’m just giving him a pencil!” Another time, Kelsey had a drawing on top of the worksheet, propped between her lap and the desk so the teacher could not
see. The teacher leaned over the desk and looked at it pointedly, and Kelsey, sheepishly, grinned and switched the papers so that the worksheet was now on top. One time, Kelsey said to another student, “I left early so I shouldn’t have to take it [the test] but she’s making me.” After the teacher gave directions, Kelsey said loudly, “What?!” The teacher mistook it for a sarcastic remark and said sharply, “Hey!” Kelsey explained, “That was an honest ‘what,’” before turning to grin at the snickering boys behind her. During tests, Kelsey is usually one of the last students to finish. She works the whole time, but sometimes has to finish her test the following day. One day, the teacher asked the students to take out their worksheet from yesterday. She asked Kelsey if she has it. Kelsey responded proudly, “Yes, I have it done!” The teacher, sounding surprised, said, “Good!”

In English class, Kelsey prefers to work alone, rather than read in a group. She told the teacher that she read this same book last year in her old school, but that she failed English last year. Kelsey seems to be behind in the reading, and the teacher told her she could come in during study hall to borrow a book.

*Taylor*

Taylor is in the vocational welding program. He took college prep classes until he entered the welding program, and then he dropped down to the regular track. After school, he works on a farm. He plans on attending a welding school for about a year after graduation. The school is a few hours away from Pierce, and it is the school his father attended. He thinks that after earning his welding qualifications, he will either move back to Pierce or move to Cincinnati, where his uncle works. Taylor says that his parents
support his plans to go to welding school, and his father is encouraging it. His mom also attended college. At one point in our conversation, Taylor said that he still is not sure about the welding school: “My dad wants me to do what he does, but – which I like, but I always thought about going to college for so many years and becoming something where I can pretty much sit in an office with a nice, cool air conditioner and make more money, you know?” Taylor visits his grandfather in New York City every summer and he admires his grandfather’s lifestyle. He lived in Columbus before moving to a neighboring county and finally to Pierce two years ago.

In math, Taylor is frequently out of his desk, talking to one of his friends at the back of the room. The teacher frequently tells him to go back to his seat. After Taylor moved back to his seat one day, he got up again during the lesson, slowly walking to the back of the room before turning to the pencil sharpener. The teacher saw him standing up, and told him to go back to his seat. He responded, “I’m sharpening my pencil!” Although he sounded annoyed, his deliberate slowness made it seem to the teacher that he was standing up for no reason. During class lectures, Taylor rarely pays attention and takes notes. One day he focused intently on taping his math folder back together. Sometimes he argues passionately with the teacher about an answer that he believes is right. After the teacher explains it on the board, he usually accepts the teacher’s answer. One day, he said, “Geez, calm yourself!” to the teacher after one such argument— even though Taylor seemed more worked up about the answer than the teacher. Another day, during a test, an announcement over the intercom called for the students in financial management classes to go down to the gym for their activity. Taylor said he wanted to
go, and told the teacher that he was in that class. She gave him a hard look and then told him to put his name on his paper and turn it in, if he really was in the class. He said, “No, just kidding, I dropped that class two weeks ago.” Later on, he put his hand up to ask a question. While walking over to him, the teacher said, “Taylor, I already told you- you sleep in class and now when it comes to a test, you expect me to help you.” Nevertheless, she did walk over and answer his question. One day in class, Taylor raised his hand to ask a question. The teacher began to tell him to wait and be quiet, but he interrupted and said, “No, it’s about this worksheet… You know how you said about this…” The teacher asked him to wait because she wanted to do something else on the board first. She never went back to answer his question. Some days, Taylor does participate well, answering the teacher’s questions about the mathematics and helping the student behind him.

Taylor has missed a lot of math, and was only in the room a few times during my first few weeks of observations. One day, he appeared after being absent for the previous two days. He was out of his seat, standing by a friend’s desk and talking, when the teacher asked him to return to his seat. After a few requests, the teacher, frustrated, told Taylor that she was going to write him up. Resigned, he stood up and walked slowly back to her desk to wait to be sent to the office. He sat in the teacher’s chair, until she asked him to move to a student desk in the back. He sat in the back, with no pen, worksheet, or book, sometimes sleeping, until the end of class. At that point, the teacher went over to talk to him in private. After all the other students had left, she leaned over his desk and told him that he needs to sit down and be quiet when class starts. Defensively, Taylor said, “But I was asking him about his baby! My girlfriend has been in the hospital the
past two days, I haven’t slept at all, and I wanted to know if this was normal.” It seemed that his girlfriend was having complications in her pregnancy and Taylor was worried about her. He was talking to a friend who already has a baby to find out about his friend’s experience. The teacher immediately softened and asked him questions about his girlfriend. After a short conversation, Taylor headed toward the door. The teacher, sounding stern again, called after him, “I’m still writing you up! Big time!”

Interview Data

The interview data was analyzed, coded, and arranged into categories as they emerged organically from the data. These emergent themes are listed in this section, and connected to the research questions and the literature in Chapter Five.

I found several themes in the students’ interview responses. First, many students explained that they just do not put effort into their schoolwork. Some say they do just enough to pass, others would rather sleep, and other students blamed other factors for their lack of motivation. Another common theme was that students are bored in class. One reason given for the boredom is that the subject is not interesting to the students. Other reasons were that bookwork is boring, the student already knows the material, or they could be in a more advanced class. Some students used their boredom to rationalize their actions in class. The third theme was student complaints about classwork. Students complained that they do not actually do anything in classes, that the information is pointless, and that subject matter repeats year after year and day after day. Fourth, students mentioned a few reasons they have for doing well, such as earning credentials, or being required to be there, so they might as well make an effort. The fifth theme I
found in student responses relates to the classes they like. Students like classes that are enjoyable, are hands-on or involve projects, allow students to be creative, introduce new topics, or involve useful, real-world skills. The sixth theme regards how school prepares students for the future. Many students felt that school does not prepare them at all, but others believe that school prepares them to have a routine when they have a job. Some students believe that the vocational skills they learn will be useful, and some believe that they can learn in places other than school. The next theme in student responses dealt with school rules. Students feel that some school rules are silly, and that the school should put a little more trust in students. Some students do not believe that school rules are consistently enforced, another cares about what his parents think more than the school, and another thinks the strict rules makes students drop out. The eighth topic is characteristics of good teachers; such as letting the students have fun, treating students like adults, helping them with classwork, and caring about the students. The ninth theme involves characteristics of bad teachers. Some teachers have favorites, do not value student input, dislike the students, are inconsistent in the classroom, are too serious and strict in the classroom, or do not explain the classwork. The next theme students mentioned is feeling as though they do not fit in, or feeling frustrated with the school gossip. The next three themes involve the disconnect between student and teacher perceptions of student behavior, students who “test” the teacher, and students who do not have time to do homework. The final and fourteenth theme is that students are glad to be almost finished with school, and are ready to graduate.
Students’ lack of effort

Many of the students explained that they simply do not put in the effort needed to do well in school. The lack of effort fell into several themes: not putting the effort into schoolwork, doing just enough to pass, preferring to sleep in class, and blaming others.

Five of the seven students indicated that they do not put effort into schoolwork. Dan said, “I don’t do bad, but I think I could do better if I put all of my time into school. I’m a slacker, I guess, just a little bit.” He believes that he could be smarter if he put more effort and thought into his schoolwork. Similarly, Jody said, “I can be smart when I wanna be, but I really don’t try as hard as I can on all my work.” Mark believes that he has self-motivation to do the things he wants to do outside of school, but has lost the motivation to do well in school because he just does not care about school. Mark also believes that the other students in school “just don’t care anymore.” Kelsey concurs, saying, “I really don’t apply myself because I truly sometimes don’t care.” She also said that teachers have told her in the past that she is smart but does not apply herself. Similarly, Cody claims that he does not “apply myself half the time.”

Two of the students, Colton and Cody, talked about doing just enough work to pass. Cody said,

I just apply what’s needed, enough to make me pass. If homework is necessary, like you need homework every day as a class grade, then yeah, I do my homework. But if its like, homework’s a once in a while thing, and I know it’s not gonna be graded, I don’t do it.
Colton responded similarly, saying that he only does homework when it is important. When I asked him what assignments he would consider important, he said, “Say you need a certain amount of papers done to pass that class, then that, to me, is important. I need to pass that class, so that’s what I need to get done.” Otherwise, Colton said he did not see the point in doing homework.

Two students revealed that they would rather sleep than go to school. Cody says he is not a morning person, and has trouble learning in the morning. Jody explained that some students do not try in school because “some people are tired.” She grouped herself in that category, saying that she wanted to go to elementary school, but now she does not want to “wake up and go to school. I’d just much rather sleep in.” She said she is tired all the time. To these students, sleep is more important to them than learning- or they cannot learn if they are not well rested.

