uOttawa

L'Université canadienne
Canada's university

FACULTÉ DES ÉTUDES SUPÉRIEURES ET POSTOCTORALES

uOttawa

L'Université canadienne
Canada's university

FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSDOCTORAL STUDIES

Anne L. George

AUTEUR DE LA THÈSE / AUTHOR OF THESIS

M.A. (Education)

GRADE / DEGREE

Faculty of Education

FACULTÉ, ÉCOLE, DÉPARTEMENT / FACULTY, SCHOOL, DEPARTMENT

Dropping Out and In : Returning to High School in Rural Canada

TITRE DE LA THÈSE / TITLE OF THESIS

Cheryll Duquette

DIRECTEUR (DIRECTRICE) DE LA THÈSE / THESIS SUPERVISOR

CO-DIRECTEUR (CO-DIRECTRICE) DE LA THÈSE / THESIS CO-SUPERVISOR

EXAMINATEURS (EXAMINATRICES) DE LA THÈSE / THESIS EXAMINERS

R. LeBlanc

C. Morawski

Gary W. Slater

Le Doyen de la Faculté des études supérieures et postdoctorales / Dean of the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

# DROPPING OUT AND IN: RETURNING TO HIGH SCHOOL IN RURAL CANADA

Anne L. George

Thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research of the University of Ottawa in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in Education.

Library and Archives Canada

Published Heritage Branch

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque et Archives Canada

Direction du Patrimoine de l'édition

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

*Your file Votre référence*
*ISBN: 978-0-494-34070-7*
*Our file Notre référence*
*ISBN: 978-0-494-34070-7*

NOTICE:
The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

AVIS:
L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

---

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.

Canada

© Anne L. George, Ottawa, Canada, 2007

## Abstract

This qualitative study explored the personal and educational experiences of five adult education students who returned to high school in rural Ontario. Examining the voices of the rural adult education students led to a greater understanding of the meaning of dropping out and returning to high school. A framework for the participants' journey is presented using a lifecourse trajectory perspective. The findings and implications of this study suggest that rural adult students face unique challenges, and that a dialogue around existing policy and practices might strengthen the program even further.

*This has been a long journey, one I am glad to have taken.*
*Thank you Jerry and thank you Cheryll.*

Contents

# CHAPTER ONE

# INTRODUCTION

i thank you God for this most amazing day, for the leaping greenly spirits of trees, and for the blue dream of sky and for everything which is natural, which is infinite, which is yes.

- e.e. *cummings*

Amos Bronson Alcott, reformer, philosopher, writer, visionary, and teacher, considered "it the best part of an education to have been born and brought up in the country." Certainly, the air is fresh and the landscape is serene and peaceful, warm and welcoming. People are friendly and truly embrace the slower-paced lifestyle associated with the country way of life. But living in rural Canada also has its shortcomings. The travelling distances to access basic services, facilities and amenities can be inconvenient and costly to utilize. The economic realities associated with rural living are often coupled with tales of financial hardship and missed educational and professional opportunities. Many of my neighbours, for instance, did not complete high school. Rather, they chose to abandon their studies in favour of entering the workforce or raising a family. Some of them were unable to conform to the rigid structures of the rural high school and left to escape the demands that they perceived to be unrealistic. However, many of them have found their way back to high school, dropping back in, so to speak, to better themselves and their opportunities. And while their voices are seldom heard in the literature, either individually or collectively, their stories need to be told. This exploratory study of rural students is their testimony and I am their voice.

For decades, educators have struggled to reduce the dropout rate in Ontario schools. Recent studies in the Province show that the dropout rate remains at 25%; that is, 25% of our youth leave high school without their Ontario Secondary School Diploma (King, 2002). The implications of these high dropout rates are far-reaching, and lead to what Harvard professor Gary Orfield (2004) calls an "economic and social tragedy" (p.1). Dropping out paves the way to unemployment, poverty, imprisonment, poor physical and emotional health, and other significant social adversities (Orfield, 2004; Western, Schiraldi, & Zeidenberg, 2003).

Rural schools may experience even higher dropout rates (Hadre & Reeve, 2003; National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2001). The Ontario Ministry of Education (2005, p. 48) defines rural schools as:

*(i)* Schools located in small towns, villages and other populated places with less than 1,000 persons; or

*(ii)* Schools located in rural fringes of census metropolitan areas and census agglomerations that may contain estate lots, agricultural, undeveloped and non-developed lands; or

*(iii)* Schools located in agricultural lands, or remote and wilderness areas; or

*(iv)* Schools for which the second character of their postal code is zero.

The economic disadvantages of living in a rural area may create underprivileged communities where limited resources reduce the earning and spending power of a district. This, in turn, translates into fewer educational opportunities for students both at home and at school (Roscigno & Crowley, 2001). Museums, theatres, and other cultural attractions that enhance a student's educational experience are almost always located in large, urban locales, and are essentially inaccessible to many rural inhabitants. Furthermore, formal education may not achieve the same level of respect as other more traditional types of rural learning (e.g., farming, hunting), and the importance of academic success may not be reinforced at home. Conversely, there are positive elements to rural living. A closer relationship with the land affords many residents the opportunity to learn about their natural surroundings. Farming, forestry, and wildlife management provide constructive and positive opportunities for rural inhabitants.

However, the rural dropout, relatively ignored in the literature, continues to face numerous barriers to high school graduation (Paasch & Swaim, 1995). Surely these students are worthy of our attention, exploration, and advocacy efforts.

*Origins of Dropping Out*

The origins of the dropout problem are deeply rooted in the economical and societal shifts that essentially began with the advent of the industrialized society in the late 19th century. Prior to this period, few people attended high school, with the majority of children contributing to the family unit either directly, through wage-earning positions, or, indirectly, with the numerous chores associated with the family farm. After World War II, when returning soldiers essentially removed job opportunities from young adults (both male and female), the economy was once again shifting to the post-war era, and the plight of the adolescent came to the fore. The conclusion of many studies, which sound amazingly current, were that "the problems of young people in connection with school leaving are many and varied and are inextricably interwoven with their own personal needs, with existing educational programs, and with opportunities in the employment field" (Johnson & Legg, 1948). By the early 1960s, graduating from high school had become the norm, and a growing body of research began to investigate the causes of leaving school early. It was during this period that the term "dropout" became widespread, and the age-old debate as to the purpose of schools (e.g., enlighten or prepare for workforce) raged. Thankfully, Canada's dropout rate has been on a steady decline since the 1950s, when over half of the adult population did not graduate from high school (HRDSC, 2000). Current studies reveal that the majority (roughly 40%) of men and women cite school-related reasons for leaving school (HRDSC, 2000). In addition, women are much more likely to report personal or family reasons, primarily pregnancy

and marriage (28% versus 10% for males) for their leaving school early, and men are much more likely to report work-related reasons (38% versus 15% for females) for their departure. The data strongly suggests that males and females disengage for different reasons, yet both groups appear to be too overwhelmed with outside responsibilities, including work and family, to be successful in school. The economic and social costs associated with dropping out are extensive and can deeply damage a community (HRDSC, 2000; Orfield, 2004; Western et al., 2003).

