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The School's Role as a Support System  
for Children of Parental Divorce

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A dissertation

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor in Education

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by

Constance Myers Cottongim

December 2002

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Dr. Russell West

Keywords: Divorce, Parents, Classroom Teacher, School Counselor,  
Interventions, Role of the School

## ABSTRACT

### The School's Role as a Support System for Children of Parental Divorce

by

Constance Myers Cottongim

In the year 2000, over one million children were involved in a new divorce. These statistics indicated that this subgroup of children would continue to be a large part of the school population. The school, because of time spent there, becomes a likely place for the recognition and identification of problems that may arise from parental divorce, thus providing an appropriate setting for interventions to be conducted.

The purpose of this study was to determine how parents, classroom teachers, and school counselors viewed the role of the school as a support system for children of divorce. The study also explored opinions about interventions and suggestions from divorced parents with children in schools. In this phenomenological study, a guided interview guide was used to interview 20 parents, 20 classroom teachers, and 8 school counselors. Data were collected, analyzed, and arranged into themes.

From the findings the researcher concluded that parents, classroom teachers, and school counselors were aware that families of divorce sometimes require school intervention for their child's well being. Parents interviewed indicated that school staff should be informed of a parental divorce by stating that the classroom teacher and counselor, if needed, should be involved with the child's well being. They also indicated that they believed school counselors were trained to provide intervention and they gave suggestions for the school to consider when working with children of divorce. Classroom teachers interviewed indicated that intervention should be used for children of divorce in the school setting if needed, that they used some kind of strategy when needed, and that they saw the school counselor as a resource in divorce intervention. School counselors interviewed indicated that it was the counselor's responsibility to assist children of divorce. They stated that they had not had formal training in divorce intervention and gave examples of support techniques used in their home school.

## DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my family.

To my parents

J. P. and Eva Myers

for their unconditional love, support, and belief that my goals were attainable.

To my children

William Stone Piper, Jr., James Clint Piper, and Mary Suzanne Piper

who lovingly allowed me the time to reach my goal and made me proud of our accomplishments

each step of the way.

I also dedicate this to my husband

John W. Cottongim

for his love, friendship, confidence, and encouragement.

Without each one of you, my dream could not have come true.

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Many individuals involved in the education of children have contributed to this study. I would like to acknowledge and thank each parent, classroom teacher, and school counselor not only for their contribution to this study but also for their love and respect for children. I would like to thank John Cottongim for his years of selfless service to children in need and his patience to listen to me read and discuss this study for hours on end.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Lilly was six the year her parents divorced, the same year she entered first grade. At home, the situation was terrible. Her father kept leaving, then coming back and fighting bitterly with her mother, and then leaving again. When her father was gone, Lilly's mother was depressed and stayed in bed most of the day. Lilly was quiet as a mouse at school but not in a good way. She often seemed a million miles away and cried easily at the smallest problem. She became distraught at any mistake and accepted only perfection in herself.

Who will help Lilly? Her mother appears too overwhelmed by her own problems to help Lilly without assistance. The pressure on schools to act as a second parent is constantly growing. Are public schools willing to intervene as support systems for children of divorce? If so, how prepared are schools to deal with this responsibility?

#### *Statement of the Problem*

According to Fagan and Rector (2000), "Divorce has grown significantly over the past half century. In 1935, there were 16 divorces for each 100 marriages. By 1998, the number had risen to 51 divorces per 100 marriages" (p. 3). Statistics from an article in *Divorce Magazine.Com* (2001) stated:

1. In 1998, there were 19,400,000 divorced people living in the United States
2. Fifty percent of first marriages end in divorce
3. Each year 2.5 million people divorce
4. One million children experience divorce each year
5. There were 20 million children under age 18 living with only one parent in 1998.

6. Statistics indicate that fatherless homes produce 50% more children who divorce as adults, 63% of youth suicides, 90% of homeless or runaway children, 85% of children with behavior problems, 71% of high school dropouts, and 85% of youths in prison. (pp. 1-5)

Divorce can be traumatic for children and information indicates that if the trauma is not handled properly, it may have the potential for permanently scarring children's lives. According to Zill (1983), two thirds of all adolescent admissions to psychiatric hospitals are children of divorce.

Some parents who are divorcing cannot provide all the help their children need, and they may look to social agencies or outside resources to provide assistance. Most children are involved with school and school-related activities for approximately one third of their waking hours each week. During this time in school, the child gains exposure to educators' and society's values. The opinions and expectations of persons other than parents help form a child's self-concept based upon a variety of different attitudes and values. Hence, what role can the school play when a child's parents are divorcing?

Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) wrote:

It is a curious phenomenon that family policy in this country has recognized the state's responsibility to offer services in family planning, for prospective children still unborn, but has left parents alone to deal with most of the issues that arise after children are born. Perhaps the time has come for a more realistic family policy, one that addresses the expectable metamorphoses of the American family and the stress points of change. (p. 317)

Benedek and Benedek (1979) concurred, "While there is certainly substantial divergence as to the nature and amount of assistance required, we believe that all children of divorce are in need of at least some supportive services for some period of time" (p. 157).

During the divorce process, a child's sense of continuity and stability is likely to be dependent upon the availability of extra familial supports such as the school (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Price and McKenry (1988) also noted the important role that schools can play in

facilitating children's adjustment during divorce. Wallerstein and Kelly learned that the attention, sympathy, and tolerance demonstrated by teachers and counselors who were informed about the divorce provided support to a number of children who were feeling emotionally undernourished at home. In their study, certain teachers became a central stable figure in the lives of children in the months following a parental divorce. Because of Wallerstein and Kelly's study, it has been argued that the school has an obligation to intervene with children of divorce. However, many parents, teachers, and administrators are uncomfortable with the introduction of the subject of divorce and to assist children with divorcing parents (Price & McKenry).

Researchers noted that most children suffer some emotional disability during a parental divorce (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980) and because of this, they have studied the problems that affect these children in an educational setting. Writers have documented how school age children experiencing parental divorce can be helped in a school setting. It has not been established, however, if teachers and counselors regard working with children of divorce as a responsibility of the school. Therefore, I proposed a study of the school's role as a support system for children of parental divorce.

The purpose of the study was to determine how parents, classroom teachers, and school counselors viewed the role of the school as a support system for children of divorce. The study also explored opinions about intervention and suggestions from divorced parents with children in schools. The study attempted to accomplish this purpose by asking the following questions:

1. What or how much specific training have classroom teachers and school counselors received in working with children who are in divorce situations?
2. Do classroom teachers and school counselors believe that divorce intervention is a responsibility of school staff? If so, why?
3. What interventions or approaches are currently implemented by teachers and school counselors when working with children of divorce?

4. What are the greatest obstacles that hinder classroom teachers' and school counselors' attempts to provide services to children with divorced parents?
5. Do parents believe intervention and support for children of divorce is a responsibility of the school? If so, why?
6. If parents agree that intervention is needed, what suggestions do they offer the school to help their child(ren) in dealing with the divorce?

A "key informant interview" will be done with "the interviewer collect[ing] data from individuals who have special knowledge or perceptions that would not otherwise be available to the researcher" (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996, p. 306). The researcher used criterion sampling to choose the participating classroom teachers, school counselors, and parents from a rural county in east Tennessee.

#### *Significance of the Study*

In the year 2000, there were 33,842 divorces granted in Tennessee and nationwide over one million children are involved in new divorce each year (National Center for Health Statistics, 2001). These statistics indicate that this subgroup of children will continue to be a large part of the school population. Awareness of the implications for children involved in a divorce situation becomes significantly important for schools.

During divorce, social support for the family is typically lacking. Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989) pointed out that unlike other family crises, during divorce, social support tends to fall away. A death in the family brings comfort from others; even natural disasters bring people to assist. When the problem is divorce, some friends are afraid they will have to choose sides or that it is none of their business.

The lack of emotional support these children are experiencing may be improved by offering interventions through schools. Schools may play an important role as a source of

nurturing. Interventions may be a primary way for schools to assist children with effective coping, and promote a child's adjustment to the divorce crisis (Freeman & Couchman, 1985).

Ourth and Zakarija (1982) stated, "Children who are troubled are children whose learning is at risk" (p. 33). The school, because of time spent there, becomes a likely place for recognition and identification of problems that may arise from parental divorce, thus providing an appropriate setting for intervention to be initiated and conducted. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) through a study done in 1980, identified changes children experience who are involved in a parental divorce and also labeled several characteristic responses seen in children of divorce. Their study indicated that, "A sense of sufficiency enabled the youngster to deal with the divorce events within the context of a balanced understanding. In contrast, the sense of deprivation placed the divorce in a perspective of continued unhappiness" (p. 192). The researchers implied that divorce does not need to be a traumatic experience. They determined that favorable adjustments could be made by children who were able to define the divorce, who were given an understandable explanation, who shared news with friends, and who viewed themselves as having acquired strengths and responsibilities because of the divorce. These factors that influence a child's adjustment to parental divorce have implications for both direct and indirect intervention.

#### *Definition of Terms*

Divorce. The term divorce as used in this study is the legal dissolution of a marriage by two adults that involves at least one child, but no stepparents or stepchildren.

Divorce Intervention. The term divorce intervention as used in this study refers to individual or group techniques used in a school setting to help the child of parental divorce cope with problems he or she may have dealing with a divorce.

Intact family. The term intact family as used in this study refers to a family that lives together in one home with two natural parents and one or more of their mutual biological children.

Training. The term training as used in this study is to only include formal training for classroom teachers and school counselors gained through a knowledgeable source

### *Limitations*

The study depended upon individual classroom teachers and school counselors accurately relating their feelings, beliefs, and experiences from working with children of divorce. The limitations from parents were based upon their openness to discuss personal issues pertaining to the divorce. The objectivity of the participants depended upon each participant's own impartiality and experience with divorce and children. Before the interview, each parent, classroom teacher, and school counselor was aware that the researcher was a school counselor. This study was limited to the assumption that participants could accurately relate their feelings, beliefs, and experiences about the role of the school in divorce while being aware of the researcher's profession.

### *Delimitations*

This study was limited to school counselors, classroom teachers, and parents in schools in a rural county in east Tennessee. Analysis of the data obtained is generalizable only to the population used in this study.

### *Overview of the Study*

Chapter 1 of the study contains the introduction, the statement of the problem, the purpose and significance of the study, limitations, and an overview of the study. Chapter 2 contains a review of relevant literature and research. The literature review includes an overview of the statistics about children and divorce, the effects, if any, of divorce on children's lives, and the role that school teachers and counselors play in the intervention for children of divorce. Chapter 3 is a description of the methodology and procedures employed in this study. Chapter 4

contains the presentation of the research findings and an analysis of the data. Chapter 5 includes a summary of the study with findings, overview, recommendations for practice, and recommendations for further research.



## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

History has taught that educational institutions intervene when society does not adequately handle the problems of its children and adolescents; consequently, during the past two decades, schools have taken a greater role in sex education and education about smoking, alcohol, and drug abuse. Schools are now facing the challenge that children of divorce present to the academic community.

When a child experiences the trauma of parental separation and divorce, the child's school can, and should, play a major role as a positive supportive influence. According to Fritz (2000),

There is mounting evidence that interventions provided at the time of divorce can improve things for the families that receive them. Divorce education programs increased threefold in the mid-1990s, and although the programs vary widely in scope and approach, results are promising. (p. 1)

Some school professionals do not agree that helping children through a family crisis should be a function of the school. Intervention in the issue of parental divorce has been viewed by some school professionals as a personal area out of the domain of the school's responsibility. It appears presumptuous to assume that a child can continue to function academically at a time when the family is in crisis or when the child experiences unresolved personal issues of the degree often encountered when parents separate (Drake, 1981).

Research has shown that certain factors may influence a child's healthy adjustment to parental divorce, and school personnel may be in a strategic position to directly or indirectly intervene. Knowledge about the effects of parental divorce on children and its impact on school behavior and learning is necessary if educators are expected to provide appropriate assistance and support within the school setting.

### *Divorce in the United States*

The National Center for Health Statistics (2001) detailed from the 2000 census that 49% of marriages in the United States ended in divorce, and over one million children are involved in new divorces each year. The 2000 Census also shows that (a) the total number of divorced adults grew from 4.3 million in 1970 to 20 million today, (b) the married population dropped from 72% in 1970 to 60% today, and (c) the average duration of first marriages ending in divorce is eight years and second marriages is six years. The numbers of children who have experienced a family divorce significantly outnumber children in the general population in outpatient psychiatric, family agency, and private practice population. In a national survey of adolescents whose parents had separated and divorced by the time the children were seven years old, Zill (1983) discovered that 30% of these children had received psychiatric therapy by the time they reached adolescence compared with only 10% of adolescents in intact families.

A study in California followed 131 children aged 3 to 18. At the five-year mark, the study showed that more than one third of the children were suffering with moderate to severe depression (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). A study by Kurz (1994) compared the psychosocial coping resources of elementary school-age children living in the sole custody of a divorced single parent to their peers living with nondivorced parents. Children of divorced parents were found to have lower levels of self-efficacy, self-esteem, and social support and less effectual coping styles.

The Americans for Divorce Reform Polls (Willats, 1998) revealed some disturbing statistics. Between 1970 and 1996, the proportion of children under 18 years of age living with one parent grew from 12% to 28%. The number of children whose parents divorced grew by 700% from 1900 to 1972. The number of children living with both parents declined from 85% to 68% between 1970 and 1996.

In the past, a couple experiencing marriage difficulties would often stay together merely for the sake of their children. Today, children are increasingly seen as secondary to the

perceived personal needs of the spouses. The number of children involved in divorces and annulments stood at 6.3 per 1,000 children under 18 years of age in 1950, and 7.2 in 1960. By 1970 it had increased to 12.5; by 1975, 16.7; by 1980, the rate stood at 17.3--a 175% increase from 1950. Since 1972, one million American children every year have seen their parents divorce (Willats, 1993). Gallagher (1996) in *The Abolition of Marriage*, stated that half of all children will witness the breakup of a parent's marriage. Of these, she noted that close to half will also see the breakup of a parent's second marriage and that 10% of children of divorce will go on to witness three or more family breakups.

On a local basis, information from the 1990 census revealed that there were 3,944 divorced people living in Sevier County over the age of 15. In Knox County, there were 27,781 divorced people over the age of 15 (Bureau of U.S. Census, 1990).

### *Effects of Parental Divorce on Children*

An important question asked over the last decades has been, "Is divorce harmful to children?" In 1991, Amato and Keith examined the results of 92 studies involving 13,000 children to determine what these study results indicated. "The overall result of this analysis was that children from divorced families are on the average somewhat worse off than children who have lived in intact families" (as cited in Hughes, 1996, p. 1). The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (1998) stated that divorce can be misinterpreted by children and cause distress in the child or children.

Regardless of the long-term effects and positive or negative adjustment to parental divorce, most children experience the divorce as an emotionally painful loss (Drake, 1979; Hetherington, Camara, & Featherman, 1981). Carlile (1991) noted although children of all ages are affected, perhaps the most vulnerable are those at the elementary school level. She stated that at a time when children need parental love, assurance, and support the most, their parents are least able, emotionally, to provide it. Unfortunately, the turmoil often does not stop after the

divorce is final. Parental hostility and bitterness may escalate through the years and continue to cause needless pain and suffering.