A few of the students blamed other factors for their disengagement with school and schoolwork. Colton said that he does not try to do well in math because the rest of the students in the class are out of control and ruin the class for him. He said, “It’s really difficult to excel when you got other people bringing you down.” Colton continued, “In math, the whole class ruins it. It’s very difficult to learn when you’ve got people that don’t want to learn.” He also explained that he does not pay attention in class because “there’s no point. Even if I did pay attention, she wouldn’t care. She wouldn’t notice. So there’s no point in even trying.” He feels that since the teacher will not reward his good behavior, there is no reason for him to try to do well in class. Kelsey also blamed other factors for her lack of participation in class, but she mentioned physical conditions in the
classroom. Kelsey said, “I usually can’t take notes because I’m in the back of the class and the room’s dark and I can’t see. But I would if I could because it’s science and I absolutely love science.” Jody rationalizes not taking notes because she cannot see in class well enough to do so.

Students are bored in class

Many students indicated that they do not pay attention in class because they are bored. Some students said the subject is boring, the methods of instruction are boring, or the student already knows the material or could be in a higher class. Other students specifically said that they talk or goof around in class to try to liven things up for themselves.

Dan explained that he does not have very good grades in a few classes, including government and English, because “those are boring classes.” Jody said she did not like “how boring it [school] is.” Colton believes, “Yes, of course every student will say it’s [school] boring.” Similarly, Kelsey said that she needs to feel passionate and motivated in order to dedicate part of her life to schoolwork. She said, “It bores me now, and there’s nothing about it [school] that makes me want to wake up and live my life to do school work.”

Students also reflected on the teaching methods or activities used in class. Certain activities are boring to them. Dan said about government, “We take notes just about every day, which is boring.” Later, when describing what happens in each of his classes, he said, “Government, it’s all bookwork. So we don’t do many projects in there.” Colton does not enjoy classes that require a lot of memorization, which he considers to be
difficult. Colton said, “Some [teachers] are harder than others, which makes it boring. I mean, like my Computer Graphics class, it’s got a lot of stuff you have to memorize. It’s not very fun.”

A few students felt that they already know the material in class, so they do not bother paying attention in class, and either goof around or fall asleep. Taylor said that he gets bored in class, “especially the stuff that we’re already talked about or I already know how to do. I just kinda get bored, because I already know how to do it. Yeah, I doze off.”

When talking about math class, Cody said, “I know the material. I know most of it. I’ve seen that all before and did it all last year, but I gotta get a credit and I need to get outta here. So, yeah, I just kinda throw it to the side. I’m like, ‘Okay. I know this.’ And I just kinda goof off and mess around.” Cody is in a general tenth grade math class because he didn’t receive credit for the more advanced tenth grade math class he took the previous year. He continued, “I’m good at math. I know I shouldn’t be in that class. I should be doing something better, harder, but I just wanna get it done ‘cause they told me that I didn’t get counted for last year when I did pass. So I was kinda upset. I was like, ‘Well, just give me the easiest thing that you got,’ so they just gave me an easy math class.”

Cody also mentioned that he could be in higher classes if he wanted. “I could take college prep classes, and I’ve been told by teachers to take college prep classes. But I don’t ‘cause it’s more work, and I don’t want all that on me.”

Two students justified their actions in class by stating that they talk or goof around to try to stay engaged in class or have fun. Mark said, “Even though some of the things I say might not show it, I’m just trying to come up with something interesting so I
can stay engaged in conversation.” Mark seems to realize that sometimes his contributions to class discussions are very off-topic, but he believes that keeping his brain actively engaged helps him stay focused in class instead of becoming bored. Cody, on the other hand, says that he goofs off “to make school more fun for myself while I’m here.”

Complaints about classwork

Several students had specific complaints about the classwork. A few mentioned that they do not actually do anything in their classes, one felt that they hear pointless information they will never hear about again, and others felt that classes are repetitive year after year.

Three students talked about the fact that they do not actually do anything in some of their classes. This suggests that they want to do engaging work and activities, and are frustrated when their teachers do not plan enough activities, or the other students are too disruptive. Cody said that he does not like math because “we don’t get a lot of stuff done.” Similarly, Jody said, “Most classes that I have, I don’t ever really do anything, and most of the classes I have, we don’t really do work in.” Colton explained what normally happens in math class to sidetrack the teacher: “She’s always saying [to another student], ‘you need to stop this.’ And then they’ll make jokes. And then she’ll get sidetracked. And then after she gets sidetracked, she keeps going on about it. We don’t learn nothing.”

Dan complained about not being able to remember information when it seems pointless and irrelevant. He said, “We learn about stuff that some of us may never hear again. And then, some of it just kinda goes in one ear and out the other.” Colton said that he does not see the point in homework, because “if it can’t be done at school, why should
it need to be done on your time?” Kelsey shared an interesting perspective about the purpose of school. She said that teachers “think it’s going to affect our lives, but it’s really not. And it makes them think that they are helping.” She believes that teachers need to feel needed by students, and genuinely believe they are helping students to learn and do well in life.

Several students also complained about classes repeating the same material every year. Dan said, “We’re learning stuff- from like first grade to tenth grade. You repeat what you’ve gone the year before. And then maybe at the end of the year, you’ll move on to something that is a little different, but the next year, you’ll repeat it.” In particular, Dan felt that English classes are repetitive. Mark felt that high school courses repeat the same information: “It gets old staying around here learning the same thing over and over for four years.” Mark also believes that some students just have trouble learning material, so schools have to continually re-teach. Since he has moved around and attended different schools, he also found that different schools teach the same thing in different grade levels. He said,

Everything that has been taught here for the most part I’ve learned in previous years. I feel that they just repeat it because some people can’t get it drilled into their heads, so that’s why I can just kind of wing it. It’s just rehammering it. Like government: I took government down in Kentucky when I was a kid. So I already know what she’s going to say. I even had that same exact book. Mark felt like topics were fresher and more revealing in elementary school, but now “you don’t get to try anything new.” He also said, “The material that’s already taught I’m like,
‘I’ve heard this all before.’” Similarly, Colton explained his feelings that class material is repeated on a day-to-day level in courses when he said, “Most teachers go over the same thing over and over again.” Taylor also felt that school is repetitive. He said, “The stuff that we’ve already talked about or I already know how to do, I just kinda get bored.”

Reasons to do well

Several students also stated reasons why they try, and reasons why they want to do well in school. Some felt like they have to be in school, so they might as well try to learn something. A few others want to graduate in order to earn their diploma or other credentials, and to help them get better jobs. One student shared his ideas about education as a social responsibility.

Three students stated that as long as they have to go to school, they might as well do their best. Dan said, “If you’re gonna be in there, I might as well try my hardest to do what I can.” Cody said, “If I didn’t [learn], then I shouldn’t even really be here. Waste of time… But you gotta do it, so might as well do it while I’m here.” Cody also talked about finishing school, since he has been in school for so long:

Might as well stay in school while you’re here. So, that’s what I’m gonna do, I guess, follow through with it. I was made to go most of the time I was here, and why quit now? Just finish up what I’ve been here doin’ forever. It’s like givin’ up on somethin’ that you love or something you care about. Why do it then when you’ve been with it forever? So, might as well stick through with it ‘til the end.

Colten had a similar take on school, since he is close to finishing, but his family seems to be encouraging him to drop out and get his GED instead: “My parents think that I should
drop out and get my GED and take the easy road, but I’m actually trying to play it smart and get my diploma, being as how I’ve only got a year left after this.”

A few students also talked about finishing school for the credentials, both the diploma and other certifications they can earn while taking classes at Pierce. Some of these students talked about the need for a high school diploma to obtain good jobs. Cody said, “If you wanna have a good job, you gotta have education.” Similarly, Taylor said, If you just dropped out of high school, you’re probably not gonna have a really good life, because a lot of places- even in like a fast-food restaurant, they at least want a high school diploma. So if you want a good job to support a family in a nice home and a nice car, you’re gonna have to educate yourself, so you’re gonna have to get a high school diploma, and you’re gonna wanna go to college after high school.

Colton also talked about wanting to graduate and earn his high school diploma, rather than drop out and earn his GED, as his mother and stepfather encourage him to do. Taylor believes that he first started taking school seriously his freshman year of high school, because he knew he was working towards his diploma. According to Taylor, “Freshman year is when I started out getting credits to graduate. And freshman year is probably the point of me saying, ‘Okay, it’s time for me to make sure that I get good grades and get my credits, because I wanna graduate high school on time.’” Other students look forward to other achievements in school. Jody, taking agricultural studies, is eager to earn her “State Degree” her senior year, because she said that it is something good to put on her resume.
Dan believes that people have a social responsibility to learn, for the good of the nation. He said, “I think school is here for our future leaders, to help people learn and not let some country come and take us over, because everybody’s dumb.”