*Concluding Remarks*

In conclusion, while the dropout rate remains relatively high (it hovers around 25%, depending on the source), Ontario boasts one of the lowest dropout rates in Canada. It has been declining steadily since the 1950s. A renewed interest in the plight of the adolescent, disengaged learner has been the impetus for further research and educational reform. Most recent Ministry reports cite the need to foster a culture of inquiry to empower teachers to affect the meaningful changes that need to take place to improve student achievement. This research project, conducted in an Adult Education Program in rural Eastern Ontario, is such an inquiry. It chronicles the lives of five adult students who have returned to high school to complete their secondary education. After reviewing their personal histories, the reader will have a strong sense of the successes, failures, frustration, anger, resentment, and apathy experienced by the participants prior to their untimely departure. The dysfunction of the period following their exit is vividly portrayed, and the stories of their return are equally poignant.

# CHAPTER TWO

# REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

I'd rather wake up in the middle of nowhere than in any city on earth.
- Steve McQueen

In the following review of the literature, relevant information regarding the high school dropout and their subsequent re-entry into school as an adult learner is synthesized and presented. To begin with, four significant themes for the disengagement of children and youth at-risk are presented within the context of (a) demographic, social and academic factors (e.g., identified risk factors), (b) intervention programs and strategies, (c) school policies and structures that inhibit, rather than encourage the at-risk student, and (d) poor classroom climate. Secondly, the characteristics of the adult secondary education student will be explored. Thirdly, an analysis of any apparent gaps in the research is examined within the context of the rural dropout. Finally, the purpose of the study, along with the research questions at the heart of this investigation, are presented. The major studies cited in this review are summarized in Appendix K.

The term *dropout,* although somewhat acrid, has been accepted by educators, researchers, as well as the general public to describe someone without a high school diploma. Despite its universal and immediate recognition, the origin of the word is relatively recent. It came into use during the post-World War II era, along with increased concern over early-departure from high school. As the expectation for graduation became the norm, a need for a new "language" to describe this norm emerged (Dorn, 1993). While other meanings for the term *dropout* have crept in and out of the English language (e.g., Timothy Leary and the counter-culture of the 1960s), its use continues to be associated with high school non-graduates.

*Identified Risk Factors*

Early research efforts were primarily concerned with the identification of students at-risk; they sought to isolate a set of risk factors associated with dropping out of school. Friesen (1967) administered a survey questionnaire to 2,425 students in Canadian high

schools, and found that most potential dropouts (students who would leave if they could) were not achieving as well as their peers and were disinterested in school, preferring instead to orient themselves to activities outside of school. Friesen also found that parental and teacher influence was weaker for both male and female potential dropouts, and that these students were less likely to attend church, less likely to participate in extra-curricular activities, and more likely to engage in risky behaviours (i.e., smoking, drinking, cheating, stealing). Fitzsimmons, Cheever, Leonard and Macunovich (1969) sought to reveal certain patterns of performance in elementary school that might discourage or encourage the at-risk learner. Results showed clearly that three out of four high school failures demonstrated poor performance by the fourth grade. On the other hand, Williams and Pickens (1967) scrutinized the high school records of schools in West Georgia and concluded that the major contributing factors leading to dropping out for both Caucasians and African Americans were the lure of employment, disinterest in school, and marriage. Interestingly, academic ability was not determined to be a significant factor in the decision to drop out. However, the authors did identify local community influences, such as ambivalent or negative attitudes towards education, as a deciding factor. Cardon and Zurick (1967) were interested in the personal characteristics of high ability dropouts. Their findings suggest that dropout males (of high ability) were much more assertive, independent, rebellious, and uninhibited than male persisters. Similarly, the female dropouts of high ability were also sociable, adventuresome, and happy-go-lucky.

Historically speaking, each study built upon the last, so that today, "schools can predict with better than 80% accuracy, students in the third grade who will later drop out of school" (Barr & Parrett, 1995, p.9). Research over the past decade or so has

established several risk factors which include, but are not excluded to, low socio-economic background, low academic achievement, low participation in extra-curricular activities, personal pain, family instability, single-parent families, student mobility, pregnancy, substance abuse, belonging to a minority group, and the presence of a disability (Battin-Pearson, Newcomb, Abbott, Hill, Catalano, Hawkins, 2000; Bracey, 1989; Dunn, Chambers & Rabren, 2004; Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992; Frymier, 1992; Frymier, Barber, Denton, Johnson-Lewis & Robertson, 1992; Natriello, Pallas & Alexander, 1989; Nunn & Parish, 1992; Pallas, Natriello & McDill, 1989; Patterson, DeBaryshe & Ramsey, 1989; Randolph, Fraser & Orthner, 2004).

Results of more recent longitudinal studies strongly suggest that in most cases, dropping out is a developmental process that begins before children enter school, highlighting the need for early intervention and prevention programs (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Entwisle, Alexander & Olson, 2004; Garnier, Stein, & Jacobs, 1997; Jimerson, Anderson & Whipple, 2002; Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe & Carlson, 2000; McClelland, Morrison & Holmes, 2000, Tinto, 1988). Jimerson et al. (2000) examined the data from a 19-year longitudinal study of 177 children and their families. Unlike previous studies that relied on data from elementary and secondary cohorts, the developmental features of children prior to elementary school were examined. Results demonstrated an association with the factors listed in the previous paragraph, but also identified early home experiences to be as important an influence as IQ and school achievement scores when making predictions.

Students at-risk for dropping out come from varied backgrounds and situations. One myth that continues to pervade the school system is that such students represent a homogeneous group. Some educators and policy makers ascribe a set of narrow

characteristics to this group, ignoring the evidence that students drop out of school for different reasons, and that individual situations differ from one student to the next (Davis, 1995). Davis challenged several myths and misconceptions, including the myth that the number of dropouts is exaggerated, that we are unable to define "at-risk," that school-based intervention programs are effective without community/family involvement, that raising academic standards benefits all students, and, that schools should stay at an arm's length when considering mental health services. Davis acknowledged that school systems are more aware of the need for comprehensive collaborative efforts to serve these students, and cautions schools to expand their role and responsibility from one that is primarily academic, to one more holistic in its vision, or otherwise face the consequences of increased numbers of at-risk students.