A 10-year study of children of divorce conducted by Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) cited a number of symptoms children in such cases might experience. Of these behaviors, the following might be observed in the elementary school classroom:

1. anxiety
2. depression
3. regression
4. asthma
5. allergies
6. tantrums
7. daydreaming
8. overaggressive behavior
9. withdrawal from relationships
10. poor school performance
11. frequent crying or absence of emotion, and
12. difficulty in communicating feelings.

The child's developmental level interacts with situational variables to determine the specific response to the divorce; these outlined themes or concerns appear to be common to most children of divorce, regardless of their age. The first is fear because divorce can be a frightening experience. The fear may be real or imagined and the specific content is variable; the child's underlying concern is one of abandonment. Many children of divorce believe if the marriage can dissolve, so too can the parent and child relationship. Children may show concern over such things as who will feed them, care for them, and provide necessities such as clothes and college education (Wallerstein & Kelly).

A sense of the unknown compounds the child's fear. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) reported that although one third of the children in their study had experienced threats of divorce before the actual event, another one third had little awareness of parental unhappiness before the decision to divorce. When an explanation was given to the child, it was usually brief and without information about the meaning of divorce. Children also showed concern over not being allowed to ask questions about the divorce. Wallerstein and Kelly noted in most situations that the children were not encouraged to express their feelings.

The second concern was a sense of sadness or loss. The report by Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) showed that many children in the study were openly tearful and moody. Frequently, the children developed depressive symptoms such as sleep disturbances and difficulty in sustaining attention. Younger children seemed to have a deep concern over the departure of the father, whereas adolescents focused on the breakdown of the family and the structure that the family provided.

A third issue was children of divorce began feeling responsible for the well being of one or both parents. During a divorce, parents sometimes become overcome by their own emotional distress. Their attention is on their own problems and because of this stress, parents may be inconsistent and less affectionate toward their children. In addition, some parents treat children, especially adolescent-aged children, as confidants. They share their concerns about the divorce with them. This often causes the child to respond by trying to become the caretaker of the parents, offering support and in some cases, attempting to bring about reconciliation (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

The fourth situation involved the loneliness children of divorce often experience. Divorced parents may become preoccupied and inattentive to the emotional needs of their children. One parent usually leaves the home, causing the custodial parent to begin working outside the home or to work longer hours. Children are often left alone or with care providers.

Children or adolescents who have a prior history of poor adjustment and low self-esteem are likely to suffer the most in these instances (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

Feeling rejected was the fifth area of concern. This was brought about not only from the departure of the noncustodial parent but also from the child's perception of withdrawal from the custodial parent. This sense of rejection may cause the child to question his or her own lovability and self-worth. In Wallerstein and Kelly's (1980) study, the results showed boys between 6 to 12 years old were most likely to express feeling rejected by the departing father.

The sixth concern was conflicting loyalties. Most children, regardless of age, wish to retain a relationship with both parents. Many parents begin to openly compete for the child's support and affection after a divorce. This puts the child in the middle and may make the child feel like a traitor to one or both of the parents (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

Anger was the seventh concern. Almost all children are at risk for experiencing anger in one form or another. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) reported, for example, that the younger children in their study were more likely to express the anger in such acting-out behaviors as hitting or exhibiting temper tantrums. The older children were more likely to express the anger directly through verbal attacks.

Wallerstein and colleagues continued their 1980 research in a recent study. Wallerstein, Lewis, and Blakeslee (2000) used the same structured interview method in the new study for both the divorced and comparison group. Eighty percent of the divorced participants and 100% of the comparison group completed the questionnaire. The results showed that, as adults, many children of divorce were still dealing with inner conflict. Glimpses of long-term effects were seen in the subjects as Wallerstein et al. noted,

Divorce is a life-transforming experience. After divorce, childhood is different. Adolescence is different, adulthood--with the decision to marry or not and have children or not--is different. Whether the final outcome is good or bad, the whole trajectory of an individual's life is profoundly altered by the divorce experience. (p. xxvii)

Wallerstein and her colleagues' (2000) 25 years of research showed that at each developmental stage, the divorce was experienced again. When the parents separated, children were frightened,

angry, and terrified of being abandoned by their parents. After the divorce, children were faced with loneliness caused by the loss of an intact family. During adolescence, the children of divorce were more likely to experiment with sex and drugs. As these children of divorce reached adulthood, they were faced with the decision of how to make a life-long commitment to another adult. As adults, they were afraid of repeating the same mistakes as their parents and many avoided commitment altogether, or rushed too quickly into relationships (Wallerstein et al.).

Amato (1994) also followed children of divorce into adulthood. The results of this study, based on data from 80,000 adults, indicated that the experience of parental divorce had a detrimental impact on their life course. When compared to children raised in an intact family, adult children of divorce had "lower psychological well being, more behavioral problems, less education, lower job status, a lower standard of living, lower marital satisfaction, a heightened risk of divorce, a heightened risk of being a single parent, and poorer physical health" (p. 146).

Although children react differently to divorce depending upon age, maturity, and individual situations, there are some generalities. Children of divorce go through a classic mourning process after divorce, much like after a death in the family. They experience disbelief, then anxiety, anger, sadness, and depression (Bienenfeld, 1987).

In studies done by the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (1998), findings showed that children are invariably frightened and confused by this threat to their security. The divorce may be misinterpreted and a feeling of being the cause of the conflict may be present. Children may assume the responsibility for bringing their parents back together, sometimes by sacrificing themselves. Younger children may react to divorce by becoming more aggressive and uncooperative, or withdrawn. Older children may feel deep sadness and loss. Their schoolwork may suffer and behavior problems are common. As teenagers, children of divorce often have trouble with their own relationships and they may experience problems with self-esteem.

According to several research reviews, children of divorce, when compared to children from intact families, exhibit more “acting-out” behaviors (e.g., aggression, conflict with school authorities) as well as maladaptive, internally directed behaviors, (e.g., depression, anxiety, and withdrawal). In addition, children of divorce are more likely to perform less well academically, have a lower academic self-concept (but not lower self-esteem), and are less motivated to achieve. These adjustment difficulties are sometimes directly divorce-related, and sometimes due to problems in parents’ functioning (Amato & Keith, 1991; Grych & Fincham, 1992, 1997; Kelly, 1993).

Although some studies (Amato & Keith, 1991; Kelly, 1993) noted boys have more adjustment problems than girls, empirical research across multiple gender studies found that boys do less well than girls only in terms of their social adjustment. Divorce can have adverse effects on children of all ages, although there does not appear to be specific types of negative effects for any given age. Elementary school children’s social adjustment may be more affected, whereas high school students may have more problems with self-concept (Grych & Fincham, 1997).

Age-related divorce concerns may be linked to children’s levels of cognitive and emotional development. Preschoolers are more likely to focus on maintaining emotional security and relationships with both parents and to need routines in their school and home environments (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). In middle childhood, issues that originated during the preschool years can be compounded by children’s assuming guilt, blame, or responsibility for their parents’ divorce or by holding unrealistic expectations about their ability to influence parental behavior, such as bringing their parents back together. High school students are more likely to deal with divorce related concerns cognitively and to express these concerns in terms of their own identity, capacity for relationships, and life-choice issues (Kurdek, 1988).

Children’s responses to divorce are not uniform; some children of divorce may be indistinguishable from children of intact families, whereas others may experience serious



emotional, behavioral, or academic adjustment problems (Grych & Fincham, 1997). According to Miller, Ryan, and Morrison (1999), children of divorce may:

1. Have to contend with their parents' suddenly unpredictable moods
2. Feel more emotionally isolated, insecure, anxious, or depressed
3. Feel guilty or responsible for the divorce, and they may assume adult-like responsibilities for themselves, their siblings, or even their own parents
4. Feel pressured to take sides, share or withhold secrets, or bad-mouth or spy on the other parent
5. Be unable to do favorite activities with their friends
6. Lose contact with everything dear to them, including friends, home, siblings, and their neighborhood. (p. 286)

Fagan and Rector (2000) acknowledged the effects of divorce are enormous. Their research showed children of divorce “demonstrated an earlier loss of virginity, more cohabitation, higher expectations of divorce, higher divorce rates later in life, and less desire to have children” (p. 3). Fagan and Rector summarized that because of the effect of divorce on children, researchers must no longer study what divorce is doing to the child, but instead understand the depth and persistence of these effects for the future and on the next generations.

Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) spoke of the reactions children have to divorce. Children and adolescents conveyed separation and its aftermath as being the most stressful period of their lives. The family rupture causes a sense of shock, anxiety, and sorrow. Few youngsters experience any relief with the divorce decision, and those who do are usually older and have witnessed physical violence or open conflict between their parents. The child's responses to the divorce are governed neither by an understanding of issues leading to the divorce nor by the fact that divorce has a high incidence in the school. To the child, divorce signifies the collapse of the structure that provided support and protection.

The fears and fantasies about what will happen next compound the suffering of children and adolescents in response to a divorce. Children begin to feel vulnerable because they believe the protective function of the family has given way. They grieve over the loss of the noncustodial parent, over the loss of the intact family, and often over the multiple losses of neighborhood, friends, and school. Children may experience anger toward one or both parents whom they hold responsible for disrupting the family. Some of this anger is reactive and defends them against their own feelings of powerlessness, their concern about being lost in the shuffle, and their fear that their needs will be forgotten. Some younger children may suffer with guilt over things they believe they may have contributed to the family quarrels and that led to the divorce. Others feel it is their responsibility to mend the broken marriage (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

Over 100 studies on thousands of families have been conducted comparing children of divorced families with children from intact families. The majority indicated that children of divorce have more adjustment problems. These behavior problems include Attention-Deficit Disorder, aggression, delinquent behavior, poor academic performance, poor social skills, depression, low self esteem, and anxiety (Amato & Keith, 1991).

One study conducted in a school setting focused on teacher identification of problems. Santrock (1970) reported that teachers rated boys ages 10 to 12 without fathers present in their homes as more masculine, aggressive, disobedient, and independent than boys with fathers present. The study concluded that divorce might lead to an increase in the male children's sex-typed behaviors, especially when the separation occurs during preadolescence. Santrock also reported that younger children of separation and divorce, ages 5 to 10, demonstrated significantly more school maladjustment than their demographically matched controls without crisis histories. His study also showed that children of separation or divorce had higher scores in acting-out, restlessness, obstinacy, disruptive behavior in class, and impulsiveness.

Felner and Cowen (1975) studied the effects of father availability on academic performance of third-grade boys. The results indicated that boys whose fathers left were generally underachievers and functioned somewhat below grade level in contrast to those whose fathers were available to them.

Some psychologists noted they believe elementary age students have the hardest time adjusting to parental divorce. At elementary school age children are old enough to understand that they are unhappy when their parents divorce. They are too young to understand the concept of how to react to the pain and guilt they feel. Elementary age children are likely to experience "embarrassment, resentment, divided loyalty and intense anger. Their ability to become actively involved in play and activities with other children may help them cope with their family situation" (Temke, 1998, p. 1).

#### *Another View on Effects of Parental Divorce on Children*

The majority of literature in the field presented a negative assessment about the effects of separation and divorce on child development, alluding to undesirable outcomes such as delinquency, serious academic problems, depression, and suicide. However, studies do exist that present a different view. Amato and Booth (1997) analyzed longitudinal child outcome data from a large national sample of families, isolating the independent effects of divorce on children from the effects of pre-existing marital conflict. The findings showed that divorce per se is sometimes better than the child living in a home with marital conflict and that 25% to 33% of parental divorces today end up being better for the child than if the parents had stayed together. Amato and Booth stated that children are highly adaptable and are capable of adjusting to a wide range of family circumstances. They also stated that most children from divorced families do not experience clinical levels of problems and grow up to be well-adjusted adults. Findings from their 1997 study reported that the worst outcome for children was to be in a continuously intact family where the parents did not get along well and had a high level of conflict.

Churlin (1996) discovered in studies done in the United States and Great Britain that some of the problems attributed to divorce were evident before the separation. School records showed some of these children were already doing worse in school and had behavior problems. He stated that the mistake should not be made of ascribing every problem a child of divorce has to being caused by the divorce.

Questions have also been raised about Wallerstein and her colleagues' earlier research conclusions. Coontz (1998) stated that Wallerstein's findings that the problems children of divorce have were caused by the divorce is an oversimplified notion. Coontz made the point that pre-existing problems with the child must be taken into consideration. Miller (1998) interviewed four professionals who work with children to remark on Wallerstein's study. One of these professionals, Shareef (as cited in Miller, 1998) stated,

Children whose parents divorced 25 years ago may have been the only child or one of only a few children whose parents were getting divorced. Today, there are a lot of children with single-parent families, so I don't think children react as strongly to the sense of loss. (p. 1)

Pollitt (2000) also criticized Wallerstein and her colleagues' 25-year landmark study by saying:

We have 60 disastrous families, featuring crazy parents, economic insecurity, trapped wives, as Wallerstein does discuss, lots of violence . . . How on earth can she claim that divorce is what made her young people's lives difficult? The wonder is that they are doing as well as they are. (p. 2)

Lee, Picard, and Blain (1994) reviewed all the published studies that examined the effectiveness of support programs for children of divorce. They concluded, "The data provide only modest evidence that the children who participated in the groups felt different after their group experience" (p. 4).

Hetherington and Kelly (MSNBC Today, 2002) studied 1,400 families and 2,500 children for almost three decades to produce a comprehensive look at divorce and its effects.

Hetherington, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, and journalist John Kelly detail the impact that divorce has on all family members. Hetherington spoke on *The Today Show* about her study. According to the MSNBC Today's Website transcript, she stated,

At the center of the primer is a new and, I think, more balanced view of divorce and its consequences. After 40 years of research, I harbor no doubts about the ability of divorce to devastate. It can and does ruin lives. I've seen it happen more times than I like to think about. But that said, I also think much current writing on divorce--both popular and academic--has exaggerated its negative effects and ignored its sometimes considerable positive effects. Divorce has undoubtedly rescued many adults and children from the horror of domestic abuse, but it is not just a preventative measure. I have seen divorce provide many women and girls, in particular, with a remarkable opportunity for life-transforming personal growth. . . . (p. 5)

One myth Hetherington hopes to expel is that divorce is always brutal for the child. She explains,

This is another article of faith in popular wisdom and it contains an undeniable truth. In the short run, divorce usually is brutally painful to a child. But its negative long-term effects have been exaggerated to the point where we now have created a self-fulfilling prophecy. At the end of my study, a fair number of my adult children of divorce described themselves as permanently 'scarred.' But objective assessments of these 'victims' told a different story. Twenty-five percent of youths from divorced families in comparison to 10% from nondivorced families did have serious social, emotional, or psychological problems. But most of the young men and women from my divorced families looked a lot like their contemporaries from nondivorced homes. Although they looked back on their parents' breakup as a painful experience, most were successfully going about the chief tasks of young adulthood: establishing careers, creating intimate relationships, building meaningful lives for themselves.