*Classes students like*

The students talked a lot about the classes they enjoy or find worthwhile. Students liked courses that involved enjoyable subject matter, hands-on work or projects, using creativity, new topics in class, and “real world” activities.

Several students mentioned that classes they like are enjoyable and interesting to them. Mark thought that government class is enjoyable, because he watches politics on television, so sometimes the class content relates to his life. Kelsey feels that she is not going to do something unless she is passionate about it. She said, “I have to want to do something to do it. And I can’t do something unless I live for it.” She seems to be saying that she is interested in classes that she can feel passionate about. Colton thinks he would like English a lot more if they always read books that he enjoyed. He recommends that teachers “pinpoint students’ likings and dislikings” because he cannot remember what he reads if he is not interested in the subject. Cody dislikes worksheets, but said that he learns best “from showing me stuff that’s gonna be funny or catch my eye.”

Many students also mentioned that the courses they enjoy most are hands-on, or that they learn best when they are doing a hands-on project. Dan really likes welding class because “we do hands-on stuff and it’s not all bookwork. You get to work in there on different projects. And we learn a lot about what it takes to make good welds. It’s not all bookwork.” Taylor also enjoys welding because “I like working with my hands a lot.
anyway, and welding is basically like an art.” Jody says that she cannot stand reading, but that “some people, like me, have to do hands-on stuff” to learn. Colton enjoys his drama class and gym class because he says, “I think I’m better hands on. Like, in Drama, I’m acting the stuff out. And I’m not reading but I’m motioning. In gym, you’re actually doing it. I think if in, like, Math, you did something physical, I would remember it. Or something to do with my hands. I’d remember it.” Similarly, Kelsey says, “The things that we actually do really helps, because I have to do something. I can’t be attentive unless I’m doing something.” A few students also mentioned that they enjoy doing projects in classes. For example, Mark says about the English teacher, “She just has a natural way of doing things, whereas other teachers are just notes, notes, notes. You never take off time to do a project or something like that, or have group involvement.” Dan also enjoys English and drafting classes because of the projects and hands-on activities. He said,

   English, we do some bookwork. And then, what we’re working on now is coming up with a little five-minute skit on a thing we just read. I like doing that kind of stuff. And then, government, it’s all bookwork. So we don’t do many projects in there. And then, in drafting, I like that, because you get to draw different stuff and learn how to draw. That’s just how I am. I like hands-on work better than bookwork.

   Other students enjoy certain classes because they have an opportunity to express their creativity. Kelsey said that she enjoys her cosmetology classes the best, because “I
get to do something. I get to show my creativity in cosmetology.” Similarly, Cody said, “I’m more creative. I like things that I wanna do, not like what people want me to do.”

Taylor mentioned that he likes learning new, different things. He likes physics because the subject material is totally new to him. He said, “I like learning different things. There’s stuff I don’t know yet. I like physics this year. There’s so many different equations that I’ve never even heard of in my life, and it’s real fun, learning different equations that you can crack problems.” He also enjoys the experiments and examples that the teacher provides in class.

Other students mentioned class activities that had real-world meaning to them. Dan said that English has been a good class this year because they worked on writing resumes. Cody enjoys learning by experience in his A+ Computer classes. He explained, People bring in their own computers from home, like actual people, and we get money that helps pay for the class. We mess around with their computers and fix ‘em for ‘em, and fix computers around the school. So, we get to do stuff. You’re active, you’re walkin’ around, you’re workin’ on stuff and not- ‘All right. Learn this, learn this, learn this.’ You learn by experience, not be seeing it.

School as preparation for life

Students had various thoughts regarding the ways that school prepares them for life after school. A few students didn’t believe that school prepares them for life at all, whereas others believe that school prepares them for getting up in the morning and holding a routine. Some students felt that their vocational programs were helpful in
preparing them for their futures. Others felt that they learn just as well, or better, in other places, and one other student believes that school is preparing him for college.

Colton said that he does not understand how some of his classes “would help me in the future,” like Computer Graphics, but he does think that math can help him. Kelsey takes the opposite perspective; she believes that her cosmetology and art classes can help her in the future, but she does not need any of her other classes “to succeed in what I want to do in life.” She says that she does not need math or skills in other subjects because “I could hire someone for that.” She continued to say that students might learn a little from history, but “the parts that I could actually learn from, I already know. I mean, I like literature, too, but I’m not going to learn anything about my life. What someone else wrote doesn’t affect who I am.” She does not think she will ever use any of the other subjects in her life. Jody similarly said that she does not think school prepares her for her future.

Other students believe that school prepares them to have a routine. Dan said that school “prepares you for getting up and coming every day,” like when they have to be at a job every day. Taylor believes that his performance in school can reflect his future performance in a job. He explained, “If I come here and I can do good, then maybe I can do good outside of school.”

A few students believe that the skills they are learning in their vocational programs will be useful outside of school. Dan said that not all of his courses will be helpful in the future, but “welding will help in the future, ‘cause I may get a job welding in the future. I’ll know how to weld for the racing part of what I want to do.” Taylor feels
similarly about the vocational programs’ usefulness to students after graduation. He explained, “Just like these welding programs, they also have an automotive program to be like a mechanic or something. When they get programs like that for kids that don’t wanna go to college out of high school, that’s good, because they’re still teaching you and helping you out, and you get a certificate when you get done with it.”

Five students commented that they learn just as much, if not more, in locations other than school, or by aspects of school other than schoolwork. Mark said, “There’s a lot of other things in life you can learn and apply than what a school has to offer.” Cody explained that he would rather be doing something other than attending school all day. When I asked what that would be, he said, “somethin’ useful- to me, I mean- what I think would be useful.” Colton values his work experience: “I learn more at work than I do at school, truthfully.” Kelsey said, “I learn [at school] but not from the schoolwork. You got to do the schoolwork to learn from it.” She believes that she learns more from social interactions than she does from the schoolwork. Dan believes that he can learn outside of school as well. He said, “Nobody ever stops learning.”

Cody explained that the classes he takes now will help him when he goes to college. In particular, he focused on the skills he is learning in his computer classes. He said, “Classes I want to take are just classes that I think that I’ll use and things that I wanna get- like through my computer classes. It’s somethin’ I wanna do when I go to college, if I go to college.”
School rules

Students also had comments about the school rules. Some students feel that school rules are silly or pointless, and others felt that students need to be given more personal responsibility for their actions. One student believes that school rules should be more consistent with the state laws, and another student thinks the school rules are not consistently enforced. One student follows school rules because he does not want to disappoint his parents, and another believes that students drop out of school so they do not have to deal with school rules.

Dan felt that some school rules are silly, such as making students pay for parking passes, or making students exit the parking lot a specific way after school. He also believes that students should be allowed to have cell phones in school, particularly at lunch. Jody was against some of the consequences for breaking rules that she felt were too extreme, like students assigned to alternative school after three tardy slips. Colton said the school rules are “horrible” and there are too many rules that are pointless. He thinks the dress code prevents students from wearing fashionable clothes, and students should be allowed to have cell phones. Colton believes that students should be responsible for their own learning and behavior. He said, “If a kid’s gonna have a cell phone out in class, that’s his fault. If he wants to do it, let him do it. If he’s not gonna learn, he’s not gonna learn. I think they should let students do whatever- if it’s gonna affect their work, then that’s their problem.” Kelsey seems to have similar beliefs. She believes that the school could loosen up a little, but that “human nature is to save,” and the school tries to control things too much. She said, “You got to trust people a little bit.”
She thinks rules like not drinking in the hallway or not chewing gum go too far. She also thinks that students who are 18 should be allowed to keep their cigarettes with them, since the state law allows students to buy cigarettes at age 18. However, school rules say that no cigarettes are allowed in the building. She said, “I don’t think a building should contradict the law that’s already been made.” On the other hand, Kelsey also said that she agrees with the fighting policy, and that she believes “there is a reason for every rule the school has.”

Mark was the only student who believes that school rules are not consistently upheld. He said, “They need to be more clearly written and more defined in their punishment, and they also need to uphold them better, too.”

Cody explained that he follows rules because he does not want to disappoint his parents. He said, “School, it doesn’t really bother me if I’m in trouble here. I deserve it if I get in trouble, but when I get home, I don’t want mom and dad always like, ‘You know you can do better,’ and stuff, so I try to keep my parents happy.”