Other studies that identified risk factors for dropping out were reviewed by McCaul (1989). He recognized the gap in research literature pertaining to the rural dropout, and completed a comprehensive analysis of the data gathered from the High School and Beyond (HS&B) survey, in which over 30,000 American sophomores participated. Results indicated that rural students were more likely to drop out due to marriage, pregnancy, job opportunities, disability or illness, or because they could not get along with their teachers. Interestingly, a 2003 study of motivational intentions of rural youth also noted a difference in rural versus urban youth in the area of teacher support on student's perceived competence (Hardre & Reeve, 2003). The authors are intrigued by the possibility that "rural students' academic motivation may be relatively more embedded in the quality of their teacher's motivating styles" (p. 354). The final report for the Ministry of Education's 2005 study, entitled *Early School Leavers: Understanding the Lived Reality of Student Disengagement from Secondary School*, also identified that

teachers and administrators play an important role in the lives of rural youths. The authors posit that because youth culture is so unique in rural areas, and that the school takes centre stage in providing a "healthy space" for young people, "the actions and care of school personnel are experienced deeply"(p. 28). Just as their reasons for dropping out vary, so are some predictors more ubiquitous than others (e.g., low SES, visible minority). Schools, however, must refrain from adopting universal programs that fail to address the specific needs and distinct situations of our youth (Davis, 1995).

Regardless of individual circumstances, the literature suggests that many of these students do share one common connection: they feel emotionally disengaged from school, so much so that leaving truly seems the only option available to them (Damico & Roth, 1994; Gallagher, 2002; Peart & Campbell, 1999). Carole Gallagher (2002), in her phenomenological study of four early leavers, revealed that many dropouts believed that they were removing themselves from a dysfunctional situation and entering into a new setting where they had more control. The participants felt overwhelmed by their learning environment, and these feelings were exacerbated by personal problems. A particularly insulting practice that emerged was that each dropout was required to "sign a document stating that they understood they were voluntarily relinquishing the privileges of being a student, and henceforth would be prosecuted as trespassers if caught on school grounds" (p. 43-44). Learned hopelessness and self-defeating behaviours were also problematic for the participants.

In summary, the literature has identified several risk factors that place students at risk for dropping out. The most powerful predictors over time (in order of influence) appear to be grade retention, academic achievement, personal commitment to school, SES of the family, and parent's level of education (Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice &

Tremblay, 1997). Poverty, family instability, low academic achievement, personal loss and pain—many of these risk factors (and others) combine in complex and dynamic ways, leaving some students emotionally isolated, marginalized and ultimately unwelcome in mainstream school culture.

*Intervention Policies and Programs*

Numerous studies have explored intervention strategies, with mixed results. During the post-war era, Camp (1967) completed an early revolutionary study of a classroom program for potential dropouts. The program's features included an empathetic teacher intent on providing a supportive classroom climate, vocational inquiries, field trips, frequent discussion of goals and aspirations, less formal evaluative methods, and a small class size (N=18). Results yielded significant differences in 11/27 categories between the experimental and control groups. Analysis of these differences indicated positive changes for the experimental group. A four-year follow-up, however, did not reveal significant differences in their feelings about school, learning, and their suggestions for change in the curriculum. Both groups voiced a need for schools to become more flexible to meet the needs of the at-risk learner, a sentiment echoed by virtually all intervention studies today.

In an effort to understand early school-leavers, Janosz (1994), in his dissertation and in later publications (see Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice & Tremblay, 2000), divided dropouts into four categories. Roughly translated from French, the categories include:

(i) *the maladjusted* (les inadaptés), roughly 40% of dropouts. Individuals who are low achievers, have behaviour problems, are delinquent, and experience a disadvantaged home life;

(ii) *the low-achievers* (les sous-performants), roughly 10% of dropouts. Individuals who have poor grades, but no behaviour difficulties;

(iii) *the disengaged* (les désengagés), roughly 10% of dropouts. Individuals who achieve average results, do not have behaviour difficulties, but who nevertheless dislike school and feel disengaged; and,

(iv) *the quiets* (les discrets), roughly 40% of dropouts. Individuals who have similar characteristics of graduates, enjoy school, but whose academic profile is less stellar and who have less favourable SES.

Janosz was concerned with creating an inventory of powerful predictors that would assist schools in identifying potential dropouts. These predictors included family, behavioural, school, social and character-related variables. Collecting such data from students, in the form of a questionnaire, would assist schools in targeting appropriate intervention strategies responding to the four categories of dropouts listed above. Additional longitudinal studies by Janosz and his colleagues have demonstrated that these predictors are relatively stable over time (Janosz et al, 1997), with school experience variables (e.g., retention, academics, commitment) being the most important predictor in the screening questionnaire.

Fortin was also interested in categorizing dropouts to assist educators in choosing appropriate intervention strategies. A long-term study of 800 adolescents between the ages of 12 and 13 identified 39% to be at risk of dropping out, based on his screening results (Fortin, Marcotte, Royer, & Potvin, 1999). Fortin and his colleagues classified these 317 potential dropouts into groups: *délinquance cachée* or unnoticed delinquents; *peu intéressé* or disinterested students; *troubles du comportement* or students with behavioural difficulties; and *dépressifs* or students with emotional disorders including

depression. Three dimensions of each of these groups emerged based on personal, familial, or classroom climate variables. By considering the unique characteristics of each at-risk student, Fortin et al (1997) recommended appropriate interventions and suitable policies to address his or her situation. Unfortunately, neither Fortin nor Janosz publish extensively in English-language journals, and my ability to accurately translate their work is limited. However, their ideas continue to be of great interest to me.

Current intervention programs usually include an academic and social skills component, with an emphasis on the school-to-work transition. Thurstson (2002) analyzed a cooperative life skills program for 114 at-risk rural youth between the ages of 14 and 21, a population with unique needs given the limited resources and difficulties involved in collaborating services in rural areas. The participants made positive gains in the areas of life management concepts, self-esteem, and social skills, and generalized these skills in other settings. Thurston advocated strong partnerships with noneducation agencies as an effective pathway to address the needs of at-risk rural youth. The results of the 30-hour lifeskills program were promising, however, long-term sustainability of the gains made were unknown and in need of further study.

Many intervention strategies are school-based, and include a mental health component (Chapman & Sawyer, 2001; Nafpaktitis & Perlmutter, 1998; Schofield & Rogers, 2004; Weissberg, Shriver, Bose & DeFalco, 1997). Indeed, adolescents who drop out often exhibit social skills deficits, which can lead to emotional and behavioural difficulties as well as a dysfunctional sense of self (Kuperminc & Allen, 2000; Lane, 1999; Nunn & Parish, 1992). Schofield and Rogers (2004) described an innovative and highly successful youth literacy program in British Columbia where students created multi-media projects reflecting their personal experiences. The program accepted

students (mostly boys) between 15 and 19 who were identified as "at-risk" by their administrator. The students faced numerous personal challenges, yet appeared to thrive in this learning environment. The curriculum was enhanced by materials that were of high interest (e.g., gothic, cars, music, food, tattooing, etc.) and students engaged in multiliteracy activities that reflected their personal identities. The use of multimedia projects encouraged students to use their own "cultural resources and to explore their own uses of literacy and media in new ways"(p. 245). The curriculum was infused with popular culture, and students were introduced to multiple literacies during the construction of their personal narratives. This approach provided many youth with a positive school experience, enabling them to persist and complete their studies.