Most unexpectedly--since it has seldom been reported before--a minority of my young adults emerged from divorce and postnuclear family life enhanced. Uncommonly resilient, mature, responsible, and focused, these children of divorce blossomed, not despite the things that had happened to them during divorce and after, but, like enhanced adults, because of them. (MSNBC Today, 2002, p. 8)

Hetherington also referred to single mothers as the "unsung heroes" of her study. "Most of our divorced women, managed to provide the support, sensitivity, and engagement their children needed for normal development" (as cited in Kantrowitz, 2002, p. 3).

### *Schools and Children of Divorce*

Since 1976 when Wallerstein and Kelly (1976) published their first research article on children of divorce, it has been established and accepted that school age children of divorce are considered at risk. Divorce impedes learning by disrupting productive study patterns as children

are faced with increased anxiety and depression because of problems in the home (Fagan & Rector, 2000). Fagan and Rector added,

In the 'Impact of Divorce Project,' a survey of 699 elementary students nationwide conducted by Kent State University in Ohio, children from divorced homes performed more poorly in reading, spelling, and math and repeated a grade more frequently than did children from intact two-parent families. (p. 10)

The responsibility for helping these children who have experienced their parents' divorce lies in part with the schools. Schools teach the whole child and are charged with meeting not only children's cognitive needs but also their emotional, physical, social, and peer needs (Bredekamp, 1987). Hertzler (as cited in Weissbourd, 1994) admits that the damage done by divorce is sometimes ignored as a problem at schools because teachers do not know how to talk to children about it. According to Weissbourd (1994), many children will provoke or try to test their teacher for attention after a divorce. These children want to know if their teacher will abandon them also. In addition, they may secretly hope that causing trouble will get their parents' attention. Teachers may find this hard to deal with because of their lack of training. Adults who have an awareness of the changes children of divorce are going through can provide a level of support for the children and also prepare themselves to deal with some of the disruptions that could impede the normal flow of group or classroom activity (Frieman, 1993).

The school is an excellent resource for children at risk. Because of the number of hours of contact, school personnel have an important effect upon the child. At school, children have exposure to professionals who are trained and are sensitive to the needs of a child. Support systems are of particular significance at a time when the family is in disorganization, and these systems may be found within the school (Drake, 1979). The elementary school counselor is in a unique position to help students, school personnel, families, and the community to work toward overcoming divorce problems (Frenza, 1984). In Hetherington and Kelly's study (MSNBC Today, 2002), Hetherington drew conclusions from information gathered from families that were studied. One important suggestion she makes to help a child through the post divorce stage is

“Selecting the right kind of school can measurably increase a child’s chances of successfully navigating life after divorce” (p. 11).

Twaiite, Silitsky, and Luchow (1998) discussed how clinicians should encourage the members of divorcing families to extend their network of support and take advantage of these support systems. Support systems can provide valuable information about how to deal with problems associated with divorce. Teachers and school counselors can represent a potentially valuable support system. Divorcing spouses should inform school personnel of the divorce. If this information is given to schools, it will help the teachers and counselors to be supportive. Teachers can also be helpful by monitoring the situation and the child’s reaction at school.

Wolchik, Sandler, and Braver (1989) identified five types of support children of divorce need: (a) recreational, (b) advice-giving, (c) resource, (d) emotional, and (e) positive feedback. Children’s sense of emotional security is a significant factor in reducing their risk for developing adjustment problems.

Children of divorce sometimes worry about abandonment. A positive teacher-child relationship can affirm a child’s sense of safety, security, and self-worth. A tolerant, calming, or kind word to a child who is having a difficult time can communicate acceptance and understanding; feeling “understood” may open a door for the child to talk about concerns. This can be the first step toward constructive problem solving (Spencer & Shapiro, 1993).

Children have no control over many divorce-related events. The noncustodial parent may move away, the child may have to move from his or her home or school, and the child may be forced to adjust to a lower standard of living. This lack of control can threaten a child’s developing sense of mastery. Teachers are able to help by allowing children to exercise control over meaningful classroom procedures, activities, and events (Miller et al., 1999).

Frieman (1993) reported many children of divorce want their teachers to know about their home situations and are anxious not to be criticized by their teacher when they have problems. Frieman’s study showed children want their teachers to listen and talk with them

about their feelings. A teacher is able to help children who need a listening ear by using such basic skills as active or reflective listening, open-ended versus yes-or-no questions, I versus you statements, and clarification.

Teachers may wonder about the extent they need to become involved in children's divorce-related problems. Miller et al. (1999) gave some general guidelines:

1. Focus upon divorce-related problems only as they affect children's classroom behavior and academic performance
2. Refer general divorce-related problems to the school's counselor or psychologist, and proceed on the basis of that person's recommendations
3. Discuss divorce-related problems with parents only in terms of how they affect the child's classroom behavior and academic performance
4. Avoid being drawn into taking sides, or supporting one parent's claims over the other
5. Be compassionate and a source of support to children, but do not take on a parental role
6. Facilitate parents and children's access to relevant resources and information for dealing with divorce-related problems, without suggesting personal involvement in resolving such problems. (p. 288)

Consulting with the school counselor as soon as it is known a child is struggling with a family-related problem can be an effective tool for children of divorce. Intervening at the first sign of a child's divorced-related problem can prevent the problem from worsening and affecting other areas of the child's functioning (Miller et al., 1999).

Frenza (1984) suggested several tools the school counselor can use that will help children facing problems after a parental divorce:

1. Implement group and peer counseling sessions in the school setting for children of single-parent families
2. Ensure that children do not feel stigmatized or singled out for their participation



3. Initiate inservice training for teachers and other school personnel to provide information on changing family patterns and to help eliminate bias and stereotypes toward single-parent families
4. Provide counseling groups for parents and children
5. Update school records to include information about the non-custodial parent and whether or not he or she should obtain report cards, school notices, and other information
6. Promote school functions that do not require the presence of a parent of a specified sex for attendance during the parents' working day.

Rainbows for Children, a school intervention program aimed at ameliorating the effects of parental divorce, was evaluated in a research study conducted by Skitka and Frazier (1995). The results of the study indicated children in this sample look very much like other children from divorced families. One of the major assumptions underlying the problematic goals of the Rainbows' program is children from divorced families will show improved self-esteem and lower levels of depression once problematic beliefs about divorce are addressed and coped with. The results of this study indicated that the intervention was not effective in improving children's beliefs about divorce, decreasing their depression, or improving their behavioral or academic self-esteem. Although depression and academic success did not significantly improve because of the intervention, depression and academic success did improve as the children's attitudes toward the divorce improved.

Traditionally, therapy groups have been offered through hospitals, private or public-supported mental health facilities, and in connection with religious organizations. All of these settings are appropriate, but lately the school has emerged as a good resource for assisting children from divorced families. Divorce can affect school performance. It has been linked to low self-esteem, decreased ability to concentrate, high absenteeism, and behavioral problems. At the adolescent level, these behavioral problems may include drug and alcohol abuse and early sexual experimentation. The school, because of its stability and regularity, provides organization

in the student's life and may serve as a haven from ongoing home conflict. In addition, the children and supportive professionals are already in place in the school, thus reducing the cost of treatment and time for the parent (Spencer & Shapiro, 1993).

Cowen, Pedro-Carroll, and Alpert-Gillis (1990) discovered in their school-based study that children of divorce who perceived themselves as having more overall support had lower scores on measures of postdivorce difficulties, anxiety, and worry and had higher scores on measures of openness about the divorce and positive resources. Stolberg and Mahler (1994) reported that even a school-based program that only offered emotional support for children of divorce produced a significant reduction of their clinical symptoms.

The purpose of a study by Omizo and Omizo (1987) was to find out if group-counseling intervention in school would assist children of divorce. Through their research, they found that group counseling sessions seemed to be beneficial for enhancing some areas of self-concept. The researchers stated that counselors are the professionals in the educational system who logically can help children of divorce with the problems associated with divorce, and time should be spent by these school counselors in groups with children of divorce working with divorce issues, expression of feelings, and the development of positive self-concept.

Lee et al. (1994) reviewed all the published studies that examined the effectiveness of school programs for children of divorce. One program showed promise and demonstrated evidence of effectiveness. This was the Children of Divorce Intervention program developed by Pedro-Carroll (as cited in Lee et al., 1994) and her colleagues. The Children of Divorce Intervention program by Pedro-Carroll was structured and designed to provide (a) a supportive group environment, (b) a safe climate for the child, (c) teaching of problem solving, (d) communication and conflict management skills, (e) encouragement of parent-child communication, and (f) higher self-esteem. This program accomplishes these goals in 12 one-hour meetings with the children in which they learn about divorce issues through film presentations, discussions, and books. The children also work on developing interpersonal

communication and problem-solving skills to help deal with family circumstances more effectively.

Banana Splits is a group intervention program designed for schools to use when working with children of divorce. In the article "Children of Divorce," Nugent (1990) stated that youngsters of divorce can be a drain on a school system's financial and emotional resources. She suggested that support groups for children of divorce are one good answer to the problem, and Banana Splits is the program she endorsed. It can be adapted to all grade levels, offers peer support, reduces pressure on staff members and budgets, and does not require highly trained counselors.

In Newton, Massachusetts, school counselors and psychologists developed ways to help children whose parents were undergoing divorce or separation. Besides setting up support systems of children who helped one another, the Newton schools compiled resource materials to help teachers, parents, and students cope with divorce. The success of Newton's program relied on the dedication, trust, and judgment of individual teachers and counselors (Holzman, 1984).

If children are to recover from the trauma of divorce, they must have a buffer zone between themselves and parental conflict. Bienenfeld (1987) encouraged parents to refrain from fighting and arguing when their children are present. Unfortunately, this does not always happen, and the classroom may provide the only conflict-free haven for these children.

In many cases, teachers are providing the only safety net for children of divorce. Schools can no longer ignore the problem and must begin to support teachers by providing training that enables them to better understand and deal with children of divorce. Budgets must be stretched to ensure that school counselors are in place in all schools (Francke, 1983).

Teachers cannot solve the problems of children experiencing parental divorce, but they can help children cope. During divorce, children sometimes experience a feeling of loss of control. Their world is turned upside-down and is often changing quite rapidly. The teacher can be helpful in this regard by being consistent, particularly in setting limits, and by offering many

choices of worthwhile activities so that the child does have opportunities to be in control (Frieman, 1993).

The review of literature showed the need for teachers and counselors to help children of divorce cope with problems that can occur during one of the most difficult and emotional events in their lives. Classroom teachers and school counselors must recognize what can be done to help children deal with divorce-related problems. Information gained from this study may help teachers and school counselors to improve the academic performance and facilitate the emotional well-being of children of divorce in their schools. Chapter 3 describes the qualitative methodology used in this study.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the procedures and methods used to complete the phenomenological study. Phenomenography is a "specialized method for describing the different ways in which people conceptualize the world around them" (Gall et al., 1996, p. 603). The study explored how parents, classroom teachers, and school counselors in four elementary schools in a rural county in northeast Tennessee viewed the school's role in the intervention for children of divorce.

According to Creswell (1998), phenomenology helps determine what an experience means to a person who has had the experience and is able to give a description of it. The study examined the experiences of 20 parents, 20 teachers, and 8 counselors to help understand what role and direction schools currently take in dealing with the emotional needs of children of divorce.

I chose to use a naturalistic inquiry to investigate the role the school plays in working with children of divorce. A naturalistic study is impossible to design in a definite way before the study is done, although there is a characteristic flow or development to this type of study (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). In a naturalistic paradigm, the researcher accepts and appreciates the contact between the investigator and participant (Patton, 1990). Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified the characteristics that make humans the instrument of choice for naturalistic inquiry: (a) Humans are responsive to environmental cues and are able to interact with the situation; (b) they have the ability to collect information at multiple levels simultaneously; (c) they are able to perceive situations holistically; (d) they are able to process data as soon as they become available; (e) they can provide immediate feedback and request verification of data; and (f) they can explore atypical or unexpected responses.

I experienced personal contact with the participants through the qualitative interview process. This allowed me to provide feedback and ask for verification during the interview process.

By using naturalistic inquiry, the research took into account the interaction effects that take place in social settings (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Through the study, I attempted to gain in-depth information that would not have been as easy to present as in another type of study.

### *Research Design*

According to Denzin (1994), “Qualitative research studies things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 501). It is reported that qualitative research can best be used to discover themes and relationships (Gall et al., 1996). Because the investigator was responsible for the selection of the research paradigm, it was this researcher’s opinion that a qualitative study would complement that goal.

Patton (1990) pointed out that naturalistic inquiry provides a direction and framework, and these characteristics are interconnected to make the whole. I interviewed parents, teachers, and counselors independently and then used the data as a whole with the end product a sum of the parts (Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

In the study, open-ended interviews were conducted with parents, teachers, and counselors. There was direct contact with the participants while doing this study. Considerable time was spent working with the participants and listening to their perceptions of the school’s role in intervention of the child and parental divorce. The interview guides (see Appendices D, E, and F) allowed the researcher to probe and explore within the inquiry areas (Patton, 1990).

According to Stake (1978), “Qualitative research reports, typically rich with detail and insights into participants’ experiences of the world, may be epistemologically in harmony with the reader’s experiences” (p. 5). In the study, information was collected from participants who

had dealt with divorce and had knowledge of the situation. The data were directly related to the participants and the context of the study.

When collecting data from parents, teachers, and counselors, several questions were considered by the researcher: Did the parent have a smooth or stormy divorce? What were the teachers' and counselors' personal feelings about divorce? Did the participants have preconceived ideas about how children react to divorce? These and other questions were considered when deciding what had shaped the participants' views. Because of these conditions, it was impossible to determine one cause-and-effect relationship in the study.

Patton (1990) noted that a naturalistic paradigm is meant to discover the meanings of events the participants have had and the interpretation of those meanings to the researcher. This research was value-laden with the values of the parents, teachers, and counselors. Each person's view about school, children, and divorce helped determine the outcome of the study. The investigator's beliefs about these issues also affected the analysis of the data.

I determined that a naturalistic inquiry paradigm was the best avenue to use in the study. Because of this assumption, qualitative methodology was used in selecting the sample, collecting the data, and completing the data analysis.

### *Description of Participants*

The participants for the study were selected using purposeful sampling, a method that is the dominant strategy in qualitative research (Patton, 1990). Purposeful sampling was chosen with the goal being to select cases that are expected to be rich in information with respect to the study (Gall et al., 1996). Twenty parents, 20 classroom teachers, and 8 counselors from the selected county were chosen to participate in the study. The school system selected was purposely chosen because of the interest I have in the county. The schools were selected because they are situated in the four corners of the county of study. The county has no zoning law, so

children from anywhere in the county can attend any school. By using these schools, a wide array of socioeconomic diversity was noted.