Jody thinks that school rules exist to try to keep people in school, but she said she has seen the opposite. She knows students who have dropped out of school because they were tired of putting up with the school rules.

*Characteristics of good teachers*

Students mentioned many characteristics of good teachers. The “good” teachers have fun in class and let the students act silly, treat the students like adults, help students with classwork, and seem to genuinely like students and coming to work.
Two students explained that the good teachers let the students goof around. Dan said about the English teacher, “The teacher is pretty cool. She’s not like most teachers, where you can goof off a little bit, but not a whole lot.” Similarly, Cody said, “I know a buncha good teachers that like to have fun, and they’ll goof all day and then still teach you what you need to know.”

Jody focused on the teachers who treat students like adults, who she said are “pretty cool.” She said about one teacher, “You can talk to her, and she’ll talk to you like you’re an adult and not some little kid, like most teachers talk to you.”

Colton and Taylor both appreciate teachers who help them with their classwork. Colton said, “Some teachers are better than others at helping you out. I mean, some teachers will help you; some won’t.” He felt that he learns best in the classes when the teachers will help him. Taylor said, “A teacher that actually helps you out and shows you or gives you examples and stuff like that, that does work with you and helps you, that helps out a lot of students.”

Taylor believes that the good teachers in the school are caring. He explained, “I’ve seen teachers that come here and they’ve got smiles on their face because they’re ready to teach, and they’re actually happy to see their kids.” He also thinks that his math teacher is stricter with him because “she doesn’t want me to act like I act because she wants me to act more mature.” He believes that she is tough on him because she believes in him.
Characteristics of bad teachers

The students I interviewed had a lot to say about the characteristics of “bad” teachers in the school. Some students felt that some teachers chose favorites, or do not value student input. Many of the students believed that some teachers dislike the students or do not respect them. Other students complained about teachers who are inconsistent, or who are too strict and serious. Several students also said that the bad teachers do not explain the classwork to them.

Dan explained that some teachers “have their favorites,” although he clarified that most of the teachers remain neutral. In particular, he explained that the welding teacher allowed three students to do the majority of a welding project, while he and the other students had to stay in the welding shop. Dan also said that some teachers “let students get away with a little more.” Similarly, Kelsey said that she feels that she is singled out in class. She explained, “I don’t even really do anything wrong except for talk. And the teachers that I talk in their classes, they get mad at me, but everyone else is allowed to talk. And they’ll single out certain kids.”

Some students feel as though some of the teachers do not value student input. Dan said that the welding teacher “sometimes thinks his way is the better way to do it, and it might be, but I think you have to try both ways to see. And if the student has a better idea, then we should go with that.” Mark admitted that he has a dominating personality, and he feels that sometimes he clashes with teachers who feel that “they are the head honcho” and need to retain all the power in class. Kelsey explains, “They think they’re knowledgeable, but they’re not exactly. They know that they don’t know everything, but
they try to put it off to us like they do.” Other teachers do not let students share their opinions in class. Mark does not think the government teacher has a good opinion of him. He said,

I don’t know what she thinks about me. It can’t be good. She always cuts me off.

Every time I go to say something she’ll cut me off. She says, ‘If we have time at the end, you can ask your opinion,’ but yet she wants us to ask her questions if we are needing a better understanding of it. So I’m like, ‘You shut me out here. How can I ask any questions?’

Many students seemed to believe that some teachers dislike them or do not respect them. Dan said that some teachers think some of the students are a bunch of “bums” “if you make them mad and don’t do your work.” However, he said that these perceptions only motivate him, because he said, “nobody wants to be a bum.” Jody explained that she never wants to go to math because the teacher does not like her, and frequently sends her to the office. She also explained that some teachers “just think that you’re gonna be a bad kid and so they can treat you like you’re five years old or something. They still treat you like you’re middle schoolers.” Jody feels as though the teachers do not respect the students. Similarly, Kelsey explained that people have to give respect to get respect, but that some of the teachers “don’t give the respect to get the respect,” instead authoritatively forcing students to respect them. Several students said that they react to teachers based on how the teacher treats them. Colton said, “If the teacher is, say, snotty or mean to me, then I react the same way.” Similarly, Kelsey said that she bases her actions on how the teacher speaks to her. She said, “I can be quiet
unless a teacher says something hurtful towards me. And then I become kind of
disoriented and rude and loud. And I’ll do anything to make them mad because they upset
me.” Taylor also explained that the bad teachers “are just so grumpy, and they come in
here thinking, ‘Well, if I’m gonna have a bad day, all my students are gonna have a bad
day.’” Colton thinks that the other students in his math class put the teacher in a bad
mood, and they “ruin it for everybody.” He said that it is not worth paying attention in
class, because “even if I did pay attention, she wouldn’t care. She wouldn’t notice.” He
does not believe that the teacher cares about the students who want to do well in the class,
because she only notices the students who are disruptive. He also said, “Why should we
take time out for them if they don’t take time out for us?”

Cody does not like going to math because he says the teacher is inconsistent. She
frequently forgets which papers she asked them to turn in. He also said that he dreads
going to class because “I know someone’s gonna get yelled at, or I’m gonna get yelled
at.” He is frustrated that the teacher spends “half the class” yelling at the students, but
still expects them to do their work.

Cody believes that the bad teachers “just wanna get stuff done. They don’t have
fun at all. They don’t make anything fun at all. They’re just serous. It makes you not
wanna be in the classroom all the time ‘cause it seems so depressing in there.” Other
teachers write a lot of behavior reports, and are very strict. Cody seems to appreciate the
teachers who can connect with the students and have fun without becoming too serious.

Some students do not like the teachers who do not explain the work. Cody talks
about school as “getting up in the morning to get everything thrown at you” without
explanation. He said, “They just hand it to you, and they’re like, ‘Do this.’” Colton also says that a teacher “tends to give work but not explain it as much, which makes it difficult to do the work. So she just gives homework, says ‘Get it done,’ bring it back, go over the answers, and that’s it.” Similarly, Jody said that she used to like math because she was good at it, but recently math has been a lot harder. She said about the teacher, “She don’t really explain it very good. And that just why I don’t even do it at all. ‘Cause if I don’t understand it, then I’m like, ‘Yeah, might as well not even do it.’” She said that she is not doing well in math this year. Taylor feels the same way; he said, “You’ve got teachers that you come into their class, they give you a worksheet, and then they sit down and don’t do nothing for you, don’t show you an example or nothing, that’s how kids don’t learn.” He said that teachers should give examples on the board to help the students out, because otherwise the students will be taking guesses. Taylor said that when students do not do well, the teachers “criticize you for getting a bad grade,” even though the teachers never explained the material to the students.

Peer groups and not fitting in

Several students mentioned that they do not feel as though they fit in, or that they dislike the drama and gossip that happens among students. Mark thinks that his personality clashes with a lot of the other students, and “they just ain’t accepting of me that I’m different, so sometimes they just don’t treat me right here.” Cody feels that things have changed since elementary school. He said that everyone used to be friends, but now people are immature and “it seems like everyone hates each other or everyone’s at somebody’s throat.” Kelsey talked about the all-girls classes she is in, and how the
girls all gossip and hurt each other’s feelings. She frequently sits at different tables at lunch because someone is always mad at someone else. Jody similarly commented on the “drama” that goes on in school.

**Student perceptions differ from teacher perceptions**

Many of the students seem to realize that teachers misunderstand their actions. Other students felt that the teachers understood their humor, but this is not always supported by my classroom observations.

Cody said that he sees himself as a “goof-off.” He said he tries to “be funny, lighten stuff up a bit,” but that teachers see his actions as misbehavior. He said that he never intends it to be misbehavior. He explained, “I don’t wanna come off as a bad person to somebody. It’s just, I don’t know what teachers see- if they see differently than what people my age see. So, it’s kinda like speaking two different languages. What I’m saying to them, they mean something different to me.” Kelsey said that she pays attention very well in class when she is doodling, but the teacher does not realize that she is listening.

Kelsey and Taylor both explained that they joke around in class, but that they do it to lighten the mood and cheer the teachers up. They did not seem to realize that the teachers see these actions negatively. Kelsey said that when a teacher gets upset at her, Kelsey responds with something like, “Oh, you love me,” and the teacher laughs, making things better. However, this is not consistent with what I observed. Kelsey frequently became defensive or angry when confronted by a teacher, and it never seemed to get better after Kelsey talked to the teacher more. Taylor also said that he is a class clown,
but that “I always know when it’s time to stop, you now, start paying attention so I can learn.” However, in class, the teacher frequently had to remind Taylor to quiet down or go back to his seat. He also said that if a teacher is a bad mood, he is able to cheer up the teacher with his jokes.