However, not all intervention strategies are successful. Evans, Axelrod and Sapia (2000) were highly critical of psychotherapeutic programs, identifying two key weaknesses: the failure of treatment gains to attain generalizability, and the lack of individualization (i.e., programs ignore specific deficits, choosing rather to adopt a one-size-fits-all approach). Bullis, Walker and Sprague (2001) carried this point further in their comprehensive review of the social skills knowledge base, suggesting that many difficulties lay in the identification of social skills deficits, and the lack of proper tools needed to assess these deficits. The authors were critical of universal interventions that were designed for use with a broad group of students. Furthermore, they argued that the length and intensity of instruction was inadequate, and that the fidelity of implementation was questionable (Bullis et al., 2001). The authors offered numerous recommendations to address these shortcomings, with careful consideration to the shifting individual and long-term needs of their at-risk clientele. At the elementary level, the authors posited, interventions should be embedded in the curriculum, and should be connected to home.

Early intervention is key—one study cited in the review reported that children who receive full intervention programs in grade one are 20% less likely to commit violent acts and of 35% less likely to engage in risky behaviour (Hawkins, Catalano, Kosterman, Abbott & Hill, 1999). During middle school, Bullis et al. (2001) believe that intervention should be universal (this avoids stigma), and should focus on changing the ecology of the school. Finally, at the secondary level, where school-to-work is the primary foci for at-risk students, the social skills curriculum should connect to real-life social interactions that are job related. The authors concluded this thorough review of the literature by acknowledging that they did not have a "formula for the precise combination of components" (p. 82) to address issues of adequate intensity and duration. However, they identified a continued need to examine long-term efficacy of social skills training, and to consider the needs of students across the panels.

Another interesting intervention or program, described by McCaul (1989) concerned pregnant mothers. On average, 12% of young women cited pregnancy as their reason for leaving school (McCaul, 1989). In a unique study of a program for teenage mothers (N=39) Rauch-Elnekave (1994) questioned the assumption that their pregnancies were unintended. Rather, the author suggested that pregnancy might be a pathway (in the girls' view) to success in another domain (e.g., motherhood). As proof of his proposition, Rauch-Elnekave pointed out that the girls for whom the California Achievement Test scores were available (N=39), the majority (56%) tested one or more years below grade level in Total Reading. Total Language and Math scores were also weak (51% and 36% respectively), yet only two of the 39 girls had undergone a psycho-educational assessment to investigate their poor academic showing. When asked how they felt about their pregnancies, fewer than half reported negative reactions (43%). Furthermore, no

evidence of impaired self-esteem was found among the girls. The author speculated that parenthood represented a positive option for many, and provided them with opportunities for success that may have been unavailable to them at school (Rauch-Elnekave, 1994). Furthermore, more recent research contended that, for the female dropout (the majority, 53%, of whom achieved passing grades), successful social integration appeared to strongly influence their decision to complete high school (McWilliams, Everett, & Bass, 2000).

Over the years, several governmental, organizational, and special labour market initiatives have sought to address the at-risk and dropout problem (e.g., Stay in School, Canadian Rotary Stay-in-School Initiative, Canadian Association of Principals Stay-in-School Programs, Council for Exceptional Children Stay in School Initiatives, Cities in School, Later Literacy, Power to Change). Most recently, Ontario's Ministry of Education has created Program Pathways, a three-year initiative that will ostensibly "enable students considered to be at risk to achieve success and meet their education and career goals" (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 7). Unfortunately, Program Pathways fails to promote a social-emotional component within its framework, despite the mountain of research that associates poor social skills and emotional disengagement with dropping out. This glaring omission is seemingly lost in the range of supports that consider local labour markets and academic/vocational skills. A more recent qualitative study prepared by outside agencies yet endorsed and funded by the Ministry of Education, entitled *Early School Leavers (2005),* recommended, among other things, that schools become more proactive when youth begin to disengage from school (p. 46). Sufficient and appropriate interventions and supports are the key to re-engaging these young people. This year, the Ministry has responded to the continued crisis by launching *Six Ways: Transforming*

*High School in Ontario*—six programs to give high school students additional means of accumulating credits. The *Six Ways* include:

(i) the creation of student success teams in every high school for schools and districts to keep youth engaged and in school;

(ii) an expanded co-op credit program;

(iii) the creation of a specialist high skills major, where students take career-related courses to prepare them for training;

(iv) a dual credit program where high school credits are recognized at post-secondary institutions or apprenticeship programs;

(v) lighthouse projects that provide students with an alternative learning environment and locally developed programs; and

(vi) a newly launched transition plan for students in grades eight and nine.

The Six Ways are an essential component of the Student Success Initiative. They provide Ontario students with more options to gain the credits they need to graduate. Students are able to tailor their course load to suit their individual goals.

In summary, numerous studies have explored intervention strategies. Early studies introduced the notion of schools needing to become more flexible. Current programs should focus on both an academic and social-emotional component, and emphasize real-life applications, including school-to-work transitions. However, not all programs are effective because they may lack intensity, individualization, and/or generalizability (Bullis et al., 2001).

*School Policies and Structures*

Although many articles exist on educational reform and school restructuring, few truly go beyond the administrative level—the need for a thorough examination of the

barriers to student success is surely warranted. True reformers need to ask themselves, *What structures within my school inhibit the success of students at-risk?* Once the link between achievement and structures is explored, and the scope of the problem is revealed and honestly acknowledged, only then will schools accept, and perhaps welcome, the responsibility of creating a new vision that encompasses the strengths and needs of all students.

A review of research conducted in the 1950s and 1960s reveals little evidence of a discernible effort to investigate school structures as a possible item for reform. The prevailing attitude was that if the student could not conform to the existing school structures and programs, then the student would have to leave. One study of pregnant teens (Birdwhistell & Beard, 1971) underscored the negative consequences of the "known-or-shows" dismissal policy prevalent during this period. Many of the young mothers-to-be received no pre-natal care, and faced considerable barriers (e.g., lengthy application process) when and if they were able to return. Camp's program for potential dropouts (1967), highlighted earlier in this thesis, did appear to yield positive results. Yet programs such as these were far and few between. Hugh Livingston, in January 1958, offered what was then considered to be very unconventional remarks about the dropout:

> It should also be remembered that some pupils may react negatively to the school. It is quite likely that some parts of the school program may actually contribute to the dropout problem even in cases where the pupil's ability and educational aspirations are high. To the extent that these pupils are capable, the school may be responsible for contributing to the serious waste of human resources (p. 4).

Schools have certainly come a long way in accepting some of the blame for the dropout problem, however, short-sighted policies and funding decisions (e.g., the elimination of

technical/industrial arts classes for middle school students during the 1990s and more recent cutbacks to adult education programs) continue to haunt the school system and beyond.