Criterion sampling was used to fulfill the need that all cases met criteria useful for quality assurance. This type of sampling helped assure that all individuals who were studied represented people who have some experience with the phenomenon (Patton, 1990). Each participant met certain qualifications. Each teacher had a minimum of five years teaching experience and had taught a child in his or her classroom who was going through a parental divorce. Each counselor had had classroom experience and a minimum of five years experience as a counselor. Each counselor had experienced working individually or in small groups with a child of divorce. Each parent selected had experienced one divorce and had at least one child in one of the public schools selected for this study. “In qualitative research, determining sample size is entirely a matter of judgment; there are no set rules. Patton suggested that selecting an appropriate sample size involves a trade-off between breadth and depth” (Gall et al., p. 236). Patton also suggested that the ideal sampling size is just to keep selecting cases until one reaches the point of redundancy, which occurs when no new information is being gained. Guba and Lincoln (1981) suggested that sampling stop when there is an exhaustion of resources, emergence of regularities, and an over extension of the research goals.

### *Collection of Data*

Permission to conduct the study in the county of study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of East Tennessee State University. The superintendent of schools in the county of study was contacted and asked for permission to interview teachers, counselors, and parents who met the criteria needed for this study (see Appendix A). The principal at each school also received a form to be signed asking permission to speak with parents, teachers, and counselors at his or her school (see Appendix B). All adults who were interviewed were given an informed consent to be signed agreeing to participate in the study (see Appendix C).



Data collected for this study were gained by using a general interview guide for counselors (see Appendix D), teachers (see Appendix E), and parents (see Appendix F). Open-ended questions were asked of the participants. This allowed the participant to give a true perspective of the phenomenon and allowed for individual variations. Lofland and Lofland (1984) stated that an interview guide is a list of questions or general topics that the interviewer wants to explore during each interview. Although it is prepared to ensure the same information is obtained from each person, there are no limitations to the responses. Interview guides ensured good use of interview time and helped to keep participants and interviewer focused. Interview guides can be modified over time to center attention on areas of particular importance or to exclude questions the researcher found to be fruitless for the goals of the research.

The interview was conducted one-on-one using a tape recorder, and the exact words of the interviewee were transcribed by a professional typist. Gall et al. (1996) suggested that using a tape recorder has several advantages. Recording reduces the chance that the interviewer will make an unconscious selection of data that favors his or her biases, it provides a complete verbal record that can be studied later, and it speeds up the interview. First, an explanation of the study and its purpose was given to the interviewee to establish rapport and ease anxiety during the interview. Next, the interview process was explained to each participant. Demographic information was gathered at this point. At the close of each interview, the interviewee was given an opportunity to add comments or discussion to the information gained during the interview.

### *Analysis of Data*

Bogdan and Biklen (1982) defined qualitative data analysis as “working with data, organizing it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others” (p. 145). Qualitative researchers tend to use inductive analysis of data. By using this, critical

themes can emerge (Patton, 1990). Using inductive analysis enabled me to put the data into logical and meaningful categories and examine them in a holistic way.

The process of data analysis occurred over several stages. These included organizing the raw data, identifying themes that emerged sometimes called “open-coding” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), and putting data in manageable pieces while beginning an audit trail which helped identify the data according to the speaker and context. Next, the researcher re-examined the themes to see how they were linked; a process referred to as “axial coding.” This process not only helped describe but also helped the researcher acquire new understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Strauss & Corbin). Finally, the investigator translated all the themes into an information-rich account that “closely approximated the reality it represents” (p. 57).

The first step in the data analysis process was data reduction. All notes transcribed were recorded in a journal along with observations and personal reflections. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe this process as

single pieces of information that stand by themselves, that is, that are interpretable in the absence of any additional information. A unit may be a simple sentence or an extended paragraph, but, in either case, the test of its unitary character is that if any portion of the unit were to be removed, the remainder would be seriously compromised or rendered uninterruptible. (p. 203)

Data were gathered and coded into the Non numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theory-building (NUD.IST) software. The NUD.IST program was beneficial in indexing, searching, and theorizing the data.

The naturalistic researcher assumes the presence of multiple realities and goes about presenting them adequately. Credibility is the test for this. Credibility depends more on the richness of the information gathered and the researcher’s analytical abilities than the sample size (Patton, 1990). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested five methods to help bring credibility to the findings.

I chose to employ two of these methods. These were triangulation and member checking. “In triangulation, researchers make use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators,

and theories to provide corroborating evidence" (Creswell, 1998, p. 202). "Triangulation helps to eliminate biases that might result from relying exclusively on any one data-collection method, source, analyst, or theory" (Gall et al, 1996, p. 574.) The purpose of triangulation is to find support for the findings from a number of different sources for validation (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000). To help validate these findings, I interviewed parents, classroom teachers, and school counselors about children and divorce, reviewed research found in professional literature about this area, and provided supporting data that helped to validate the findings.

The next technique for establishing credibility is member checking. "In member checks the researcher solicits informants' views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations" (Creswell, 1998, p. 202). Lincoln and Guba (1985) considered this the most critical technique used and determined it imperative that the participants be given the opportunity to react to the research. The participants were asked to review statements made in the researcher's report. Member checking helped to reveal any factual errors that needed to be corrected or alert the researcher to the need to collect more information (Gall et al., 1996).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) chose to use the word transferability over the word external validity for a naturalistic inquiry. Whereas the positivist strives to make precise statements, the naturalist uses working hypotheses. The naturalist cannot specify the external validity. It is the job of the inquirer to provide a thick description, and the responsibility of the reader of this study to decide the applicability of the findings in his or her own setting (Gall et al., 1996).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) used the word dependability and confirmability together to refer to the concept of reliability. Lincoln and Guba claimed that there is no validity without reliability or no credibility without dependability. This idea is derived from the argument that if the study shows credibility, it is not necessary to show dependability separately. The second technique used triangulation and other techniques that included an inquiry audit.

I used an inquiry audit to establish dependability and confirmability of the study. An inquiry audit cannot be conducted without collecting many records from the investigation. As

this study was compiled, the typed interviews of all participants, the researcher's journal, and the investigator's notes from the unitization process were released to the auditor. The auditor was asked to use Halpern's procedures, as outlined in Appendix B of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry* as the basis for this audit. The auditor's report is presented in Appendix G.

### *Summary*

Chapter 3 contains an overview of the research methodology that was used in the study. This included the steps that are used in a naturalistic inquiry to investigate the role the school plays in working with children of divorce. The investigation took place in four elementary schools in a rural county in east Tennessee. The participants were selected through purposeful sampling with each participant meeting certain criteria. Twenty parents, 20 classroom teachers, and 8 counselors from the selected county were chosen to participate in the study. Inductive analysis of the data was used to allow critical themes to emerge. Credibility was achieved through triangulation and member checking. The dependability and confirmability of this research was achieved by the use of an inquiry audit. The report of research findings are presented in Chapter 4.

## CHAPTER 4

### ANALYSIS OF DATA

The purpose of the study was to determine how parents, teachers, and school counselors view the role of the school as a support system for children of divorce. The study explored opinions about intervention by school personnel in a divorce situation and provided suggestions from divorced parents with children who were currently enrolled in one of the four elementary schools selected for the study.

The investigation was conducted in a rural county in northeast Tennessee, an area noted for its nine million visitors each year. The natural beauty, dynamic growth, and diverse occupational opportunities lead families from all socioeconomic levels to move to the area from many states and countries. Because of the uniqueness of the area and its socioeconomic and population diversity, I found the county to be an ideal setting for my research. The school system within the chosen county was used for conducting the study.

Participants chosen for the study were parents who (a) had been married only once, (b) had a child or children in the selected schools and were going through or had been through a divorce, (c) had no step-children, and (d) their child or children were natural or adopted children. The teachers selected had at least five years teaching experience and had taught at least one child whose family was going through a divorce while the child was in their classroom. The counselors chosen had at least five years teaching experience and had worked with children of divorce. In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 parents, 20 teachers, and 8 school counselors. The research consisted of a multi-site study designed to gather qualitative data. Data were gathered using open-ended interviews recorded on audiotape and then transcribed. The information included the collected demographic data and general responses to the questions

presented to participants. The data were then organized, divided into manageable units, and examined for patterns that were then used to develop themes for the study.

The interviews were conducted privately and one-on-one in my office or in the teachers' classrooms with no students present. I determined this type of atmosphere was relaxing to the participants, allowing them to feel comfortable and free to speak openly about the topic. Before the recorder was turned on or the interview started, each participant reviewed the objectives of the study, signed a permission form, and verbally agreed that he or she was willing to participate in the study. Each interview lasted 15 to 20 minutes and was not interrupted.

### *Profile of Parents*

Of the 20 parents interviewed, 14 were mothers and 6 were fathers. Their ages ranged from 20 to 48 years. The number of children in each household ranged from one to six with some having joint custody and others having full custody of their children. The number of years the participants were married varied, ranging from 1 year but living together 4 or 5 years before marriage to a parent who was married for 20 years. I interviewed parents from a broad socioeconomic level, with educational background ranging from those who had a GED, or 12<sup>th</sup> grade education--to parents with educational specialist degrees. The parents' career fields included homemaking, teaching, banking, retailing, accounting, interior decorating, surveying, and nursing. Others held positions such as a childcare attendant, private investigator, real estate broker, electrician, attorney, construction worker, photographer, and small business owner.

### *Parents' Perspectives*

Four major themes emerged from data obtained from my interviews with the 20 parents. The first theme concerned disclosure, or whether parents should or should not inform the school that the family was undergoing a divorce. All the parents interviewed expressed views about whether or not to tell their child's classroom teacher and the school about the divorce. They also

gave reasons for their opinions. The second theme established that the parents saw the classroom teacher in a variety of roles including, but not limited to, a resource for their children's emotional needs. As the interviews progressed, the topic of counselors was introduced and a theme was identified from the parents' responses as to whether they saw the school counselor as a positive or negative resource for their children or for themselves. As a final consideration, I asked parents if they believed that school counselors obtained formal or specific training to deal with children of divorce, and if they, themselves, were comfortable discussing the topic with counselors. All 20 parents were unanimous in their responses. They indicated that they believed counselors are formally trained for divorce intervention and said they would be comfortable themselves talking with a school counselor. They also indicated they were equally comfortable having their children talk to a school counselor. Out of the data relating to counselors, a theme developed concerning suggestions from parents to give to counselors when working with parental divorce issues.

#### *Parents See the Need to Inform the School*

Of the 20 parents interviewed, 15 responded that they had informed their child's elementary school at the time they were going through the divorce. These 15 parents gave varying reasons for contacting the school.

*Help Child if Problems Arise.* Seven parents interviewed had not experienced problems with their children at school but did want the school to know in case something arose. They realized that divorce could be a stressful situation for a child. Barb was a young mother who had been married for only 18 months but who had lived with her ex-spouse for 11 years. She had two children. She spoke to me several times about her stressful situation and how hard it was to make ends meet financially. She spoke in a quiet voice as she said,

I decided to do that [inform the school] because I was made aware that it was a good idea to, um, inform the school about being in a stressful situation, such as being divorced, et

cetera. It's a good idea to let them know. She [daughter] also had a hard time adjusting that daddy wasn't there . . . mommy and daddy weren't together, and the big adjustment came when we had to move--mid-year.

Doris, a mother in her mid 30s and married for 14 years with 1 child in school, pointed out that she expected the school to inform her of any changes in her child's behavior when she said,

I wanted to let the school know, if there was any behavior changes in my son--my younger son--who's in school, so they could be aware, and let me know. So if there were any problems we'd do whatever needed to be done . . . to correct those problems.

Peggy was a teacher who appeared to be comfortable in her environment. When asked if she had informed the school, she spoke with a confident voice saying, "I talked to people at work because they helped me. And so, while I didn't actually inform them, I did talk to my principal and my assistant principal for moral support and I told my child's teacher."

*Parents looking for Help with Problems at Home.* Five parents were already experiencing problems at home with their children and went to the school seeking help. Pete was a bank employee who had been married for 10 years before divorcing. His wife had sole custody of their two children, but he still tried to stay involved in their lives. He said he wanted the school "to understand the degree of difficulties that I was experiencing."

Another parent who was already experiencing problems at home and had sought advice from her child's teacher was Dorothy. She was a nursing home worker who had been married for 10 years and had 2 children. She remarked of her frustration with her ex-spouse and his infrequent phone calls to their children. She stated, "My son was having difficulty and was crying during the day a lot. And I felt that his teacher should know what was going on."

One final example depicts a woman who had been married to an abusive husband for 10 years. Her name was Marie and she explained to me how she was planning a move in the near future and was excited about being 100's of miles away from her ex-husband and closer to her own family. She had sole responsibility for her children, and by court order they were not



allowed to see their father. She wanted me to know these things about her, so I would understand why she had spoken to her children's teachers. She stated,

I'm sure I talked to the teachers at the time, and told them, and I talked to \_\_\_\_\_, who was the counselor over there at the \_\_\_\_\_ Middle School. It was really the hardest on my son. And that's who. . . I talked to his teacher and the counselor over there. However, now it's affecting [daughter] big time.

I asked her if that was the only reason she spoke with the school, and her answer was, "Yeah, and his attention span was a little shot. He seemed a little disoriented, and I just figured I'd clue them in on that, but then I talked to the principal. . . ."

*Parents Involve School Because of Custody Issues.* Interestingly, three parents who were interviewed told the teacher only because of custody issues. Edna was 41 years old; she had been married 14 years and had 1 child. She worked for child protective services. When asked why she decided to inform her child's school about the divorce, she said,

At the time, at the school that he was attending at that time, there were, um, some extenuating circumstances. I had to file an order of protection. I felt that it was--I had him [son] with me, and we had left town for a few days. So, I felt it was necessary in that perspective.

As a final point, Betty who had been married only five years (but had lived with her ex-husband for seven years before they married) and had sole custody of their daughter remarked on the custody issues. She said she decided to tell the school,

to keep him [father] from picking her [daughter] up when I had full custody; to keep him . . . at the time of my divorce, it wasn't very nice, and I just wanted to make sure that he didn't come and take her when he wasn't supposed to.

### *Some Parents Did Not Need Support from School*

In contrast, five parents did not believe it was necessary to inform the school during the divorce. They gave short answers as to why they made this decision. Chuck was a lab technician who had been married for four years and had one child. He stated, "I didn't think it was necessary to explain to the teacher. If he wanted her to know he would tell her." Anna

came to the interview at the wrong time and seemed to be overwhelmed. She appeared unkempt, as if she had just gotten out of bed for the interview. Anna said she was a 23-year old mother with one child and had been married for 7 years. We spoke about unrelated things for several moments before I began the interview. When I asked if she informed the school when she was going through the divorce, I had to ask the question twice. Like Chuck, she gave a short answer, "Well, I just didn't think about it, and I just didn't think it was . . . it would matter."

### *Teachers as a Source of Emotional Support*

Each of the 20 parents interviewed gave suggestions for the school to consider when dealing with families that were experiencing divorce. These parents wanted help for their children, themselves, and resources from the counselor.

*Teachers as a Resource for Parents.* Five parents not only wanted the teacher to work with their children at school but also wanted the teachers to let them know of things that they, the parents, could do at home to help their child. Max was a 45 year-old father, a private investigator, who had 1 child in school. He shared joint custody with his wife and played an important part in his son's schooling. Max stated,

Well I don't think there's anything she could have done any more than what she has, and she's been wonderful. She's been very responsive and lets me know if there's been any kind of behavioral changes, and if there hasn't. Both his first and second grade teachers have just loved [son] to death.