“Testing” the teacher

Two students said that they misbehave in order to “test” or get back at the teacher. Jody said that she sometimes tries to see “how far she’ll go before she pretty much just bursts and goes off. I think it’s funny to do it.” Kelsey also said that she continues to talk when teachers get mad at her. “I just do it because I know that it’s wrong. And I know what they said to me is wrong. And just me saying a few words can upset them. And it just proves that they’re more wrong than I am.”

No time to do homework

Three of the students explained that they struggle in classes because they do not have the time to do homework. Cody said that the class he likes the least, math, has the most homework, “And it’s time consuming. And she always takes it for a grade, so you always gotta do it.” Jody, who works after school and plays sports, said that she does not do homework because she never has time to do it. Similarly, Colton explained that when he works, he might not get home until after 2 a.m., and he does not have time in the afternoon or evening to do his homework. He said, “They expect you to have it done, and it’s not your fault, but it is your fault. It’s kind of a lose-lose situation.”
Ready to graduate

Many of the students said that they are ready to leave. Some said that they could not stand the school and could not wait to leave, and others simply said that they could not wait until graduation. Mark said, “I can’t stand this place, to be honest with you. I’m just looking forward to the future.” Jody said she hates Pierce, saying, “That’s one reason why I can’t wait to get outta here.” When I asked him how he feels about school, Cody said, “It’s school. What else? Just don’t like bein’ here.” Later, he explained, “I just wanna get through. I wanna survive- get it done.” Dan spoke mostly about being ready to get out of school and move on to college. He said, “I’m glad to be getting out within a month or two. I’m so close to being out of high school and going to college and doing things on my own.” Mark explained that he is “just riding it out now” until graduation.

Observation Data

The observation data is based on my observations in the classroom and conversations with teachers. These observations have been grouped into themes: devaluing school, the notion that college prep classes are well-behaved, students who only care about doing work if it will be graded, students attempting to skip class, students who are bored in class, low expectations for students to complete homework, the disconnect between student and teacher perceptions, the culture of the school, the teen pregnancy rate, teachers disrespectful toward students, and observations of different types of resistance.
Devaluing school

Both teachers and students demonstrated (through words and actions) a lack of respect or value for the education at Pierce. It seemed to me that two popular beliefs were that students do not receive a good education at Pierce, and that classtime is not valuable.

Frequently, classes would be interrupted by knocks on the door, the teacher’s school phone ringing, or announcements over the intercom, or the guidance counselor coming in to talk to the students. Sometimes classes would not officially start until ten minutes after the bell rang. The math teacher would answer phone calls, talk with people at the classroom door, or work on the computer, while asking the students to stay quiet, for up to ten minutes before she gave them directions or something to work on.

Students (and teachers, sometimes) seem to devalue the education they are earning at Pierce. In a junior college-prep English class, the journal prompt one day was, “Do you feel hindered by your environment (Pierce County, home, rural Appalachia, this high school)?” During the class discussion that followed, the teacher asked the students if they feel as though they are being cheated out of a good education. The students discussed the negatives of Pierce High School, and one of the students said that they do not learn very much, because some teachers are really bad and do not teach anything. The teacher asked if they think that is typical of every school, and the students agreed with that. They also discussed the lack of higher education opportunities. No colleges are located in the county, although two are within one hour’s driving distance from the school. Another day, in senior English, the class discussed dialects and stereotypes of unintelligence when people hear a certain dialect. The class talked about how people in
Cleveland think that people from Pierce are “hicks” and uneducated due to their accent and dialect, and how people from Pierce think that people from Kentucky are uneducated. The teacher responded by saying that some people in Kentucky are probably more intelligent than anyone here, and it also depends on how you define intelligence. The discussion then turned to the differences in dialect between Charleston, West Virginia, and Pierce. Charleston is seen as being the “big city.” Mark grinned and joked sarcastically, “Yeah, Pierce County-ans are much more educated than Charleston!”

One day that I went in to observe, many of the juniors and seniors are not in class. The students who are part of the vocational programs have to give presentations about their programs at a showcase the following day. Since many of the students did not have their presentations ready, the school administration gave these students permission to stay in their vocational classes all day to work on them, missing their other classes.

I went in one morning during what I thought was second period, to interview Jody during her study hall. It turns out that they had “activity period” that day, in which students participate in various clubs and activities during the first 45 minutes of the day, and have shortened class periods afterwards. When I came in, first period (rather than second) had just begun. When I realized this, I asked the secretaries not to call her to the office because I did not want to pull her out of class. The secretary shook her head and said, “No, it’s fine.” It seemed like the secretary did not feel as though Jody would miss anything important. When Jody came down to the office for the interview, she did not mind missing class either.
Some students do not seem to care about or respect the school. When Taylor forgot to bring in his signed consent form for me, I said that I could mail it to his house if that would be easier. He replied, “Would it say Pierce on it? Because I throw away all that mail.”

Students joked about the bad things they could say about the school when I passed out the interview interest forms. I gave a quick summary of the study and read my standard list of what the interviews will entail, explaining that I would keep everything confidential unless they told me about anything illegal or causing harm to anyone. The students asked me questions like, “What if Kyle says he’s going to blow up the school? Would you tell anyone?” They joked about the things they could and could not say. A boy in one class said, “Man, that’s everything!” after I listed things that are illegal that I would have to report. The students acted as though they could not wait to do an interview and share all the bad things that they dislike about the school. One boy marked “no” on the interest survey, and told me, “Man, you don’t even want to hear what I have to say!”

**College prep students are well-behaved**

Many teachers and adults at the school hold the belief that students in college prep classes are well-behaved, and students in general classes pose behavior problems.

The junior college-prep English teacher told me that she had the general English classes last year, and it was tough. She said that she had a hard time with classroom management, and the only way she made it through the year was by building relationships with the students.
The advanced math teacher said that he never has any discipline problems. He said he is lucky now because he has advanced calculus and physics, but when he started, he taught general math and general physics. He said it was tough because the students did not want to learn. According to him, some of the parents are from a very low socioeconomic status and do not value education.

I talked to the substitute teacher in English one day. He said that these are pretty good classes. I said, “They’re all college-prep, right?” He said that there is a huge difference in behavior in college-prep classes and general classes, before shaking his head sadly.

After a particularly uneventful class period, I commented to the government teacher that it was a very quiet class. She responded, “Oh, they’re college prep,” as though that explained everything.

*Students only care about graded work*

Many of the students give the impression that they do not care to do classwork or homework unless it will be graded.

One day, when math teacher went over one of the handouts in class, Kelsey told her, “I think you should take this up.” The teacher responds, “I don’t think so- I just gave you all the answers! Although I’ll bet there are some people who didn’t copy it down.” Another day, a student asked, “Are we turning this in?” about one of the worksheets. It seems as though students only care to do the work if it will be graded.

In general junior English, the students are reading a book. The teacher asked the groups to read to page 20 that day. About 20 minutes before the end of the period, she
walked back to one of the groups who had put the book down to talk, and told them, “Keep going. You’re not at 20 yet.” One of the students said, “Oh, we only have to get to 20? Keep reading!” She says it urgently, as if she wants to finish quickly- but only to page 20 because that is the minimum requirement. There is no incentive to do extra work.

Students joke about skipping class

It seems like a running joke that students try to get out of class as often as they can, but in actuality, no one ever leaves. When a former student visited the school and stopped by the English class, he talked to the teacher and a few of the students for a few minutes. When he left, Cody got up and exaggeratedly sauntered out the door after him. The English teacher called after him, and he came back in, laughing. In math class, Taylor asked if he could leave class to go to the financial management activity. The teacher said he could if he was in the class. He hesitated, and said, “No, just kidding. I dropped that class two weeks ago.” He could very easily have continued the deception and left class, but he did not. It seemed like he was joking about going, because although he knows that he should not lie and leave class, he still pretended to want to get out of class.

Students are bored in class

The teachers seem to recognize that students are bored in class because they already know how to do the work.

For example, a girl in one of the general math classes asked the teacher a question about the chart on the worksheet. The teacher said, “We’re not there yet,” to which the student replied, “But I am!” The teacher said, “Let’s work on this together,” and the
student responded, frustrated, “But I want to get this finished!” This math class is set up for all students to work at the same pace. Students can work ahead of the group, but they cannot get their questions answered until everyone is at that place. This is similar to the situation when Taylor attempted to ask the teacher a question about the worksheet, and she would not answer his question because she wanted to do something else on the board first. This could be boring or frustrating for students who work quickly or understand the material in class.

When speaking to me one day, the math teacher referenced two boys who are in her junior math class, and said that they are bored in class. She said that they can do the work and understand it, but they just do not do the homework. These two students are failing the course due to lack of completed assignments.