Several studies have identified problematic structures that disaffect students at risk (Baker & Sansone, 1990; Bowman, 1994; Campbell-Whatley, Obiakor, Algozzine, 1997; Rutter and Margelofsky, 1997; Safran & Oswald, 2003). The literature suggests that it is a combination of factors that is alienating our youth today, creating an uninviting environment intent on pushing them out. Rutter and Margelofsky (1997) in a mixed methodology design used both qualitative and quantitative data to investigate the effects of large group instruction and long inflexible school days with youth at-risk. More than a third of the students surveyed identified large group instruction as problematic for them, hindering their academic performance. Behaving appropriately in large groups is sometimes difficult for the at-risk learner, and often issues of authority and resistance surface. A large class means limited opportunities for interaction between teacher and student; the personal connection that these students so desperately seek fails to become established. Furthermore, large groups lend themselves to lecture-type teaching, a method of instruction not favoured by students at-risk (Rutter & Margelofsky, 1997). Rutter and Margelofsky (1997) also identified the inflexibility of the school day as equally problematic. Forcing students with long histories of truancy to remain at school for an entire day seems bizarre and counterproductive. If a primary goal of intervention is to build pathways to success in the workplace and community, then why is the school day not more flexible? Pregnancy, child care concerns, work responsibilities, and the often overwhelming demands of a school day force these students to make difficult decisions about where to commit their time and energy (Rutter & Margelofsky, 1997). For many, it

is impossible to balance all of the demands in their lives and so, several of them choose to let go of the commitment that will have the least impact on their immediate lives (Rutter & Margelofsky, 1997).

Baker and Sansone (1990) called for a modified schedule, with alternative arrangements made with students to accommodate missed or late assignments (i.e., no automatic failures). Parental involvement was also critical; ongoing positive communication involved families and schools participating in truly collaborative and respectful exchanges. The authors recommended in-school committees (meeting on a weekly basis) to table the concerns of at-risk students, and to respond to new referrals. Safran and Oswald (2003) identified a similar construct in their review of school-based positive behaviour supports (PBS), interventions built on the foundations of applied behaviour analysis (ABA). The authors reviewed the use of behaviour principles to encourage the creation of more positive learning environments. They identified four levels of support in the PBS process: (a) school wide universal supports for all students (i.e., violence prevention program for all students, computerized databases of discipline-related information), (b) non-classroom or specific setting supports (i.e., programs carried out in hallways, cafeterias, on the school yard, etc.), (c) classroom or group supports (i.e., a grade four class or a senior basketball team), and (d) individual student supports (i.e., geared towards specific students) (Safran & Oswald, 2003, p. 363). Although the research in the use of PBS supports is in its early stages, strong evidence suggests that this approach has already led to positive changes.

Innovative programming and adaptation of the curriculum may make school more engaging for some students. *Project Second Chance*, an initiative featured in a study by Campbell-Whatley et al. (1997), was a program for students at-risk in a small town in

rural Alabama. Several policies were adopted, including "an alternative curriculum, a component to address the needs of the family, community involvement, and a component that addresses the behavioural and emotional needs of youth at-risk" (p. 5). The goal of the program was to encourage students to complete two academic years in the span of one calendar year, so that they could graduate from middle school and continue to high school with their grade eight peers. Results indicated significant improvement in attendance, reduced numbers of suspensions and increased academic achievement after implementation. Additionally, 87% of the students who participated in the program under study were promoted to high school with their same-aged peers. Informal teacher observations highlighted positive changes in the attitudes of many of the participants.

To summarize, several school policies and structures inhibit learning for the student at risk for dropping out. Pregnancy policies, large class sizes, inflexible scheduling, and a lack of communication between home and school combine in dynamic ways to create an inhospitable learning environment. Administrators are likely to play a significant role in the structural changes in need of implementation. They may adopt an active role in providing guidance and support to staff and students by committing themselves to the initiatives described above. Most importantly, they are responsible for ensuring that their school remains accessible to *all* students, both emotionally, through the selection of empathetic staff who are in tune with the needs of the at-risk learner, and physically, by adopting specific measures and policies that encourage, rather than inhibit, their at-risk population.

*Classroom Climate*

Numerous studies over the past twenty years have examined the role of classroom climate and the at-risk learner (Dunn et al., 2004; Mayer, Mitchell, Clementi, Clement-

Robertson, Myatt & Bullara, 1993; Peart & Campbell, 1999; Peterson, Bennet & Sherman, 1991; Pierce, 1994; Waxman & Padron, 1995). Waxman (1992) identified at-risk school environments as those schools or classrooms that (a) alienated students and teachers, (b) provided low standards and low quality of education, (c) had differential expectations for student, (d) had high non-completion rates for student, (e) were unresponsive to students, (f) had high truancy and disciplinary problems, or (g) did not adequately prepare students for the future. Students at-risk who did graduate "repeatedly painted their relationships with teachers and the learning climate of their compensatory classrooms as prime reasons why they had persisted in school" (Damico & Roth, 1994, p. 33; Dunn et al., 2004). Many of the studies reviewed touched on some or all of these factors. Pierce (1994), for instance, stressed the importance of classroom climate, suggesting that many classrooms focus on production and outcomes, which may isolate the at-risk learner. Her research subject, middle school teacher Mary Morgan, reported that many at-risk learners enter the classroom discouraged and alienated. The teacher's priority was to establish an emotional bond with her students, making students feel safe, valued, and comfortable. Pierce identified three essential components in Mary Morgan's classroom that fostered the emotional well being of her students: standards of behaviour and sensitivity, a variety of teacher roles (i.e., that of mentor, teacher, encourager), and teacher enthusiasm. Peart and Campbell (1999) also identified teacher enthusiasm as a key domain of teacher effectiveness, which they termed *motivational leadership*. The authors also recognized good interpersonal skills, effective instructional methods, and racial impartiality as important in their qualitative study of at-risk students' perceptions of teacher effectiveness.

Students at-risk are often considered to be "underachievers" by their teachers (Waxman & Padron, 1995). Furthermore, the direct instructional model, where teachers lecture and drill their students in a whole-class setting, was, and remains, common in the elementary, middle and secondary panels (Waxman, Huang, Saldana & Padron, 1994). Yet, dropouts repeatedly identified this model as the least effective in their learning, preferring instead small group instruction that was individual and personalized (Davis, 1995; Rutter & Margelofsky, 1997).

Many studies have examined instructional strategies that positively affect classroom climate. Burns (1998) described the benefits of literature circles, such as the empowerment of students, increased motivation in reluctant readers, and improved social interactions between students. Waxman and Padron (1995) asked educators to consider the use of alternative instructional approaches, such as cognitively guided instruction (i.e., metacognitive strategies, reciprocal teaching, etc.). They also recommended responsive teaching (often called "culturally-sensitive instruction" or "multicultural instruction"), which focused on the daily concerns of students, and attempted to incorporate these concerns into the curriculum. Making the curriculum meaningful is not a novel suggestion, yet one could argue that it is a practice not fully established in many classroom settings.