Donald was a divorced father, a real estate broker, who had been married for seven years. He and his wife shared custody of their one child. He spoke with much confidence during our interview. When asked whether or not classroom teachers should or can help a child going through a parental divorce, he stated, "Just watch the child for any changes, school work, getting along with others etc., and inform the parent on what might be a way to help with the transition." Gina, an accounting clerk, was a 39-year-old divorced mother with 2 children. She and her

husband shared custody of the children. To the same question, Gina replied, “not really--just inform parents if they fall behind.”

*Teachers as a Resource for Students.* All 20 parents stated that if their child needed any emotional help in the classroom during the time of divorce that the classroom teacher should give it. The parents suggested that a classroom teacher should be someone who would listen to their child, show support for their child, and give a little extra love and understanding during this time.

When asked about ways that a classroom teacher might help a child whose parents were experiencing divorce, Barb spoke of how the teachers need to try and understand what the child needs by stating,

I think there are a lot more children nowadays that are having problems in the family; there are a lot of single parent families, and there's just a lot going on in society that the teachers are expected to do so much. I think that they need--we need funding for these teachers so that, at least in the second grade, they can have helpers to help them with these children that need the help. They're not able to do it all. And, um, I think the teachers do try to understand the children's--where they are emotionally. And, just to have that positive attitude, and that quiet voice, with that little pat on the shoulder, touch on the shoulder, and encouragement, is all that I could think of really to do to help them.

Dorothy spoke of the understanding that parents hope to get from teachers. She said she hoped that teachers would notice when children were upset and recognize their need for a little more attention. She added,

I expected that the teachers might be a little more understanding if they [children] were crying and being a little upset, or if their work wasn't what it had been; that the teacher would understand a little bit and maybe not be as hard on them.

### *Counselors are a Trained Resource for the School*

All schools in the study had access to a school counselor. The school counselor at each school had classroom guidance with each child during the year and was accessible to parents.

During the interview, I asked the parents to respond to whether they were comfortable talking to

the school counselor, whether or not the school counselor was formally trained to deal with divorce, and what suggestions they could provide to counselors to help the family. All 20 parents stated that counselors had formal training to help children of divorce. Each parent spoke well of the school counselor and spoke of the trust that he or she had in the counselor's ability to help a child going through a parental divorce. They also stated that they would be comfortable speaking to a school counselor and would use and let their children use suggestions made by the counselor. These comments made by parents led to the theme of the counselor as a trained resource.

Dorothy reaffirmed this by saying, "Absolutely. I feel that they are very experienced and very trained and understand what my children are going through. And they can help me understand what they are going through in school." Edna gave another illustration saying,

I guess kids want to be loyal to their parents, and that's somebody I think that they can probably feel comfortable with. Just letting go and saying what's on their minds. They can let them know that they're there, that they are there to listen if they want to talk, and that they are not going to run back to mom and dad and tell them what's being said. Unless it's just something, that you know, that needs to be told. But just somebody that they can talk to, if they need to spill their heart.

Peggy realized that both parents could pull a child to take sides and spoke of how a counselor is trained to help by saying,

I think the big thing is that lots of times when parents are going through a divorce, the child feels very pulled, so they don't want to talk to either parent. This is a person that's not involved at all at home, that they can be free to just say anything they want to say, and get out those hurt feelings.

Dorothy stated that the counselor's office was a safe place for children to go and reaffirmed the belief in the counselor's training by saying,

I think if they're just having a lot of trouble in the classroom that going to see the counselor can be a safe place to be upset and not to be embarrassed in front of their classmates. Particularly my son, he has days that he feels like he needs to cry and is so embarrassed in front of his friends, and going to the counselor's office and getting that out kind of helps.

Marie spoke slowly and expressed appreciation for the school in every reply she gave.

When asked whether school counselors were a trained resource for her child, she replied,

Definitely. I know [counselor] has helped, and now [counselor] has tremendously helped them deal with feelings they have and what not. They should do just what they are doing. Just being supportive, listening. With [daughter], there's just me, and there's a lack of family support, the counselor is like, her aunt or whatever, and she just feels comfortable telling her something that she might not want to tell me, and . . . same thing for [counselor], and she understands. She's been there with [daughter] and been through a divorce, been through stepchildren, you know, uh, half brothers and sisters and, uh, that alone is enough, they get to vent. They get to feel like it's okay to feel angry, it's okay to feel hurt, it's okay to, you know. You're not alone, because there's other children that are going through the same thing. Worse, or better, whatever. And, that makes them feel like they're not the only ones.

Anna responded when asked whether school counselors received specific or formal training in divorce by stating that the counselor could key in on specific issues. She responded,

Absolutely. And yes, they are trained. Uh, about the same way as a regular classroom teacher, only they could, just, uh, key in on stuff, and be more specific. And get into more personal details that the teacher really can't take the time to do. And they have more expertise on these things than a regular teacher does.

Finally, Peggy spoke very clearly about her belief in the school counselor when she said, "I trust the school counselor because I don't . . . I felt like she was a person that would not judge, and that her main concern was the happiness of my children."

### *Parents Talk About How Counselors Can Help*

As parents talked about the role of the counselor, they gave suggestions that they would like the counselor to know and understand when they are helping their children. Some of the suggestions included small groups of children meeting and doing activities with peers, individual counseling, parenting classes, and being a listener; some were to just keep doing what they were doing, but all were statements made with children in mind.

*Suggestions for Counselors.* Barb had suggestions for the counselor that included helping the child and the parents by being supportive and providing the parents with information that they might use at home. She said,

I think the counselor at the school should be aware that something is going on and that they should be supportive of that child and parents efforts, to try to motivate them to help

the child to do well in school and to deal with the situation. I think that it would be nice to, even for parents as well as the counselors and people at school, to maybe have some additional information on, you know, the few children that don't handle it well, and how can they help him. That would be good. I'm still looking for information on that.

Max told me that he had spoken to his child's counselor about how he would like her to help and made some suggestions. He spoke about the number of divorces that he sees today and his concern for children and how they would survive in relationships as adults. He stated,

If they met in a group--and I think [counselor] is doing that. I think that would be, so that kids don't feel like we're the only children that are out there with just a mom--with a mom and dad that are not living at home. When I hear the statistics on the news when I'm driving, it's scary . . . the likelihood of children that come from divorced parents, all the things that they get involved in, the almost hopelessness there is, for them to have a successful relationship in their lives.

Betty told me that it was very important for the counselor to listen to the child and if needed, the counselor, students, and parents should sit down together and work on how to help the child overcome his or her worries. She added,

If there's any major concerns, I think the counselor could go over it with the child, and even get in touch with the parents, and discuss it with the parents, and then possibly, if it's all right with the child, and the parents, everybody agrees--maybe come together and have discussions about it, so that the child feels like there's a third party that they can lean on.

Another very pleased parent was Marie. She had one child at the primary school and one child at the middle school, and she had worked with both counselors. She told me how she had relied on the counselor for help with her children. When I asked what more the counselor could do, she said,

Umm, just what [counselor] is doing. Just being supportive, listening. With [daughter], there's just me, and there's a lack of family support. [Counselor] is like, her aunt or whatever, and she feels comfortable telling the counselor something that she might not want to tell me. And same thing for [son's counselor]; she understands. She's been there with him and been through a divorce, been through step children, you know, half brothers and sisters and that alone is enough. They get to vent, they get to feel like it's okay to feel angry, it's okay to feel hurt, it's okay to . . . you're not alone because there's other children that are going through the same thing. Worse, or better, whatever. And, that makes them feel like they're not the only ones.

Finally, Anna told me that she would like for the counselor to be an outside person who could explain to her child that it was not her daughter's fault and no matter what had happened, she was loved. She said,

I think if my child had any problems with the divorce, I would just have the counselor try to help me out sometimes to help explain to my child that she is loved no matter what happens. And, explain to her that, um, no matter what happens, it wasn't her fault that there was a divorce.

### *Summary of Parents' Views*

Twenty parents, 14 mothers and 6 fathers, were interviewed for the study. Their ages ranged from 20 to 48 years. From interviews with these 20 parents, 4 themes emerged that were introduced and explained.

The first was the issue of informing the school. Fifteen of the 20 parents had informed the school at the time they were going through the divorce. Seven parents interviewed had not experienced problems with their children at school but did want the school to know in case something arose. Five parents were already experiencing problems at home with their children and went to the school seeking help. Three of the parents who were experiencing a divorce told the teacher because of custody issues. In contrast, five parents did not believe it was necessary to inform the school during the divorce.

The second theme that developed regarded whether the school, specifically the child's classroom teacher, should or should not become involved in students' reactions to the divorce. Five parents not only wanted the teacher to work with their children at school but also wanted the teachers to let them know of things that they, the parents, could do at home to help their child. All 20 parents stated that if their child needed any emotional help in the classroom during the time of divorce that the classroom teacher should give it.

The third theme to emerge was the belief by the parents that all school counselors had had specific or formal training to deal with children of divorce. Each parent indicated that he or

she would go to or send his or her child to the school counselor for help or advice. They also stated that they would be comfortable using a school counselor's recommendations.

The last theme discovered how each parent had suggestions that he or she would like counselors to know and understand when they were helping his or her children. These included small group sessions, individual counseling, parenting classes, and listening.

The next section includes teachers and their responses to the challenge of working with children of divorce.

### *Profile of Teachers*

During the study, I interviewed 20 elementary classroom teachers to obtain their perceptions and suggestions regarding the role the school plays when working with children of parental divorce. The teachers chosen were kindergarten through sixth grade teachers who had over five year's teaching experience, and who had experienced teaching at least one child of parental divorce. Six of the teachers had educational specialist degrees, 11 had master's degrees, and 3 had bachelor's degrees. Their teaching experience ranged from 6 to 32 years. Six teachers had 7 or fewer years of experience, 7 had between 11 and 20 years experience, and 6 had over 20 years teaching experience.

### *Teachers' Perspectives*

I began each interview by asking the teacher general questions about having children of divorce in his or her classroom. During the interview I asked questions such as, "Do you believe it is your responsibility or the counselors' responsibility to help children with divorce issues?" I also asked each one how he or she usually found out if there was a divorce happening at home. Through these general questions and the dialog that developed, I acquired information; the analysis revealed several themes. All teachers had an opinion about the fine-line that ran between their responsibility and the counselors' responsibility. Each teacher openly discussed



what interventions he or she found were the most useful in a divorce situation and voiced opinions about the importance and usefulness of the school counselor.

When all 20 teachers had finished their individual interviews, I looked at a major theme that ran through all interviews: Whose responsibility was it to deal with problems that children may experience because of parental divorce? Each teacher expressed a concern over the fact that he or she always saw a change in behavior, grades, or both during a parental divorce.

### *Teachers State that Divorce Intervention is Counselors' Responsibility*

Of the 20 classroom teachers interviewed, 8 indicated that it was the counselor's responsibility and not the classroom teachers to work with children who were experiencing problems related to their parents' divorce. All 8 teachers who indicated that intervention for children of parental divorce was the counselor's responsibility had fewer than 15 years classroom experience.

Ms. Jenkins had an Ed. S degree and 12 years experience as a classroom teacher. At the time of our interview, she was teaching kindergarten in a kindergarten through grade three school. She said, "My job as a classroom teacher is to teach, not to deal with a counseling issue." Mr. Carr had a master's degree and had taught for nine years in fourth grade. He sat quietly for a couple of minutes before saying, "The guidance counselor should help. That's really what I do, go to, and ask \_\_\_\_\_, the counselor what to do." Mr. Sauls had been teaching for six years and had a master's degree in elementary education. He gave another example of what the teachers' responsibility was when he said, "No, I'm an educator. Although I do believe that I am to meet the needs of my students that empower them to receive a free and appropriate education."

One final example of this belief is shown when Ms. Baker, a teacher with an Ed. S degree and 10 years classroom experience stated, "Overall it is the counselor's responsibility. Teachers already deal with so much besides divorced parents that we cannot do it all."

### *Teachers State that They are Responsible for Their Students' Emotional Needs*

Twelve teachers who were interviewed did indicate that it was their responsibility to work with the child, not only academically but also emotionally. Six of the teachers also had fewer than 15 years experience and the other 6 had more than 15 years experience. Although these teachers did indicate it was their responsibility, they also said they were comfortable speaking with and sending children to the counselor for extra help. Many of these teachers also mentioned that the counselors could provide them with resources if necessary.

Ms. Davis had been teaching for 21 years. She said she had seen much change in the last 20 years in families and with children's home life. She expressed her belief that teachers must be compassionate and caring and give extra affection to children who are upset by divorce. She stated,

I believe that you have to, you have to deal with it because that child is with you seven to eight hours a day, and they're going through it, so you have to be sensitive to their needs--because this child is usually devastated, and this is the only place they can get away, lots of times from all the problems at home. But it still affects them, and I think you have to have compassion, a special compassion for these children, to give them an extra hug, and extra love.

Ms. Ruff was a 2nd grade teacher who had been teaching for 10 years. She spoke about keeping her students safe and secure at school and when asked about why this was her responsibility, she echoed,

As a teacher I have to deal with them every day that I have that child. The counselor can help tremendously, but that child is my responsibility and anything that affects him or her will affect performance in the classroom.

### *Strategies Used by Classroom Teachers When Working With Children of Divorce*

Because all teachers interviewed had an opinion as to who should handle the child of divorce if problems arose, a theme emerged indicating that all teachers use some kind of strategy to help children of divorce if needed. Several suggestions were made by the teachers on the subject of interventions that worked in the classroom with children of divorce.

Ms. Ricks had a master's degree in elementary education and she had been teaching for 33 years. She told me she that this would be her last year teaching before she retired. She offered advice about talking with the child by saying,

Oh, just, you know, just saying I'll be here if you need to talk to me; we'll stay out during gym and you and I'll just go in the back and talk. Or, if you just need to go off to the bathroom and cry, you just say I need to go off by myself. Just let me know what you need. Um, sometimes it's just a hug. Lots of times it's just you saying I love you and I know there's problems, and I'm there if you need me.

As I continued my interview with Ms. Ricks, she again spoke of how to help and she told how different aged children needed different approaches by saying,

You just don't have time to do it during the regular classroom, and I feel like, that older children need to talk, while younger children would rather just have a hug. Sometimes they want to talk, but sometimes they don't know how to express themselves enough. And just being there and telling them you love them and giving them a hug. Children in fourth or fifth grade, they want to talk about it, they want to express themselves.

She also told me that all teachers must remember,

You have to give them [children of parental divorce] special, extra, attention. They just have to have that extra time and attention. Um, lots of times they know what they're doing, but they're so emotionally distraught that they just can't focus. Or concentrate. So, you kinda have to brag, bring 'em over to the side, pat 'em a little, and get 'em back on track, and, sometimes, you just have to give 'em time.