One day, a student said to the math teacher, “I don’t know anything about this. You got all the people who know this answer questions. You need to get people like me up there doing this, instead of sitting here bored.” She was bored because she felt like she was not being engaged with during the lesson.

Low expectations of homework completion

Students are not really expected to do homework. In junior English, the teacher gave the students the first 10 minutes of class to study for an exam, “In case you forgot to over the weekend.” Similarly, the senior English teacher asked students to raise their hands if they read the story they were assigned the previous night. Only one student raised his hand, and another boy said “I read it just now!” She replied, “That’s what I
thought… let’s just go over this then.” She laughs and doesn’t seem to be bothered that no one read the story.

*Disconnect between student and teacher perceptions*

In math, a lot of students talk back, or make funny or sarcastic comments. They seem to be showing off for the other students or the teacher. This might be why several students from this class think of themselves as class clowns, but they also do not believe that it really bothers the teacher. From the number of times she tells them to be quiet or behave, I believe it does bother the teacher. Whenever she steps out of the room to talk to someone in the hallway, the class settles down, is less talkative, and seems to lose energy. When she re-enters the room, it become energized again, with students making silly comments and talking to her loudly.

*School culture clash*

Teachers do not call on students who raise their hands. In fact, most students do *not* raise their hands in class: they speak out whenever they have something to say. When students do raise their hands, the teachers tend not to call on them. Although it seems that the teacher is ignoring those students, it could just be that the culture of the school is to not raise your hand and just speak out if you want to be heard, and those students have not figured out the culture or are not obeying those cultural norms at that time.

In government, a student asked the teacher if they will have a student teacher. She told them that she had a student teacher once whose educational experience was very different from theirs, and it did not work out very well.
**Teen pregnancy issues**

According to one of the teachers, Pierce has a big problem with teen pregnancy. This teacher explained that last year about 15 junior girls (out of about 60 girls in the junior class) were pregnant or already had children. This teacher told me that although Pierce High School is in the same county as another school, this one is three times as large and feels a lot more urban.

In general junior English, one reading group finished early one day and pulled out a health textbook. The girls began reading about and discussing labor and delivery. One of the girls was pregnant, and another girl was talking as though she has already given birth. They also spoke about one of their friends who will be delivering her baby very soon.

**Teacher is disrespectful to students**

When the math teacher gets frustrated, she speaks very slowly and deliberately, giving directions as though the students will barely understand her. At one point, the guidance counselor stepped into the room while the math teacher was working through a problem on the board. Taylor argued with her about her subtraction of a negative number. The math teacher turned to the guidance counselor and said in front of the class, “He just wants to argue with me,” before patronizingly walking the student through two separate ways of showing that her answer is correct. It seemed like a power struggle in which the teacher won, but the student lost face in front of the class and the counselor.

In math class one day, a girl moved to the back of the room to work near her friend. The friend said, “She’s paying more attention to the bad kids than you. And you
were sitting up there all quiet!” They seem to believe that the teacher does not notice or reward good behavior.

**Observations of resistance**

When observing for resistance behaviors, I noticed that disproportionately more boys than girls were displaying active resistance. Only three girls truly seemed to be actively resistant, while other girls passively resisted by quietly not following along in class. On the other hand, only a few boys displayed this type of passive resistance.
CHAPTER FIVE: ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Analysis

The analysis has been utilized to provide summary answers to the two research questions. Within the category of each research question, observation and interview data has been arranged under categories determined from the literature.

Analysis of the first research question addresses reasons that high school students give for their resistance, using the themes identified in the literature. Reasons include larger social factors, identity and peer pressure, dissonance between school and cultural knowledge, teacher misunderstanding and culture clash, desire for knowledge, and rejecting authoritarian school. The second research questions addresses reasons for resistance that may be unique to the rural area, including school consolidation, stereotypes and culture clash, family influence and beliefs, student mobility between school districts, and out-migration.

Research question one: What reasons do high school students give for displaying resistance in a rural Appalachian high school?

Larger social factors

Students seem to devalue the education they are receiving at Pierce. The findings of Munns and McFadden (2000) that students reject the unequal experience of their schooling are reflected in students’ comments about the school. Many students seem to feel that Pierce is not a very good school compared to other schools. Mark’s joke about people from Pierce not being very smart directly relates to this, as does the conversation in junior English class about students feeling hindered by the school environment.
Further, when I approached classes about interviews, the students enjoyed making jokes about the horrible things they could say about the school. Taylor showed a lack of respect for the school when he said that he throws away mail that comes from Pierce High School.

Further, both school employees and students seemed to devalue classtime. Frequent class interruptions or allowing students to work on projects rather than attend class, as well as pulling students out of class for my interviews show a lack of respect for classtime by school employees. Students joke about skipping class, and teachers start class late or neglect to provide classwork for students.

Identity and peer pressure

Miron and Lauria (1998) found that students with positive self-esteem tend to be less resistant. Students with low self-esteem gain power and control by resisting. For example, by neglecting to do schoolwork, students spare themselves the rejection of earning poor grades. Colton demonstrates this lack of self-esteem several times throughout the interview, when he says that the opinion of the principal is more important than his, and that he is not good enough to get into college. He blames other factors, like the other students’ bad behavior, for his poor grades, and he also sleeps through class. By not attempting the schoolwork, Colton does not have to deal with the psychological effects of failing.

Dissonance between school and cultural knowledge

Starcher’s (2005) findings of students who do not believe academics can be helpful in “real life” are seen in the interviews with Colton and Kelsey, both of whom
state that school cannot help them succeed in the future. Willis’s (1997) study found that
the lads believe important knowledge is learned through practical experiences, or on the
job. Similarly, Dan believes that the routine of school prepares him for getting up and
going to a job every day, and Colton stated that he learns more at work. Mark echoed
Willis’s findings when he said, “There’s a lot of other things in life you can learn and
apply than what a school has to offer.” Further, McFadden (1995) and Miron and Lauria
(1998) findings that the school curriculum is not relevant to students’ needs are reflected
in the interviews. Five of the seven students talked about going to work or volunteering
after school and not having as much time for homework, and one student talked about his
concerns for his pregnant girlfriend in class. These students may not see school as
valuable because they are already almost living adult lives.

On the other hand, Willis (1997) also found that the students who resisted school
ended up cementing their future in the working class. Students at Pierce High School may
find a similar fate. Students like Colton and Kelsey both want to move away and attend
college, but neither performs well in school and their grades may prevent them from
attending college. Colton seems to realize that his current grades may hurt him in the
future, but none of the other students seemed to realize the impact that their current
resistance may have on their plans.

In her studies of working class students, Weis (1990) found that students
recognized the value of the diploma as a credential to acquiring a good job, but did not
see the value in academic knowledge. Similarly, students at Pierce High School talked
about finishing school solely for the diploma. Cody said that he is going to “follow
through with it” and finish school since he has worked at it for so long. Colton also mentioned that he wants to graduate and get his diploma, despite his parents encouraging him to obtain his GED instead. Taylor said that most jobs require a high school diploma. These students seem to realize the affect that having a diploma will have on their future job options, but they do not extend that value to the academics.

Teacher misunderstanding and culture clash

Burroughs (2007) found that students who perceived teachers as not approachable were more likely to resist in that class, and Rueda (2005) found that students who lack meaningful relationships with teachers were less likely to achieve highly and more likely to be seen as having behavior problems. Many of the students interviewed, such as Cody, explained that some teachers were too serious, very strict, or just want to do the work and be done. On the other hand, students praised the teachers who connected with the students as adults, like when Jody said that her teacher talks to them like adults, not like middle-schoolers. The students seem to be very affected by the approachability of their teachers. However, the students who say that the teachers do not like them or do not care about them may be misinterpreting the teacher’s actions. Some students, like Cody and Kelsey, readily admitted that sometimes the teacher misinterprets their actions. It is very possible that the students then misinterpret the teacher’s actions. Many students mentioned not wanting to do well in a particular class due to the teacher’s actions, whether it was devaluing their contributions to class, not treating them like adults, not allowing them to have fun in class, or choosing favorites in class. The student’s
perception of the teacher’s actions in the classroom can have an impact on the student’s work and behavior in that class.

*Desire for knowledge*

Students seem to want to learn, but explained that they do not do their classwork for several reasons: they do not learn anything, the subjects repeat every year and they already know how to do it, or because they are frustrated when they cannot work ahead.

Sidorkin’s (2002) explanation of mass quantities of busywork and Holt’s (2002) discussion of dull, repetitive tasks that do not require actual learning are echoed in several students’ statements. Cody, Jody, and Colton all talked about how nothing happens in their classes, making statements like, “We don’t do anything in there.” Dan complained that some of the information is useless, and it is pointless to learn. These students give the impression that they do not care about school because they believe they are not learning anything. These students seemed to be saying that they would engage in school if they were learning important information.