Attendance is a recurring problem, one that is often attributed to punitive classroom practices (Mayer et al., 1993). One study attempted to reduce the number of dropouts in an urban school district by making the classroom environment less punitive (Mayer et al., 1993). Two hundred ninth graders from a school district in Los Angeles County who were frequently absent from school were chosen to participate. Seventeen teachers were assigned to these students for one period per day. Project consultants

measured teacher rates of approval and disapproval using the Teacher Approval-Disapproval scale. Twice weekly visits by the trained consultants occurred to assist with the development of positive classroom practices to make the classroom a more desirable place to learn. The results of the study showed measurable improvement in teacher rates of approval. Further, students engaged in on-task behaviours much more frequently, and the number of student suspensions declined dramatically (35.5% decrease after intervention).

In summary, the classroom options available to rural educators should emphasize the creation of personal relationships with at-risk students. A supportive and caring learning environment is key to their success. Furthermore, expanding the professional knowledge through capacity-building amongst the educational community will provide teachers with appropriate skills to replace punitive strategies that may be in use. The research clearly demonstrates that classroom climate is a most important factor when considering the at-risk learner.

*The Adult Learner*

Eventually, most of the students who drop out of high school drop back in after a period of months, years, or even decades (Entwisle et al., 2004; Rumberger & Lamb, 2003). Mature learners cite a variety of reasons for their return, including qualification for a job, prerequisite for further educational programs, self-improvement, or to improve basic literacy skills (Movement for Canadian Literacy, 2003; Mombourquette, McEwan & McBride, 1999). Interestingly, temporary dropouts, defined as those who received a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) prior to the age of 22, have more positive motivational qualities and were more likely to be employed than permanent dropouts (i.e., those who have not received their GED by age 22) (Entwisle et al., 2004). Adult

learners are continually faced with ongoing challenges to their learning, including parenting responsibilities, employment demands, transportation issues, motivational concerns, and/or undiagnosed learning difficulties, all of which may combine and fuel the high attrition rates reported by many adult education programs (Bradley & Goldman, 1996; Cantor, 1992; Cocklin, 1991; Ekström, 2003; Entwisle et al., 2004). Furthermore, many providers of adult educational programs report that they lack specific qualifications in the area of adult teaching-learning methods (Bradley & Goldman, 1996).

Similar to the adolescent learner, certain institutional policies and structures may preclude the adult learner from being successful in their program. Rigid timetabling of courses, outdated non-meaningful curriculum and assessment strategies, and inappropriate teaching methods suitable for the mature student are frequently mentioned as barriers to learning (Bradley & Goldman, 1996; Gadbow, 2002; Gadbow & DuBois, 1998). The lack of tutorial assistance (either formal or informal) and few bridging or return-to-study courses may further alienate re-entry students (Bradley & Goldman, 1996).

To summarize, the adult learner returns to school for a variety of reasons, and are faced with unique challenges that distinguish them from their adolescent counterparts. Parenting responsibilities, employment demands, motivation, and learning disabilities are barriers to their success. Like the adolescent learner, they are sensitive to the school policies and structures that either support or hinder their performance at school.

This review of the literature presented an historical examination of the academic inquiry into the dropout situation. For example, early research focused on identifying the demographic, social and academic risk factors associated with early departure from high school. Intervention programs have also been a topic of interest by leading researchers in

the field. More recently, research efforts have attempted to identify school policies and structures that inhibit or encourage the at-risk learner. Several subsequent studies identified the importance of classroom climate in the disengagement process. The review concluded with a brief examination of the unique characteristics of the adult learner. These major findings are summarized in Appendix K.

## Research Context

Why do some rural students ultimately leave school prior to graduation and what compels them to return to school as an adult learner? Unfortunately, few studies that focus on the rural dropout exist (e.g., Hadre & Reeve, 2003; McCaul, 1989; Paasch & Swaim, 1995 Roscigno & Crowley, 2001; Thurston, 2002) and even fewer rural studies utilize a qualitative methodology that attempts to explore meaning framed within a narrative (e.g., Haughey, 1996). However, the literature informs us that, generally speaking, dropouts leave school with unique sets of circumstances.

Several models attempt to describe and predict the process of dropping out at both the secondary and post-secondary level (McWilliams, Everett & Bass, 2000; Owens, Morris & Lieberman, 2001; Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1982). A comparative analysis of five models classified them into unique sets of influences or processes associated with high school failure (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000). These categories included (a) full academic mediation, (b) general deviance, (c) deviant affiliation, (d) poor family socialization, and (e) structural strains (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000). Results of their analysis indicated that for all models, poor academic achievement was the strongest predictor of early leaving, but that other variables (including but not limited to general deviance and low SES) added to the explained variance when achievement was considered. After a lengthy and

thoughtful discussion, the authors concluded that none of the theories was able to fully explain the data, although all of the theories could be supported by some of the data.

Several of these models have been useful to school boards when evaluating their dropout prevention programs and at-risk initiatives, however, these models fall short in capturing and conveying the personal stories of their subjects, and lack the ability to describe, in personal and meaningful terms, the students' educational experiences. Therefore, while I entered this study with substantial, well-researched concepts and models as possible scaffolds on which to frame my study, my conclusions reflected those of Battin-Pearson et al: none of the established models adequately explained the unique personal histories related by the participants. Therefore, rather than forcing the words of the participants into an existing model or theory, this study permitted their stories to develop a framework of their own, which may reflect those models recognized in the literature. This emerging framework (grounded theory), discussed in detail by Glaser and Strauss (1967), has been accepted in the field of qualitative research.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study (Merriam, 1998) was to explore the perceptions of the educational experiences of several adult education students to gain a better understanding of the process of dropping out and returning to high school in rural Ontario. Seidman's (2006) three interview series was adopted to explore the participants' responses to the research questions outlined below.

## Research Questions

The central questions guiding the three-interview structure (Seidman, 2006) were as follows:

1. *Focused Life History:* What are the educational and personal experiences that lead to the final act of dropping out?
2. *The Details of the Experience:* What are the current educational experiences of the returning student?
3. *Reflection on the Meaning:* What are the insights and reflections associated with dropping out and returning to school? Where does the student see himself or herself in the future?

The data gained through the personal stories of the participants revealed the underlying themes and contexts that described the personal experiences of dropping out and returning to school within a rural setting.

*Concluding Remarks: An Invitation for Inquiry and Dialogue*

In conclusion, this review of the literature presented several facets of the dropout situation, yet fails to fully address the experiences of the rural dropout. This inquiry addressed these shortcomings by investigating the educational experiences of the rural dropout who has returned to high school as an adult learner. Administrators, school board officials and governmental officers must develop and implement policies that address the needs of all of their clients. Therefore, this inquiry will assist program providers in understanding the experiences of the rural dropout, and will provide suggestions that will optimize learning opportunities with an aim to reducing the high attrition rates for this truly exceptional and inspiring learner.