Ms. Black had a master's degree and had been a classroom teacher for 16 years. She stated that her responsibility was to help not only the child but also the parents and that both needed some of her time and empathy. She commented,

First, I sit down. I like to sit down with the parent, to find out what the family situation--how ugly did this get? Some interventions I've done with the kids--just try to spend some more quality time with them. And just talk to them. If they want to talk to me privately up at my desk, we do that. I had a child once in kindergarten, whose parents had not officially divorced yet, but they were separated, and we were drawing family trees at the beginning of the year. And he just drew all his little people on the tree, and then he took. . .with his black crayon, [and drew] this big black line down the center of the tree. I couldn't figure it out. I said what's that for? He and I hadn't really talked about divorce at all. And he said 'that's me with my mommy, and me with my daddy. He'd drawn himself on both sides of the tree, but the big black line, to him, was the divorce. He still had to be with mommy, he still had to be with daddy, but his tree was divided. That's pretty deep for a kindergartner, but he knew . . . to cut that tree in half.

Ms. Ruff had worked at a mental health facility in the county and said she had found her experience there to be very helpful in the classroom. She added to this subject by talking about the use of outside agencies and said,

I'm not sure there are specific interventions I use. I just try to be sensitive to the situation, talk individually to the child to make sure he or she is OK, and refer the child or parent to other services available if necessary.

Ms. White had taught for 14 years and had been a classroom teacher in 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades. She had a master's degree and she was currently working on her doctoral degree. She spoke of how a teacher's own experiences with divorce could be an asset for a child by saying,

Well, I've talked to them. Sometimes I would just invite them to lunch and that child and I would sit and have lunch together, and I would kinda share with them some of the feelings that I had when my parents were going through a divorce, and just kinda let them know that I understood. And I'd also just tell 'em if they were sad or needed a hug, that they were welcome to come up and talk to me at any time, and just basically let 'em know that I was there to listen to them, and help out.

Ms. Dobbs was a kindergarten teacher who had been teaching for only seven years, but she brought out some good ideas. She mentioned that the teacher must remember that he or she may need to send things from school to both parents' homes, and that not all children live with their mother or father. She pointed this out by saying,

I try to be conscious of the fact that all of the children in my class may not come from a traditional two-parent family and so in classroom discussions I don't always say 'Take this home and have your mom sign it.' I'll say, 'Somebody, an adult who lives with you, needs to sign this.'

### *Teachers Use School Counselors as a Resource for Children of Divorce*

Woven throughout all the interviews with classroom teachers was their impression of the school counselor as a resource for them to use for help with children of divorce. All teachers who were interviewed said they were comfortable talking with and sending children to speak with the counselor. They also, like the parents, stated that counselors were trained in divorce intervention. Ms. Arwood held an Ed.S degree and she had taught several different grades. She

was presently teaching kindergarten. She spoke of the counselor as a resource whom she used by saying,

I refer to the counselor, because my understanding is they have that time they set aside, during the week that's for divorced children, or something. But, I don't care at all to listen to the child, or talk to the child if that's just really on their mind at that time, and the counselor's busy, or I've got the time to do that.

Ms. Black related how she found using the counselor as a person to go to for classroom resources was the best idea. She stated,

I need the resources to be able to meet those needs, and even if there's just some little activity that I can be doing, to maybe break the ice with them, and make them feel safe with me, to talk about these issues. Five, six, seven, and eight year olds--that's a lot to shoulder when they're that young. So, I think the counselor should give resources to the classroom teacher as needed.

Ms. Ricks told me during the interview that it would be nice if school counselors could do small family counseling sessions involving the whole family, and Ms. Layman a teacher with 32 years classroom experience brought out in her interview that,

Sometimes, if the child doesn't seem to be helped by a simple comment here or there, or a small talking to, they need someone who's more trained. Then the guidance counselor should step in and meet with the child.

Ms. Albert had a master's degree and had been a classroom teacher for 25 years. She told me that she had attended an empathy training as an inservice and had learned a lot from this training. She did note that counselors were important to the well-being of the child and were important persons to turn to with a child or divorce issue by saying,

Counselors have had training and will not have the fear of saying or doing the wrong thing with little ones. This is a huge responsibility and a confidential matter and the counselor has a private place to speak with the child.

Ms. Dobbs stated that divorce intervention did fall on the teacher, but the counselor was someone who could help the child with one-on-one issues both individually or in a small group. She said,

I feel comfortable referring at anytime. I mean I think it should be something that they should be aware of. But as a classroom teacher that's with the child the whole school day, I feel like we can't just put that off on a counselor. But yes, if the child is definitely showing problems that the classroom teacher feels certain are stemming from the divorce,

then yes, I feel that it's time for the counselor to meet one-on-one with the child or in a small group or whatever, without singling the child out.

### *Summary of Teachers' Views*

This section contained the thoughts and suggestions of the 20 teachers who were interviewed. The teachers chosen were kindergarten through sixth grade teachers who had over five year's teaching experience, and who had experienced teaching at least one child of parental divorce. From these interviews three themes developed.

The first theme discussed was who should handle problems with children of divorce. Eight of the teachers interviewed indicated that it was the counselor's and not the classroom teachers' responsibility to deal with problems that might arise with children of divorce. Twelve teachers who were interviewed stated that it was their responsibility to work with the child not only academically but also emotionally.

The second theme to emerge when the findings were coded was that all teachers used some kind of strategy, if needed, to help children of divorce. Each teacher gave suggestions including giving the child extra time for work, spending time one-on-one with the child, giving extra hugs and words of encouragement, and referring to the counselor.

The last theme to develop was how teachers perceive the school counselor as a resource and when his or her expertise is best used. All teachers interviewed said they were comfortable talking with and sending children to speak with the counselor. They spoke of their understanding that counselors were trained to deal with divorce. Teachers stated that counselors were best used as a classroom resource, to give one-on-one attention to the child, and to provide children and parents with needed information about divorce.

The next section contains the counselors' beliefs and suggestions for working with children of parental divorce.

### *Profile of Counselors*

I interviewed the eight counselors who work at the schools selected for this study. Two of the counselors were male and six were female. It is required that counselors in the selected county have at least a master's degree and have some classroom teaching experience. Five of the counselors interviewed had educational specialist degrees and the other three had master's degrees. The counselors interviewed had between 8 and 19 years experience as counselors and 2 to 18 years classroom experience. In evaluating their responses, I did not find a difference in males and females, in years of experience as a counselor, or in education level attained.

### *Counselors' Perspectives*

After interviewing the parents, I was interested in speaking with the school counselors and addressing issues that the parents had spoken about. The first major theme that became apparent from the interviews was the formal training or lack thereof, which each counselor said he or she had had. When I spoke to each counselor about his or her job responsibilities, another theme emerged about why each counselor found divorce intervention was partly his or her responsibility. As I discussed and asked questions about why counselors felt this way, each one spoke of something that had been an obstacle that prevented him or her from accomplishing what he or she indicated was necessary when working with divorced children. Another theme developed out of this information. The last major theme that was developed as we spoke was how each counselor had interventions that he or she found were best for children of divorce.

### *Counselors' Training or Lack of Training*

I discussed with each counselor what kind of formal training he or she had that was used when working with children of parental divorce. The counselors indicated that they had gained some information during their careers that had contributed to their training when working with children of divorce. Although they spoke of some training through different counseling classes,

books, experience, and workshops, none of the eight counselors had had any specific or formal training in intervention for children of parental divorce.

*Received Training Through Master's Degree.* Five counselors indicated that while they had no formal training in intervention, general counseling skills were learned during their master's degree programs. Ms. Jones had 10 years of classroom teaching experience and was in her 10th year as a school counselor. She had an educational specialist degree in administration and supervision. She acknowledged her belief that there are many children in schools who need some kind of help with parental divorce. She was the counselor at a kindergarten through grade three school. When I asked about her training, she replied,

The coursework that I took in group dynamics when I was getting my master's in counseling helped. I've read several things on divorce. I've not taken any divorce workshops, per se, but I've taken grief and bereavement type workshops and I find that many of those strategies can apply to any type of separation. It's a mourning thing, either way.

Mr. Cox was a counselor at a fourth through seventh grade school. He had been a classroom teacher for three years and a school counselor for eight years. As I saw him coming down the hall to speak with me, I noticed children stopping to speak with him. He never hurried, but stopped and touched each one on the back as he smiled and answered their questions. When asked about his training he replied,

Probably mostly, more so in my counseling, going through my master's program, the courses, the things that I experienced there. I would consider that. And also just the experience of working with children who are going through parental divorce. With them and their parents—you know, experience helps a lot.

Another example of the lack of formal divorce training was heard when Ms. Litton was interviewed. She had an educational specialist degree in administration and supervision and had been a classroom teacher for 2 years and a school counselor for 10 years. Her answers were



short and to the point. Her only answer to the question about her training was, "I've had some training in my master's classes."

*Seminars and Workshops.* Two counselors said they had received most of their training on divorce issues in seminars and workshops. Ms. Brown spoke in a soft voice that was very pleasant to hear. Her response to the question about training was, "I can't say that I've ever had any real formal training to help. Most of my information has come, like from seminars, counselor discussion groups--not any real training--for this specific situation."

Another counselor who spoke of attending workshops for information was Ms. Roberts. She had been a classroom teacher for two years and a counselor for eight years. Ms. Roberts was the counselor at a small rural school within the county, where she had worked hard to make the very close-knit people accept a school counselor and feel comfortable speaking with her. When asked about her training, she said, "I don't really feel that I had any specific training. I went to several workshops and general stuff. But as far as a special class or special training focused, there weren't any."

*Educational Specialist Degree.* Although five counselors had their educational specialist degree, only one attributed her divorce training to it. Ms. McClure had been a classroom teacher for 9 years and was presently in her 19th year as a school counselor. She had an educational specialist degree in counseling. She had been at the same 4th through 6th grade school for the past 19 years and indicated she had a good rapport with each child. When asked about her training, she said,

Well the training that I got to help me the most was when I was working on my educational specialist degree. I took a class in child and family studies at U. T. And that is what has given me the most information that helped.

*Counselors Have a Responsibility to Help Children of Divorce*

All eight counselors indicated that counseling children of divorce was their responsibility, although each gave a different reason as to why it was their responsibility. Each counselor also indicated that the academic success of each student was an important reason to use intervention strategies with children of divorce if problems arose.

Ms. Brown stated that children needed to be able to concentrate in class and keep their mind on their schoolwork. She spoke of how it was everyone's responsibility to help by saying,

Well, I do, because I think it impacts the children as much as any other thing, maybe other than death in the family--but it certainly keeps them from being able to concentrate in class, and it's on their mind more than schoolwork, so yes, I do, I think it's also the responsibility of teachers and assistants--all of our responsibilities.

Ms. Jones in speaking of her role as a counselor said, "Oh yes. Anything that interferes with a child's being able to perform in the classroom, it's my job to help them--to find coping strategies for that."

Mr. Cox thought extensively about this question and had me pause the tape recorder for a couple of minutes so he could collect his thoughts. He wanted me to understand that divorce intervention was needed so children could get an education while in the classroom and keep their mind on academics. His response was,

Yes I do believe it's very appropriate in a school setting because it has a great deal of effect on their education. I've seen children who are excellent students, their grades are affected greatly and other things in school like their behavior has changed, so I do believe it's the guidance counselor's responsibility to deal with that within the school setting as much as he can.

Mr. Cox referred to this question later in the interview and discussed how a child needs someone to talk with, and even though the counselor has some parameters, he or she can still help. He said,

Well, I think sometimes there's a fine line. I think now as a school counselor that you in some way need to deal and at least let that child know that there's somebody there that they can talk with and that you can maybe get them in a group of kids that's gonna help them. There's a lot of times where I think the child also needs some ongoing outside help, because the school counselor just literally don't have the time for a long term type help that some of these children need and they have to be referred outside. But I think

that you need to be able to try to do as much as you can within the parameters that you have.”

Another example of a counselor who believed that intervention was needed to help the child reach academic success was found in Mr. Jeffords. He taught in the classroom for 18 years and had been a counselor for the last 14 years. When he conversed about his responsibility as a school counselor, he said,

From the standpoint when it is affecting the child and their school progress, when it affects them from the standpoint of them being able to not keep their mind on their studies or being able to function within themselves, if I can help them I feel like it's part of my responsibility to help them . . .Especially when it affects their grades and when it affects their relationship with other students in school and so forth, and their ability to deal and function properly, I believe that's part of my responsibility.

Because of his answer, I asked Mr. Jeffords if he was speaking only of the school setting, if the divorce was affecting them at school, was that the only time he would give his assistance. He responded,

If it's affecting them at school, that's my responsibility. Well, even if it's affecting them at home from some standpoint because when parents come and talk to me, about how their child is relating to them or not relating to them, talking with them or not talking with them, I take it, I can see it from that standpoint with a parent needing some help possibly in a function with that child when the child is not relating to the parent. If the parent puts forth the initiative, then I try to help them if I can.

### *Divorce Interventions Used by Counselors*

All eight counselors were very willing to share ideas and suggestions that they used when working with children of divorce. Ms. Brown commented that she always liked to go to the county counselor meetings to hear what other counselors were doing in their schools; sometimes she felt all alone in her school because her only contact with other counselors was at the monthly meetings. I asked Ms. Brown what interventions she was using as a school counselor when she worked with children of parental divorce. She said,

I have a book called *Child Support* that has...it's for small groups for children, and there is a section in there--or two sections, for children of divorce, one for ages, I think it's six to eight, and then nine and up. And I use activities from that. I also use the *Banana*

*Splits* program. There's a book called *Dinosaur's Divorce* that I use a lot because it's very explicit in explaining all the different legal terms and things like that to young children. We have several books in our library that I use. I just use a variety of materials, depending on . . . as long as it's just sadness, or whatever, that they're experiencing, or just not getting along in a new environment, then that's the kind of things I do. Then if it leads to a bigger behavioral problem, then we go into the behavior kinds of things. I do work with the parents, but usually they contact me. When the parents want help, it's usually they ask me to help their child, and then we kind of stay in contact periodically. If I hear of anything that the kids really need. And, sometimes our parents come, and they just want counseling.

Ms. Jones also expounded on the benefit of some initial one-on-one counseling and then the use of small groups. She told of the programs she had tried by saying,

. . . especially if the divorce is a recent one, or a separation, that seems to be the critical time--right afterwards--and I see it. Depending on the child, each child reacts differently. Initially a one-on-one visit, and then I have groups--small groups that meet from time to time on this topic and we do activities. I have a book, it's not *Banana Splits*, it's one called *Counseling Children of Divorce*, and it has different activities. But their greatest resource is helping each other.

Similar to Ms. Jones ideas, Ms. McClure, who had an educational specialist degree in counseling, also spoke of educating the parent. She referred to the use of one-on-one but continued by indicating that enlightening the parents and being a resource to them was very beneficial. She spoke of what she did by saying,

Well, I have done both individual counseling with them and in small groups. If the parents come in, the parents and I will talk about what research has shown negatively impacts the kids and what's important for the parents to continue to do, or to start doing that makes it easier on the kids.

Ms. McClure explained why she stated that working in small groups was important. It gave her the opportunity to work with more children at one time. She replied,

I think that overall the small groups are more effective because the kids have a chance to learn from each other, as well as from things that I might be able to help. It's also more effective, because I think it's a better use of my time. I'm not saying the same thing 10 times, they can be hearing it all at one time. Everyone in the small group can hear it.