Similarly, the students in Sekayi’s (2001) study resisted because they did not think the curriculum was challenging enough. At Pierce, Cody said that since he was in more advanced classes the previous year, he already knows most of the material, so he has fun in class instead of doing the repetitive work. Taylor also explained that he gets bored in class when he already knows to do something. Delisle (1992) found that gifted students were bored in general courses. Although the students I observed at Pierce may not be classified as gifted, they demonstrated an ability to work quickly and frustration when they were not able to work ahead of the class. The general math class, in particular,
is set up for students to all work at the same pace, so the teacher did not answer Taylor’s question, for example, when the rest of the class was not yet at that point.

Flanders (1987) found that textbooks repeat much of the same material every year. Some of the students at Pierce seemed to realize this. Mark explained that he is bored in class because the subjects repeat each year, and he feels the teachers are just “rehammering” information that he already knows. As a result, he explained that he frequently talks in class or brings up new points. Similarly, Dan said that every year, the topics are repeated in classes.

Rejecting authoritarian school

Dickar’s (2008) comments about authoritarian schools, and Olafson and Field’s (2003) discussion of school rules are also reflected in student opinions of school rules. Dan, Colton, and Kelsey all believe that the rigidity of school rules is silly and pointless, and that some rules are unjust. Kelsey thought the rules show a lack of trust in the students, and Jody said that some students have dropped out of school rather than obey school rules. Sometimes, as Dickar (2008) found, enforcing school rules can result in escalating resistance when students challenge the legitimacy of teachers and engage in power struggles. Kelsey explained that when teachers get mad at her, she continues to talk and misbehave more, because, in her words, “that just proves that they’re more wrong than I am.” Similarly, Jody said that sometimes she pushes a teacher in order to see “how far she’ll go.”
Research Question Two: What, if any, student resistance occurs as a result of factors specific to the rural area, relating to the issues of school consolidation, leaving the region, or clashing middle class and working class values?

School consolidation

Issues of school consolidation, as told by Knight, Knight and Quickenton (1996), were seen when Colton spoke about his long bus ride home. He travels for more than an hour to arrive home, only to go straight to work. As a result, Colton said that he does not have time for homework, and I would guess that Colton is not participating in many after-school events. Similarly, Knight, Knight and Quickenton (1996) wrote that students who live further away from the school do not participate in extracurricular activities or after-school homework help as often as students who live closer to the school.

Stereotypes and culture clash

Purcell-Gates (2002) and Howley et. al. (2006) discussed the culture clash that sometimes occurs when middle class teachers teach working class students. This was echoed in the government teacher’s remark about the student teacher with a very different background, who did not connect well with the students at Pierce.

Family influence and beliefs

Family education levels may impact student achievement, as reported by Deaton (2008) and Scheidegger (1998). The interviewed students whose parents did not attend college, namely, Jody, Cody, Mark, and Colton, reported that their parents did not actively encourage college. Further, Taylor said that his father wants him to attend the
same welding school his father attended, although Taylor mentioned thinking about earning a college degree.

Schools frequently bring a message of worldliness and knowledge of the world that is inconsistent with place-based knowledge (Corbett, 2007). This may be part of the reason why Dan said, “We learn about stuff that some of us may never hear again,” and Kelsey said that school will not affect her life. Other students did not believe that some subjects would help them in the future, such as Colton with Computer Graphics. Similarly, Kelsey did not see the value in math, English, and history, because she felt that she already learned everything she needed to know.

**Student mobility between school districts**

Schafft’s (2005) discussion about student mobility between school districts and the negative impacts on student achievement is reflected in Colton’s experience. According to Colton, he was held back one grade level due to constant mobility. Similarly, Kelsey said that she purposely started performing poorly when she moved to another school district, a habit that stuck and made it almost impossible for her to catch up now. Student mobility may also have impacted the academic grades of Taylor and Mark, who attended more than one school district.

**Out-migration**

All the students I interviewed, with the exception of Kelsey, plan on moving back to Pierce or another familiar location after completing college or technical training. Carr and Kefalas (2009) write about the phenomenon in which many students who obtain low levels of schooling at a community college end up returning to the area, the group of
graduates referred to as the Returners. Although the students I interviewed talk about leaving, they also talk about returning. Kelsey, the only exception, seems to be a Seeker, since she has a drive to leave the small town by any means necessary. However, her grades may prevent her from attending one of the schools in New York that she so desperately wants to attend.

Recommendations for Educational Practice

Based on the analysis of the data collected, I make the following recommendations for teachers, principals, and school communities to consider.

First, schools and teachers should ask the students what they want and need in the classroom, and be aware of differences within the classroom. This could be as simple as finding out about student interests, and it could be as complex as taking learning style inventories. Many of the students I surveyed said that they learn through hands-on approaches. If this is the case in a particular classroom, the teacher could find more projects or activities that align with those learning styles. Students who are bored in class or want to move ahead of the rest of the class could be given alternative assignments that stretch their imaginations and allow them to apply the knowledge they already have.

Second, I recommend that teachers and principals make an effort to listen to the students and connect with them as people. Many students felt that the good teachers respected them and cared about them, while the bad teachers did not like the students or treated them like children. Teachers should attempt to be aware of the messages they send to students, and let the students know that they care. Teachers can take more time to talk to the students and get to know them better on a personal level. Schools can facilitate
this by taking time for a teacher/student retreat or planned interactive events during the first few weeks of school.

Third, school administrators should critically evaluate the purpose of school rules and perhaps choose their battles. Some rules are truly important for making the school environment feel safe. However, some of the students felt as though they were being micromanaged and the school administration did not trust them to make their own decisions. For example, some students felt that they should be allowed to leave the classroom to get a drink if they wanted.

Fourth, students should be made to feel appreciated and valued. Students should be treated like adults and given small privileges. One student suggested that recess or a coffee break in a student lounge should be allowed. Allowing students to enjoy an adult privilege like a coffee break would demonstrate respect for the students and an understanding that they are almost adults. Further, this would provide students with a safe place to take a break and refresh their minds.

Fifth, schoolwork should be valuable, meaningful, and not just “busywork.” Instead of worksheets, students should have more opportunities to interact with the disciplines. Students want to feel as though their time is not wasted when they are in school. One student said that if he were a teacher, he would give less homework. He explained that he would give it less often, but make it worth more in the final grade so that students have more motivation to do it. In light of the after-school schedules of some of the students interviewed, teachers should consider the quality and quantity of the homework and classwork assigned. Students mentioned long bus rides home, working all
afternoon, sports, and volunteer work, in addition to adult concerns, like having children. High school students clearly have a lot of responsibilities that extend past the school day. By carefully considering the quality and quantity of homework assignments, teachers could ensure that more students see the value in the work and have adequate time to complete the assignments.

Sixth, teachers and school communities should provide more opportunities for the students to learn about college and careers. A few of the students seemed to know vaguely about college, but a few said that their families were unable to help them learn more. Students may be interested in furthering their education but lack an understanding of the importance of high school grades and the steps to take to apply to college.

Seventh, I recommend that teachers and administrators attempt to view resistance from a different perspective. Rather than seeing all resistance as negative behaviors and punishing students, teachers and administrators can work with resistant students to channel their energy into social and political endeavors. Resistance should be appreciated and utilized in the classroom to engage students in critical discussions about dominant norms and effective strategies for influencing social change.

This type of observed purposeful resistance in response to school or teacher factors should be of most interest to teachers and school administrators, as it occurs in response to school factors that can be changed. Many students complained about small things, like a lack of trust for the students reflected in silly school rules, teachers not caring or not willing to help them, or boredom in class due to lots of bookwork and few
active or creative lessons. These are all factors that school communities and teachers can take into consideration and easily modify.
CHAPTER SIX: SUMMARY, NEXT STEPS, AND CONCLUSION

Summary

Although the interviewed students differed widely in background, interests, and future plans, many shared the same ideas about school. Students (as well as school employees and teachers) seem to devalue the education they are receiving at Pierce High School. They do not believe it will be valuable to them in the future, and most students just want to finish and earn their diplomas. However, the fact that many students repeated their desire to finish may attest to the fact that although some of their peers have already dropped out of school, these students have already made the decision to stay in school. The students understand the importance of educational credentials, but they do not value the education they are receiving in the classroom. Further, many students have jobs, children, or other factors in their lives that are more important to them at this time. Classroom material often does not relate to or recognize the students’ lives outside of school. Students felt that teachers misunderstand them or do not respect them, and teacher characteristics played a vital role in student engagement or resistance in the classroom. Further, the students did want to learn in the class, as many said that they were bored or frustrated because the teachers do not expect them to do anything in class.