# CHAPTER THREE

# METHODOLOGY

Now I see the secret of making the best person, it is to grow in the open air and to eat and sleep with the earth.

*- Walt Whitman*

This chapter describes the methodology applied to this qualitative study of dropping out and in. An outline of the rationale *for* and assumptions *of* a comparative case study design is presented. The methods used to recruit participants, collect data, and analyze the resulting narratives are also explained. Lastly, a discussion of the researcher's perspective and trustworthiness is offered for consideration.

## Qualitative Approaches

A naturalistic research paradigm focuses on meaning in context. Merriam (1998) distinguishes this orientation from quantitative research in that qualitative research assumes "that meaning is embedded in people's experiences and that this meaning is mediated through the investigator's own perceptions" (p. 6). Case studies, popular amongst qualitative researchers, are often used "as a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon" (p. 41), and they are bounded by time and location (this study occurred over a four month period in Eastern Ontario). The collective case study, one that involves collecting and analyzing data from several cases, is commonly used to enhance generalizability of the findings (Merriam, 1998). This inquiry utilized such a framework, using a mixture of Merriam's case study technique and Seidman's (2006) composition for in-depth phenomenological interviewing, to assemble a framework for the personal narratives that unfolded.

A constructivist approach was adopted, insofar as the stories collected were considered to be, "in *all* cases human constructions" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 108) which were context-dependent. Theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used, to permit the "data to lead the investigator to the next document to be read, the next person to be interviewed, and so on" (Merriam, 1998, p. 63). In that way, an emerging

theory was allowed to evolve naturally, a process that was guided by the simultaneous analysis of the data (Merriam, 1998).

## Participants

A typical sample (Merriam, 1998) of five adult continuing education students was sought. Typical sampling is a type of purposeful sampling that reflects a typical instance of the topic of interest (Merriam, 1998). In this case, participants were recruited from a local adult education program that was in no way atypical in its program structure and delivery model in rural Ontario. The program consists of two teachers who share teaching responsibilities. Some of the courses are taught using a traditional classroom model (e.g., students are taught the course curriculum by the teacher), while other courses are done by correspondence, with teacher support if needed (the students are expected to remain at school to work on their correspondence courses during that period). The average enrolment was 50 students. To recruit participants, a brief presentation to continuing education classes was made to introduce the study, explain its purpose, and to familiarize potential participants with their role. Print copies of the consent form (see Appendix E) were given to all of the students in the class, along with a return envelope. To qualify for this study, the primary participants had to have departed from school prior to graduation and must have attended a school within a rural district for the majority (i.e., more than 80%) of their educational experience. Additionally, the participants' teachers had to agree to contribute to the study by means of a 45-minute interview (see Appendix J). Interested participants were asked to complete the consent form, place it in the envelope, and give it to their teacher (who was also interviewed in the study) at a later date. Five students indicated their interest: three male and two female. All of the participants were Caucasians, born in Canada, spoke English as their first language, and were schooled

within the Ontario educational system. They ranged in age from eighteen to thirty-nine. Contact was made with the five interested volunteers via telephone. They were asked to complete a *Participant Information Form* (see Appendix C) to collect basic personal information, such as date of birth, names and locations of schools attended, and contact information. This data was used to enhance the descriptions of their educational experiences.

## Researcher's Perspective

Before delving into the details of data collection and analysis, revealing and clarifying researcher bias is a crucial step in gaining credibility. Seidman (2006) provocatively asks, "Whose meaning is it that an interview brings forth and that a researcher reports in a presentation, article, or book?" (p. 22). To prepare myself for this endeavour, I read several books about interviewing for qualitative inquiry. Prior interviewing experiences include a recently published qualitative study in a peer-reviewed journal (George & Duquette, 2005), as well as conducting interviews with parents, educators and students in my professional role within the psycho-educational department of my school board.

As an elementary special education teacher, diagnostician and researcher-practitioner, I bring to the table a set of assumptions about, well, *everything*, and these assumptions have impacted this inquiry in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. I have studied numerous theories of learning, I am well-versed in the anatomy and diagnosis of learning disabilities, intellectual deficits, and the genesis of educational dysfunction within the home and school setting. I have witnessed how overwhelming learning can be for many students, and the lengths that teachers go to ensure success for their students. I acknowledge that school can be inhospitable, restrictive and inflexible for many students,

but it can also be an encouraging and caring environment that successfully supports *all* learners. Furthermore, I am hopeful that with new initiatives, supported by research, innovation and political will, more and more students will graduate from high school on their first attempt.

## Data Collection

Merriam (1998) identified three primary sources of data commonly associated with the case study: interviews, observations, and documents. Further, she maintained that the data to be considered is closely linked with the researcher's theoretical orientation, the purpose of the study, and the choice of participants (p. 70). For this case study, qualitative data were gathered from multiple sources of information over a four-month period. The primary method of data collection was through the use of interviews with the participants. Specifically, data collection included three 90-minute individual taped interviews with each of the five participants, for a total of 15 interviews. Individual taped interviews with the participant's teachers yielded additional data. Data from field notes and three classroom observations was gathered. All data were transcribed after each interview or observation session, and interview transcriptions were further subjected to member checks to ensure the participants' true voices were captured. Pseudonyms were used throughout this study to ensure anonymity.

### *Interviewing*

Each of the five primary participants were interviewed (face to face) during the 2005-2006 school year on three separate occasions, one week apart, to allow participants time to reflect on the previous interview. The interviews, each approximately 90 minutes in length and taped onto a cassette, were conducted in a quiet location agreed upon by both the interviewer and participant. Every attempt was made to accommodate the

participant when selecting an interview location to ensure that he/she was feeling comfortable when relating personal experiences. Each set of participant/teacher interviews was completed before the next cluster of interviews began. Each interview focussed on one of the three research questions. At the conclusion of each interview, a date was set for the next conversation. Within that same week, hard copies of the transcripts were produced and checked by the participants, who placed them back in my mailbox in a sealed envelope. This allowed the participant time to reflect on their responses prior to the next meeting. Equally important, it provided the researcher with the opportunity for preliminary analysis of the data, and to formulate and present new questions at the next meeting. Four of the five participants modified (slightly) their transcripts. This series of interviewing, transcribing, and preliminary analysis continued until the first set of three interviews was complete. The insight gathered from the first set of interviews provided the researcher with a slightly altered schema which, in turn, enriched the next series of interviews as new thematic connections emerged. This process continued as each of the five participants were asked to reconstruct and reflect upon their past.