Mr. Cox was very business-like when asked about the interventions that he used. He discussed the benefits of small groups and how through their use children were able to speak with other children who were having similar problems. He said,

First, some one-on-one sessions with them, to see what stage they are in. Then group activities and things to get them into realizing, depending upon the age, that they're not the only person experiencing something like this. You know, when they realize it's not their fault. So one-on-one and group type settings have both been very good and effective in their own way. I think with any child going through divorce, that at some time you're going to have to use both methods. Sometimes you have to talk with them before you get any ideas of what's really going on with them, but I think, group, particularly for younger children, is something that is very effective. They feel comfortable when they realize that there's somebody else like me who understands how I feel.

Mr. Jeffords, like the other counselors, seemed to understand the importance of helping children by using small group counseling. He also stated the need to educate the parents. He suggested,

I'll do one-on-one with that child. I'll let that child talk, discuss the situation. I will have small groups that I work with. There are divorce programs that we use in the small groups to help them to see that they are not the only ones in this situation. At times I will even have the child and the parents sit down together and we discuss the situation because the child has requested, because they can't seem to talk to the parents one-on-one because they're scared to talk to the parents, because they don't know what to say. And I sort of act as a liaison between the two, just letting them talk. And then ask questions. And I'll try to help them through it if I can.

Ms. Roberts referred back to her small community situation, and how she had had to work very hard to just be accepted into a community that was not sure an outsider like a counselor knew how to really help. She stated that small group and individual counseling were beneficial, she sometimes also used techniques of drawing and playing games. She stated,

In this situation where the community had not really adjusted to having counselors in the schools, it was a situation where I primarily did individual counseling and a little free work. They played games, or they would draw, or anything that would make them more comfortable. If they were feeling antsy and they needed to fidget a little bit, then maybe they would draw as they talked. But it was primarily discussion.

Ms. Litton gave a short answer to the question, but it still reflected what I had been hearing from the other counselors when she said, "Individual, small groups, that sort of thing. I think individual works the best." And Ms. Hunt seconded what Ms. Litton said by adding, "Individual and small groups, but I like the small groups because they don't feel so alone in the situation. They feel like there's other people going through this."

### *Challenges That Counselors Face*

After each counselor explained to me why he or she stated divorce intervention was his or her responsibility I pressed farther and asked each school counselor what had been the greatest obstacles that hindered his or her attempts to provide services to children in a divorce situation. Each counselor, except one voiced the same concern: time constraints.

#### *Time Constraints*

Ms. Jones spoke of how she spent so much time in the classroom that fitting divorce counseling into her schedule was hard. She said,

A great deal of my time is spent in the classroom, doing classroom guidance. And I feel that if I had more time to do small groups I could address the situation better. I could have more small groups. But now I'm restricted to, at the most, doing six or seven in a week. And it's really not enough for the high volume of divorce that I seem to be seeing.

Ms. McClure told of how cooperative her teachers were to work with and how they helped as much as possible but added that even with everyone working together, the demands made on her caused her to have to juggle her time. She responded,

My greatest obstacle is finding enough time for me to do it. Because of all the other demands and things the counselors have to juggle. I don't consider myself just an academic counselor, and so I don't have any problem with me dealing with them, because what the kids are going through has an impact on their academics and so their well-being. What I get so frustrated about is administration things being put on counselors that take away from my time to interact with the kids."

Mr. Cox spoke about the fact that he was saddened by what parents sometimes do to children during a divorce by pulling the child between the two parents and he saw the difficulty in that but also added that there was sometimes just not enough time to include everything. He sorrowfully said,

Sometimes in a counselor situation, just absolutely finding the time to do the things you need to do because you are responsible for so many other children. That sometimes that can be difficult, finding enough time to be able to do what you need to do.

Ms. Roberts spoke of time restraints and brought out another good point about the importance of time in the classroom and how important it was for children to be in the classroom and working on academics. She said,

I think time constraints, as far as time on task. They needed to be in class getting information that would help them pass objective tests, and so forth. And it would take the children away from the classroom. I always tried to talk to the classroom teacher about what they had observed as far as behaviors or anything that the student had said to them. So that we could focus in on how the child felt--whether they were feeling it was their fault or whether they were feeling that because their mom and dad were separating, they felt like they were put on the spot or something.”

### *Lack of Experience*

Mr. Jeffords was the only counselor who did not mention time constraints as a problem. He told me that he had never been divorced or had a family member divorce. He stated that because of this, he would never fully understand the problem no matter how much training he received. He gave an example of a great loss in his life and how he had grieved after it as an illustration of how children of divorce may sometimes react. He spoke from the heart as he said,

I personally feel like it's hard for you to try to help somebody through a situation of that nature when you have not been through it. It's like I've told people, back years ago, in fact it's been 21 years ago now, my oldest child died. He was 13 years old, and they...well I know how you feel. I said 'no you don't,' I said, 'Have you ever had a child laying in that casket over there?' No I haven't. I said, 'You don't know how I feel. You have sympathy, but you don't have empathy.' I've never been through a divorce, so I cannot empathize, I can sympathize with them, but I don't know what they're going through.

### *Summary of Counselors' Views*

Eight counselors in the selected county were interviewed to gain a perspective about the school's role in the intervention for children of parental divorce. Two of the counselors were male and six were female. Each counselor had a master's degree or above and had between 8 and 19 years experience. Four themes emerged from the findings.

The first theme that became apparent was the fact that no counselor stated that he or she had had any formal or specific training in intervention for children of parental divorce. They credited their knowledge to other classes and workshops that they had attended and their counseling experience.

All eight counselors stated that the counseling of children of divorce was their responsibility. They gave reasons that included working as a team with the classroom teacher and addressing anything that interfered with children's academic success.

Each counselor shared ideas and suggestions that he or she used when working with children of divorce. Some used books and programs that they had purchased; some used the small group or individual method. Other counselors indicated that parenting classes and providing classroom teachers with resources were effective.

Each school counselor expressed what had been his or her greatest obstacle that hindered attempts to provide services to children in a divorce situation. Every counselor except one voiced the same concern: time constraints. The only counselor who stated another problem spoke of lack of personal experience.

### *Postscript*

This chapter included the findings of the interviews with 20 parents, 20 classroom teachers, and 8 counselors. These interviews provided an in-depth look at what these people in their various positions stated the role of the school was when working with children of parental divorce. Although each person brought his or her own individual beliefs and ideas to the interviews, the researcher perceived that all who were interviewed had the child's best interest at heart. Chapter 5 summarizes these findings and presents the investigator's recommendations for practice and suggestions for further research on this topic.



## CHAPTER 5

### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### *Summary*

The subject of divorce and if and how it affects children is an issue of concern in society today. According to 1998 statistics reported in *Divorce Magazine.Com* (2001), 50% of first marriages end in divorce. This alone could affect over one million children of school age. Because of time spent there, the school becomes a likely place for the recognition and identification of problems that may arise from parental divorce, thus providing an appropriate setting for interventions to be conducted.

The purpose of the study was to determine how parents, teachers, and school counselors viewed the role of the school as a support system for children of divorce. The study also explored opinions about intervention and suggestions from divorced parents with children in one of the four schools selected for the study.

Participants used for the study were parents, classroom teachers, and school counselors who met certain criteria. The research consisted of a multisite study designed to gather qualitative data. Data were gathered using open-ended interviews. The information included demographic data and general responses to questions presented to participants. The data were arranged in manageable units and examined for themes.

Twenty divorced parents (14 mothers and 6 fathers) representing a broad socioeconomic range were selected. Parents interviewed for the study had been married from 1 to 20 years, and ranged in age from 20 to 48 years. The number of children in each household varied from one to six. Twenty teachers were selected from kindergarten through sixth grade in the four schools chosen for the study. Their teaching experience ranged from 6 to 32 years. The eight school

counselors who were chosen had both classroom and counseling experience. Their experience as counselors varied from 2 to 18 years.

### *Findings*

#### *Parents*

Interviewing the 20 parents led to the development of 4 major themes about the school and the role of the classroom teacher and school counselor as a support system for children of divorce. These themes consisted of the parents' opinions about disclosing information to the school, what role the parents saw the teacher playing to address emotional concerns, the counselor as a positive resource for children of divorce, and suggestions that parents believed would be useful to the school counselor.

Parents who were interviewed had definite opinions about whether or not to inform the school. Fifteen parents said they did inform the school when they went through a divorce; seven parents told the school so school personnel would know in case any problem arose. Five parents were already experiencing problems at home with their children and went to the school for help. Three parents informed the school because of custody issues. In contrast, five parents did not find it necessary to inform the school about the divorce.

Each of the 20 parents interviewed spoke about whether the classroom teacher should or should not become involved in his or her children's reaction to the divorce. Five parents not only wanted the teacher to work with their child but also wanted the teacher to help them, the parent, with interventions to use at home. All 20 parents indicated that if their child needed any emotional help in the classroom during the time of divorce that the classroom teacher should provide it. They expected the teacher to listen, show support, and give a little extra love and understanding during this time.

All 20 parents considered the counselor as a trained professional in the area of dealing with divorce. They acknowledged that they and their children would be comfortable speaking

with school counselors and would readily use their suggestions. The parents pointed out things they wanted school counselors to know and understand when they were helping their children. These included being supportive, providing the parent with information, initiating individual and small group counseling, showing concern while listening, and helping their children to understand what divorce was and that it was not their fault.

### *Teachers*

Interviewing the 20 teachers led to the development of 3 major themes about their role and the counselors' roles in intervention for children of parental divorce. These themes consisted of the teachers' responsibilities with children if problems arose that might be attributed to the divorce, what interventions they found most useful in the classroom, and the importance and usefulness of the school counselor.

Eight of the 20 teachers interviewed said they did not think it was their responsibility to deal with divorce issues. Each of the eight emphasized the importance of being a teacher of academics and not being a counselor. All 8 of these teachers had fewer than 15 years teaching experience.

Twelve teachers who were interviewed stated that it was their responsibility to work with the child not only academically but also emotionally. Six of these teachers also had fewer than 15 years experience and the other 6 had more than 15 years experience. Although they did indicate it was their responsibility, they also said they were comfortable speaking with and sending children to the counselor for extra help.

All 20 teachers stated they used strategies that they believed would best work with a child in their classroom. They made suggestions including referring immediately to the counselor, spending extra time with the student, giving extra time for class work and warnings about behavior, being there to comfort and give hugs, and telling students of their own experience with divorce.

All 20 teachers interviewed said that school counselors had specific training in intervention for children of parental divorce and they used them as needed as a resource. When asked why they used the counselor as a resource, they gave reasons including their belief that counselors have more time set aside for this purpose. Teachers also stated that they could use the counselor to obtain classroom resources, to give a child some time alone with one adult, to provide one-on-one and small group counseling, and to provide parents with educational materials.

### *Counselors*

Interviewing the eight counselors led to the development of four major themes about the role of the school and specifically the counselor's role in intervention for children of parental divorce. These themes consisted of the counselors' knowledge about support techniques for children of parental divorce, why they acknowledged that intervention was their responsibility, what their greatest obstacles were when trying to assist children of divorce, and the methods of intervention they found to be the most effective.

All eight counselors stated that they did not have specific or formal training in intervention for children of parental divorce. They indicated that they had gained knowledge and information through other avenues. Five of the counselors attributed their knowledge to classes that they took while earning their master's degree, although specific training in intervention techniques for children of parental divorce was not provided. Two counselors said they had received most of their training on divorce issues in seminars and workshops. Although five counselors had earned an educational specialist degree, only one cited that as the source of her training.

All eight counselors indicated they believed counseling children of divorce was their responsibility. All eight counselors said that treating the child's emotional needs bettered his or her chances for academic success. They also stated that providing coping skills to children,

being a safe and secure figure for the child, and helping the parents and teachers with resources was an important part of their job.

Seven of the eight counselors found time constraints as the biggest challenge in their job. They stated that more and more demands were put on them both with classroom guidance and administrative work and these demands hindered their attempts to assist children in a divorce situation. One counselor expressed the issue of time out of the classroom for the child as a concern. Only one counselor did not mention time constraints. This counselor said that because he had not personally experienced divorced, he could have sympathy for the child, but found it hard to empathize with the child.

#### *Postscript to Findings*

Before the interview, each parent, classroom teacher, and school counselor was aware that I was a school counselor. After the parent interview ended and the tape recorder was turned off, each parent sought to continue our personal conversation and indicated a desire to talk longer. None of the interviewees made negative remarks about professionals in the school setting, and each individual expressed concern for the child.

#### *Conclusions*

The interviews provided an indepth look at what parents, teachers, and counselors stated the role of the school was when working with children of parental divorce. Although each of the groups was considered separately, overall there were assumptions that existed across groups. The first commonality found for both parents and teachers was their perception that school counselors had received specific training in intervention for children of parental divorce. All eight of the school counselors stated that they had not had specific training in intervention for children of parental divorce, although they did believe it was their responsibility and they

credited their knowledge to classes and workshops that they had attended, and from their counseling experience. Additionally, parents, teachers, and school counselors as a whole agreed that school was a place that should provide emotional support, if needed, for children of divorce.

Results indicated that counselors have gained trust from parents and teachers through their positions and actions. This was woven throughout the study and recognized each time the parents and teachers indicated their confidence in the counselors' ability to help a child of parental divorce.

### *Recommendations for Practice*

The recommendations for parents, classroom teachers, and school counselors are the result of the insights of the parents, classroom teachers, and school counselors who participated in the study, and the researcher's thoughts in synthesizing those data.

#### *Parents*

1. Based on concerns expressed by the parents during the interviews about their own children, it is recommended that parents be given resources that will benefit their child's well being and help to educate them in their endeavors.
2. Children of divorce may experience anger and make unwise choices. This was indicated by comments made by parents who participated in this study and is consistent with the review of the literature. In order to educate children of divorce in anger management and problem solving skills, I recommend that parents seek out programs for children of divorce that are provided by the school and other community agencies, such as a family center or church.

3. The review of literature and findings from this study indicated an increasing awareness that many factors affecting children during a divorce are caused by their parents. The parent must become the change agent for the child and help the child through this transition period. I recommend that more programs be provided to help increase parenting skills. These should be provided through the school counselor, family life centers, and churches.
4. Because of the lack of knowledge about the school counselor's training and job description as indicated in this study, I recommend that parents attend conferences and stay in close contact with the school through the office, classroom teacher, or school counselor about available resources.
5. As was indicated by several parents who participated in this study, kidnapping of a child by the noncustodial parent can sometimes be a concern. I recommend that parents inform the school about custody matters. Parents should show the office and their child's classroom teacher legal documentation of sole custody and make sure the school is aware of who can and cannot pick up their child.

### *Teachers*

1. The findings of this study indicated that communication between home and school is important. Because of the importance of teacher-parent communication during a divorce, I recommend that teachers develop an information sheet that the parent can fill out when the child enters the class. This will provide information on the status of the family and with whom the child lives.