Next Steps: Recommendations for Future Research

I believe that further research can expand and further define this area of study.

First, more studies need to focus on giving resistant and low-achieving students a voice. Schools serve all students, not just those students who succeed easily, and the opinions of all students can be valuable. Students spend one-third of their day in
classrooms, and they see a variety of teaching methods, both good and bad. They can provide valuable input into what works at engaging them and what does not work. The beliefs and recommendations of these students should be heard and valued.

Second, student resistance should be examined in contrast with the students who engage with and succeed in school. A comparative study between these two groups of students would be valuable. Each student could be asked questions similar to those of this study, such as what he or she likes and dislikes about school. The differences may show which aspects of school the resistant students are resisting, and perhaps suggest why the high achieving students do not resist these aspects of school.

Third, a comparative study of resistance in rural, urban, and suburban schools may reveal factors that are not present in other types of schools. The different contexts may impact how students display resistance as well as the motivating factors behind the resistance.

Fourth, in addition to including the student voice in more studies, parent, teacher, and community voices should also be included in this type of research. Teachers may have insights about their students that are not apparent to an observer. Further, school is a community endeavor, and parents and community members have a vested interest in the quality of schools. Their opinions and beliefs about student engagement and resistant could provide valuable data.

Further research should continue in the area of student resistance, including providing more opportunities for the student voice, examining the beliefs of resistant and
high-achieving students, comparing resistance in urban, rural, and suburban areas, and including the voices of parents, teachers, and community members in the study.

Conclusion

Since the majority of the students interviewed plan to stay in the area, or come back to the area after college, it seems vital that schools invest resources in these students. Rather than pour energy and resources into high achieving students who leave the area, the schools and communities need to shift some of their attention to the low-achieving and resisting students who will be community members in the future. These students want to learn and graduate, and even go on to higher education or technical training, but they are frequently ignored in class or sent to the office. Resistant students seem to want a more equal educational experience, and caring teachers and schools should attempt to provide that. In the words of Terrell and Lindsey (2009), “It takes the courageous leader to be able to change the focus from ‘what is wrong with the student’ to ‘what is it we need to do differently to meet students needs.’”
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APPENDIX A: STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

I. On a scale of 1-10 (give Likert card), how much do you like going to school?
   a. P: Why do you say that?

II. Can you tell me about a typical day in school?
   a. P: What do you like best about school? (Try to get academic answers:
      “What about in your classes?”)
   b. P: What do you like least about school?

III. On a scale of 1-10 (Likert card), how smart do you think you are?
   a. P: Why do you feel that way?

IV. On a scale of 1-10 (Likert card), how well do you do in school?
   a. P: Why do you feel that way?
   b. P: Describe yourself as a student. (Do you follow directions? Do you do
      your homework?)

V. What do you do outside of school?

VI. What are your plans for after graduation?
   a. P: What do your parents want you to do?
   b. P: Are you planning on attending college or a technical school?
   c. P: Are you planning on moving away from home?

VII. Tell me a little about (incident from class observations). Why did you
     act/respond the way you did?
     a. [If student says they were bored:] Is that because you already know the
        material, or because you’re not interested in the topic?
b. [Try to get students to elaborate:] Why do you feel that way? How do you know that?

VIII. Pick a class, either the one you like the most, or least.

a. Why do you like/dislike that class?
   i. P: Content?
   ii. P: Methods?
   iii. P: Teacher?

b. Same questions for class liked least/most.

c. Do you ever not something you are supposed to do in class? Can you give an example? Why do you choose not to do something?

IX. What are the teachers like in school?

a. P: What do the “good” teachers do?

b. P: What do the “bad” teachers do?

X. Does school have anything to do with your life right now?

a. P: What about your future?

b. P: What is the purpose of school?

XI. Did you feel differently about school when you were in elementary and middle school? For example, if you don’t like it now, did you like it before?

a. If yes, what changed?
APPENDIX B: STUDENT LIKERT SCALE

On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being the least and 10 being the best, circle your response for each of the following.

1. How much do you like going to school?

   1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10
   (not at all)  (neutral)  (very much)

2. How smart do you think you are?

   1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10
   (not smart at all) (neutral) (very smart)

3. How well do you do in school?

   1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10
   (not well at all) (neutral) (very well)
January ____, 2010

Dear student and parent or guardian,

Hello. My name is Katie Hendrickson, and I am a master’s student at Ohio University in the College of Education’s Cultural Studies in Education program.

I am writing to invite your participation in my thesis study titled “Student Perceptions of School in Rural Areas.” I am interested in how students come to perceive their schooling experience and how they take part in their schooling. I will be observing classes and interviewing students and teachers. I am very interested in hearing about the student experience in schools, and their ideas will greatly contribute to my research. I hope that my study will help to make schools a better place for students.

I am writing to request that your child participate in an interview with me. Each interview will take place during the students’ study hall, lunch, or activity period, or any other time convenient to the student. It will last approximately 45 minutes. I will use a pseudonym in any reports of my study to ensure student confidentiality. All interviews will remain confidential, unless your child tells me about anything illegal (like drug or alcohol use, truancy, or abuse) or anything that might cause harm to him or herself or anyone else. In that case, I am required by law to report it, along with your child’s name, to authorities.

I would appreciate your cooperation with this project. I have attached an Informed Consent form, with more detailed information. Please read this form and return the signed form by (date) if you consent for your child to be interviewed. Please feel free to contact me through a phone call or e-mail if you have any questions.

Please send back the attached form. I will need student consent, and, if the student is under 18 years of age, parent or guardian consent as well. Thank you and I look forward to working with you this year.

Sincerely,

Katie Hendrickson
740-274-0147
kh232602@ohio.edu
Dear (teacher),

I hope your school year is going well. My name is Katie Hendrickson. I am working on my master’s degree in the Cultural Studies in Education program, in the College of Education.

I am writing to invite your participation in my thesis study titled “Student Perceptions of School in Rural Areas.” I will be observing classes and interviewing students (juniors and seniors). This study will help the scientific community gain an understanding of reasons for student attitudes about school, from the student perspective. An understanding of the student perspective can be helpful to teachers who are hoping to increase student engagement in the classroom.

I would appreciate your cooperation with this project. If you agree to allow your classroom to be a part of my research, I would ask you to recommend one or two of your classes for me to observe. I would then come into your class, briefly tell students what I will be doing (observing the interactions in class and interviewing some of them about their attitudes toward school), and then I would spend between 1-5 weeks periodically observing students in your class. I will then invite all students to participate in an interview, and I will send consent forms home to several of the students who indicate interest in being interviewed. Once I have received the signed consent forms, I would schedule one-on-one interviews with the students during their study hall, activity period, or lunch.

If you would like to participate, please email me back with the times and class periods that would be suitable for me to observe. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions. Thank you and I look forward to working with you this year.

Sincerely,

Katie Hendrickson
Kh232602@ohio.edu
740-274-0147
APPENDIX E: ORAL SCRIPTS

Oral script to approach class:
Hi! My name is Katie Hendrickson. I am a graduate student at Ohio University, and I am doing a study on how students feel about school. I will be coming into your class throughout the next few weeks to see what goes on in your class, and then I will be asking some of you to talk with me one-on-one. I really want to hear what you have to say about what makes schools good and bad. Your grade will not be affected by whether you choose to participate in this study or not.

Oral script to approach individual student for interview:
I’m researching student attitudes and perceptions toward school. I would really like to get your input as to what makes schools good and bad. I will not share anything you say with any teachers, other students, or anyone else at the school unless you tell me about anything illegal (like drug or alcohol use, truancy, or abuse) or anything that might cause harm to yourself or anyone else. In that case, I am required by law to report it. If I include anything you say in my paper, I will change your name. If you would be willing to sit down with me one day in the coming weeks to talk about school, please fill out this interest form. If I select you for an interview, I will be sending a consent form home for your parent or guardian to sign. Do you have any questions for me?
APPENDIX F: STUDENT INTEREST FORM

Name: _______________________________________________

Please check one of the following:

_______ Yes, I am interested in participating in an interview.

The best way to contact me is:

In class: __________

Phone: ________________________________

E-mail: ________________________________

Mailing address: __________________________

_______ No, I am not interested in participating in an interview.

Name: _______________________________________________

Please check one of the following:

_______ Yes, I am interested in participating in an interview.

The best way to contact me is:

In class: __________

Phone: ________________________________

E-mail: ________________________________

Mailing address: __________________________

_______ No, I am not interested in participating in an interview.