2. The review of literature and findings from this study illustrated the need for teachers to ensure effective information is in place with the parent. I recommend that each six weeks parent conferences be carried out at school and if the parent cannot attend, a note should be sent home or a phone call made to each parent. This will quickly ensure that the parent is made aware of any changes in the child's emotional, behavioral, or academic progress.
3. Findings substantiated that counselors do have interventions and support techniques to offer children of divorce. It is very important that the teacher is aware of what the counselor has to offer. I recommend that the teacher take time to speak with the counselor often and ask questions that he or she may have about services and resources.
4. Data from this study indicated teachers need to use art projects and writing or telling stories to allow the child to express his or her feelings. I recommend that classroom teachers use methods such as these in a classroom setting in order to become aware of the child's needs while also continuing the learning process.
5. Data from this study indicated that children going through a divorce sometimes feel lost and scared with all the changes in their lives. The classroom teacher must supply the support and consistency needed during this time of transition. I recommend that classroom teachers maintain a structured classroom for children of divorce where children are made aware of the rules, and techniques are used to make the child feel competent, needed, secure, and important.
6. The review of literature for this study indicated that children do their best after a divorce when they maintain contact with both parents. I recommend that teachers be aware of and make a considerable effort to try and involve both father and mother in the child's



school life when the custody agreement allows. Teachers can send newsletters and notices to both parents, use individual conference time to offer feedback, send duplicated copies of class work and report cards, and seek insights from them separately about a child's progress.

### *Counselors*

1. Each counselor who was interviewed spoke of a lack of formal training in intervention for children of parental divorce. I recommend that colleges consider these findings and offer more training for school counselors in intervention and support techniques at the undergraduate level.
2. The school counselor can provide valuable assistance directly through counseling with the children and indirectly through services to school administrators, teachers, and parents. I recommend that school counselors provide information to these people about techniques that may be helpful for the child in day-to-day activities at school.
3. When a child is experiencing divorce, teachers may need to change their choice of words, or adapt their curriculum and classroom resource materials to include various family types. I recommend that the school counselor conduct inservices pertaining to the effects of divorce on children, dealing with parents of divorce, and managing classroom behavior of the child of divorce.
4. Based on data from this study, it was determined that counselors can be a wealth of information for the parents. At a time when some parents feel overwhelmed and unsure of how to handle problems that arise with their children, I recommend that the counselor make parents aware of the special needs of their child during the divorce transition. This

can be accomplished by referring parents to divorce support groups in the community, by recommending reading materials that deal with families of divorce, by being a listening ear to the parent, and by suggesting ways that parents can help their children adjust to the divorce.

5. The results of studies show, and parents in this study confirmed, that having someone to talk with and express their feelings to without being judged helps children of divorce. I recommend that counselors use one-on-one counseling to help children who do not work well in groups, or who have long-term problems. The counselor can also read to the child or provide books for him or her to read about divorce.
6. It was noted during the review of the literature that children's groups on divorce, led by elementary school counselors with specific strategies to meet the needs of these children, are very successful (Robson, 1982). They also allow children to hear from their peers and help the counselor to assist more children at once when time is an issue. I recommend that counselors use divorce programs in a small group setting to be of benefit to the child of divorce.
7. Parents and teachers in the study had preconceived ideas and expectations of the school counselor. I recommend that the counselor prepare a short pamphlet or brochure containing their job description, services offered, and times available. This could be distributed to each teacher and to parents at the beginning of the school year.

### *School as a Whole*

The school is in an excellent position to offer supportive services to children of divorce. It has been shown in the study that parents, teachers, and counselors are aware of problems that

arise because of divorce and they have preconceived ideas about how the school handles these problems. I recommend that the school offer a safe and secure environment for children of parental divorce. Administrators, teachers, counselors, and other school personnel should make themselves available to help provide services and support for families experiencing divorce.

### *Recommendations for Further Research*

Research has shown that divorce affects school age children. This study confirmed that parents, teachers, and counselors are concerned about this issue. More research should be done to provide the school with intervention techniques that will be useful when working with children of divorce.

This study did not include the child's view about the school and its role of support during divorce. This study could be modified to include children's perspectives and how they might indicate the school could help them during this transition period.

The perception of how the school is viewed and what teachers, school counselors, and parents understand about one another is addressed throughout this study. These issues could be addressed further and include the opinion of administrators and other school personnel.

Research suggested that small group programs for children of divorce help to detect and prevent children's social, emotional, and school adjustment problems and may improve their behavior and academics. Research could be conducted to evaluate these findings and create valid intervention and support techniques to be used by the school.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A

#### Letter to Superintendent

Dear \_\_\_\_\_  
(Superintendent)

As part of the requirements toward completing the Doctor of Education degree at East Tennessee State University, I am planning to complete a study to determine how teachers, school counselors, and parents view the role of the school as a support system for children of divorce. This study will also include procedures used by these teachers and counselors to aid these children. This letter is to request your permission for the elementary and middle schools in Sevier County School system to participate in this study.

In my career as a school counselor and throughout my education, I have believed that schools must address the emotional needs of children in order to enhance their academic learning. I have also worked with teachers that have children in their classes that faced the issues of divorce. In schools today, 60% of our children will spend some part of their lives in a single-parent home. Over the past 10 years as a school counselor, I have worked with teachers and counselors who felt a responsibility for these children, and others who did not find this to be a prerequisite of their job. I hope that the results of this study will assist teachers and counselors in dealing with these children's needs.

Upon completion, I will be happy to share the results of my study with you.

If you have any further questions, do not hesitate to call me at ((XXX) XXX-XXXX

Sincerely,

Constance M. Cottongim

APPENDIX B

Letter to Principal

Dear \_\_\_\_\_  
(Principal)

As part of the requirements toward completing the Doctor of Education degree at East Tennessee State University, I am planning to complete a study to determine how teachers, counselors, and parents view the role of the school as a support system for children of divorce. This study will also include procedures used by these teachers and counselors to aid these children. This letter is to request your permission for the elementary and middle schools in Sevier County School system to participate in this study.

In my career as a school counselor and throughout my education I have believed that schools must address the emotional needs of children in order to enhance their academic learning. I have also worked with teachers that have children in their classes that face the problems of divorce. In schools today, 60% of our children will spend some part of their lives in a single-parent home. Over the past 10 years as a school counselor I have worked with teachers and counselors that felt a responsibility for these children, and others who did not find this to be a prerequisite of their job. Hopefully the results of this study will assist teachers and counselors in dealing with these children's needs, and cause higher education institutes to realize the need for more training to be provided in intervention techniques.

Upon completion, I will be happy to share the results of my study with you.

If you have any questions please feel free to contact me at (XXX-XXX-XXXX).

Sincerely,

APPENDIX C

**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**

**East Tennessee State University  
Veterans Affairs Medical Center**

**INFORMED CONSENT**

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Constance M. Cottongim

**TITLE OF PROJECT:** The School's Role as a Support System for Children of Parental Divorce

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of this study is to examine the views of teachers and school counselors concerning how schools assess their role as a support system for children of divorce. This study will also explore opinions about intervention techniques and suggestions from divorced parents with children in Sevier County schools.

**DURATION:** The interview that will be conducted with each parent, school counselor, and classroom teacher will take approximately 20 to 30 minutes. A second meeting for member checking, allowing you to judge the accuracy and completeness of statements made in the researcher's report, will require approximately 15 minutes of your time.

**PROCEDURES:** Data collected for this study will be gained by using a general interview guide. Open-ended questions will be asked of the participants. Although it is prepared to ensure that the same information is obtained from each person, there are no prearranged responses. The interview guide can be modified over time, if needed, to center attention on areas of particular importance, or to exclude questions the researcher has found to be fruitless for the goals of the research. The interviews will be tape recorded to allow the researcher to converse freely with participants and listen attentively to interview answers. A professional transcriptionist will transcribe audio tapes. Copies of transcribed data will be available upon request. You will have control over the audio tape recorder and may cease taping at any time. No participant's name will be used, but each interview will be coded with a number that is strictly to permit matching interviews into either teacher, counselor, or parent category. In no way will the identification number be used to determine participant identity.

**POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS:** Some of the questions asked during the interview may make you feel uncomfortable or may be difficult to answer. You are free to stop the interview

May 24, 2002

Subject Initials \_\_\_\_\_

without prejudice at any time, and may choose not to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS AND/OR COMPENSATION: No participant benefits or forms of compensation are included in this study.

CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS: If you have any questions or concerns, please **contact Constance Cottongim at XXX-XXX-XXXX or Dr. Russell Mays at XXX-XXX-XXX. You may also contact the Chairman of the Institutional Review Board at XXX-XXX-XXXX** for any questions you may have about your rights as a research participant.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Every attempt will be made to see that participants and interview information is kept confidential. A copy of the records from this study will be stored a locked file cabinet in the Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis Department in Warf-Pickel Hall for at least 10 years after the end of this research. Audio cassette tapes used for this study will be disposed of immediately following transcription. The results of this study may be published and/or presented without naming you as a participant. Although your rights and privacy will be maintained, the East Tennessee State University Institutional Review Board and the ETSU Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis have access to the study records. My records will be kept completely confidential according to current legal requirements. They will not be revealed unless required by law, or as noted above.

COMPENSATION FOR MEDICAL TREATMENT: East Tennessee State University (ETSU) will pay the cost of emergency first aid for any injury that may happen as a result of your being in this study. They will not pay for any other medical treatment. Claims against ETSU or any of its agents or employees may be submitted to the Tennessee Claims Commission. These claims will be settled to the extent allowable as provided under TCA Section 0-9-307. For more information about claims call the Chairman of the Institutional Review Board of ETSU at 423/439-6134.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION: The nature, demands, risks, and the benefits of the project have been explained to me as well as are known and available. I understand what my participation involves. Furthermore, I understand that I am free to ask questions and withdraw from the project at any time, without penalty. I have read, or have had read to me, and fully understand this consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A signed copy will be given to me upon request.

\_\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_  
SIGNATURE OF VOLUNTEER PARENT, SCHOOL  
COUNSELOR, OR CLASSROOM TEACHER

DATE

\_\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_  
SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR  
May 24, 2002

DATE

Subject Initials \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX D

### Guided Interview for Counselors

The guided interview for counselors will contain the following questions:

1. Demographic information:

How many years experience do you have?

What is your highest degree?

2. In most situations how do you discover that a divorce is happening in a child's family?
3. What specific training have you received to help you when working with children who are in a divorce situation?
4. Do you believe that divorce intervention is your responsibility as a school counselor, and why?
5. Do classroom teachers refer students who are experiencing parental divorce to you for counseling?
6. What interventions are you as a school counselor using when working with a child of parental divorce?
7. What have been the greatest obstacles that hinder your attempts to provide services to children in a divorce situation?
8. Should you as a school counselor be expected to deal with the issues of divorce, or should they be referred to other agencies, and why?
9. Should you as the school counselor be expected to deal with all parental divorce issues that children have, or should the classroom teacher be involved, and why?
10. In an ideal situation what do you believe the role of the school should be in assisting families experiencing divorce?

## APPENDIX E

### Guided Interview for Teachers

The guided interview for teachers will contain the following questions:

1. Demographic information:

How many years experience do you have?

What is your highest degree?

2. In most situations how do you discover that a divorce is happening in a child's family?
3. What specific training have you received to help you when working with children who are in a divorce situation?
4. Do you believe that divorce intervention is your responsibility as a classroom teacher, and why?
5. What interventions are you as a teacher using when working with a child of parental divorce?
6. What have been the greatest obstacles that hinder your attempts to provide services to children in a divorce situation?
7. Should you as a classroom teacher be expected to deal with the issues of divorce, or should they be referred to the counselor, and why?
8. In an ideal situation what do you believe the role of the school should be in assisting families experiencing divorce?

## APPENDIX F

### Guided Interview for Parents

The guided interview for parents will contain the following questions:

1. Demographic information:

How many years were you married before you divorced?

How many children do you have, and what are their ages?

What is your occupation?

What is your ex-spouse's occupation?

What are your and your ex-spouse's ages?

What is the highest grade you completed in school?

2. Did you inform the school when going through the divorce? Why or why not?
3. Is there a way that you believe the school could have helped you when going through the divorce?
4. Do you believe that classroom teachers should or can help a child going through a parental divorce?
5. In your opinion, what are some ways that a classroom teacher might help a child whose parents are experiencing divorce?
6. Do you believe that school counselors should or can help a child going through a parental divorce?
7. In your opinion, what are some ways that a school counselor might help a child whose parents are experiencing divorce?
8. Do you feel comfortable speaking with a school counselor about divorce issues? Why or why not?
9. In an ideal situation what do you believe the role of the school should be in assisting families experiencing divorce?

## APPENDIX G

### Auditor's Report

DATE: June 3, 2002  
TO: Connie Cottongim  
FROM: Debby Bryan  
SUBJECT: Dissertation Audit Report

Please accept this auditor's letter of attestation for inclusion in your doctoral dissertation. Using guidelines as set forth in Chapter 3 of your study, I am aware that auditing criteria are based on Halpern's procedures, as outlined in Appendix B of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Using also your specifications as outlined in Chapter 3, I submit the following:

In examining your audit trail, I found the data to be complete, comprehensive, and useful for the purpose of your study. Therefore, the auditability of the data is hereby, confirmed.

Discussion with the researcher and examination of procedural information took place throughout the study. I listened to the audiotaped recordings and compared them word-by-word to the written transcriptions. I examined raw data including field notes. No evidence of researcher bias was found. The findings are based solely on data collected and, are hereby, confirmed.

Dependability was established through research procedures applicable for a naturalistic study. The inquiry questions were reflected in the thoroughness and trustworthiness of procedures used throughout the study. I hereby confirm the dependability of the study.

The credibility of the research project was established through the confirmation of the use of data triangulation, including prolonged engagement with participants, relative documents, raw audiocassette recordings, field notes, and personal notes on the progression of researcher analyses. The credibility of the study is, hereby, confirmed.

Based on my personal observations from the beginning of the study and throughout progression of the auditing trail components, I attest that you have consistently maintained the highest possible standards, using professional ethics and integrity throughout your study. Thank you for allowing me to participate in your contribution to this body of knowledge.



VITA

CONSTANCE MYERS COTTONGIM

Personal Data:           Date of Birth: February 11, 1954  
                              Place of Birth: Sevierville, Tennessee  
                              Marital Status: Married

Education:                University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee;  
                                  Elementary Education, B.S.  
                                  1976

                              Lincoln Memorial University, Harrigate, Tennessee;  
                                  School Counseling and Guidance, M.Ed.,  
                                  1994

                              Lincoln Memorial University, Harrigate, Tennessee;  
                                  Administration and Supervision, Ed.S.,  
                                  1997

                              East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee;  
                                  Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, Ed. D.,  
                                  2002

Professional  
Experience:                Sevier County School System;  
                                  1<sup>st</sup> Grade Classroom Teacher, 1976-1979

                              Wilson County School System;  
                                  3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> Grade Classroom Teacher, 1986-1991

                              Sevier County Schools;  
                                  1<sup>st</sup> Grade Classroom Teacher, 1991-1992

                              Sevier County Schools;  
                                  School Counselor, 1992-2002

Honors and  
Awards:                    Tennessee Career Ladder I, 1990