Seidman's model (2006) involved a series of three in-depth interviews with each participant over the course of three weeks; the goal "is to have the participant reconstruct his or her experience within the topic of study"(p. 9). The first interview involved a detailed exploration of the individual participant's life history up to the point of his/her leaving school (see Appendix H). Thirty questions were included in the semi-structured interview schedule, however, these questions acted only as a springboard for deeper inquiry. The questions were open-ended to elicit vivid descriptions of key memories. All of the participants had clear recollections of school, and most had come to terms with

their being labelled as a "dropout." Re-living these experiences was uncomfortable for some of the participants—they were asked to re-live a time in their life that was filled with conflict, tension, and sometimes trauma. For one participant, the first interview allowed her to face many buried emotions from her past that she was previously unable to confront. While their right to withdraw at any time was carefully explained, all of the participants were committed to the study, and believed that their participation was an important contribution that they could make in helping other students facing similar challenges.

The second interview explored current educational experiences as an adult learner (see Appendix I). The conversation briefly re-examined their decision to leave school early, and then turned to their personal life as well as their experiences at the adult education program.

The final interview asked the participant to reflect on the meaning of his/her educational experiences with a look towards the future (see Appendix J). The participants reflected on how they saw themselves in light of their past—they made connections to explain their past and to make meaning out of their experiences. Furthermore, they were asked to compare the two systems of schooling (e.g., regular high school vs. adult program), and offered suggestions to improve both systems. Finally, an opportunity to look to the future rounded out the discussion.

Additional interviews with current classroom teachers in the adult program were also conducted (see Appendix K). These 45-minute semi-structured interviews gathered data concerning the structure of the program, their observations of the strengths and needs of the adult learner, a comparison of the adult vs. the adolescent learner, and their personal insights into each of the participants and their own teaching style.

*Observations*

Three classroom observations of the participants were conducted. This involved the researcher sitting at the back of the class to observe the student in his/her learning environment, the nature of the student-teacher interactions, the nature of peer interactions, as well as to gather an overall "feeling" of the adult learning environment. Field notes were gathered and included in the data set for analysis. Once again, each classroom observation resulted in a slightly modified "schema," which the researcher was continually adjusting and re-adjusting to accommodate the new information.

*Documents*

Permission to view the Ontario Student Record (OSR) was given by each participant when they signed the study's initial Consent Form. Further permission to access the OSRs was granted, in writing, by the Board's Superintendent of Education. The depth of information in the OSRs varied. Documents contained in the OSR and considered for analysis included: report cards, letters of suspensions, Individual Education Plans, medical reports, notes from social workers, letters from parents, reports from classroom teachers and support staff, and results from standardized testing. For the two oldest participants (both in their thirties), the OSR was incomplete in that not all report cards were present, especially at the elementary level. However, the OSR was invaluable in providing the researcher will ample concrete evidence of academic (and sometimes emotional) struggles at school, documented absences, and results from any standardized testing (e.g., psycho-educational assessments) that were surprisingly absent in all but one case.

## Trustworthiness

Seidman (2006) cautions the qualitative researcher to "recognize that the meaning is, to some degree, a function of the participant's interaction with the interviewer" (p. 23). One criticism of the in-depth interview structure is the assumption that participants are giving a true account of their experiences. This epistemological view of validity was inadequate for this study; the goal of the three-interview format was to allow both the researcher and the participant to make meaning of their experiences. Seidman (2006) argues that the three-interview structure includes several salient features to enhance validity. For example, when applied to this study it encouraged the participant, over a three-week period, to re-visit their experiences, thereby confirming their personal accounts. Member checking was also encouraged to ensure that the true voices of the participants were heard. Furthermore, when interviewing several participants, the researcher explored and checked interesting details with those of other participants to consider their transferability. Finally, if the in-depth interviewing structure facilitated a greater understanding of the experiences for both the participant and the interviewer, then, Seidman argues, "it has gone a long way toward validity"(2006, p. 24).

Merriam (1998) addresses issues of validity and reliability in such a way: if qualitative studies are to have any impact on theory or practice, they need to be "rigorously conducted," (p. 199) which includes, as Guba and Lincoln (1981, p. 378) elucidated some twenty-five years ago, "interviews reliably and validly constructed...contents of the documents properly analyzed...and conclusions of the case study [that] rest upon the data" (p. 378). Designing and conducting this study was undertaken with the utmost care. Several books on interviewing were read prior to data collection, proper questioning techniques were adhered to during the study, data were

analyzed inductively, member checks were used, and a researcher's journal was kept to record reflections made during the data collection and analysis. The researcher's journal was an invaluable tool to assist in recognizing and working with biased reactions, and helped the researcher become more aware of this potentially damaging intrusion of preconceived notions throughout the process.

## Data Analysis

In-depth interviewing is an incredibly labour-intensive process. During this study, over 400 pages of double-spaced interview transcripts were generated. To facilitate comparative analyses (and to remain organized), transcripts were copied onto coloured paper, with each participant being assigned a colour.

Preliminary analysis of the data occurred after each interview. As the researcher personally transcribed all interview data from audiotape into a print format, the nuances and subtleties of the case began to emerge. Re-reading the transcripts in preparation for the next interview elicited additional questions, insights and reflections that were added to the interview protocol. While this approach is often used in naturalistic inquiry, Seidman (2006) cautions the researcher to avoid over-analyzing the data at this stage to avoid imposing meaning from one interview onto the next, or from one participant onto the next. In-depth analysis, therefore, did not occur until all of the interviews had been completed.

Data were analyzed inductively, that is, the researcher approached the data with an open-mind and did not force the data to conform to any pre-conceived theory of student departure and re-entry. Each interview was read, re-read, and re-read, several times, so that the important and interesting elements of the interview became clear. These passages, or "chunks" were marked with parentheses, and noteworthy phrases within

these chunks were highlighted. Personal reflections and additional notes were marked within the margins of the transcripts.

From this initial analysis, profiles of the data were created. Each of the participant's experiences revealed in the individual profiles conveyed a journey, starting with their early life, then proceeding to elementary and secondary school experiences, next recounting their early departure, and finally concluding with their re-entry into the adult education program. Within each profile, the voices of the participants were captured and showcased as mini-vignettes of their lives.

The next stage in considering the data involved a cross-case analysis of the profiles. Passages where recurring ideas began to emerge across the cases were coded, and categories began to emerge. The profiles were compared and contrasted within this emerging framework and are presented at the end of Chapter Four. The key findings were organized around a common theme that emerged from these categories, and inferences, assertions and a comparative analysis of the cases was once again made (Stake, 1995), linking together the conceptual elements of the cases to create a holistic narrative.

*Concluding Remarks*

This chapter reviewed the researcher's rationale *for* and approach *to* the study. Methods for participant recruitment, data collection and analysis were presented. Issues of trustworthiness, validity and reliability were raised and each was addressed in turn.

# CHAPTER FOUR

# FINDINGS

I have no relish for the country; it is a kind of healthy grave.
- Sydney Smith

In this chapter, the profiles of the participants will be presented. During the interviews, the participants related countless stories of the personal and educational circumstances that led to their dropping out and dropping in. Some of these life experiences became learning experiences, and these are the stories that are worth sharing. This chapter provides the reader with the greatest opportunity to connect with each participant, to sympathize with his or her circumstances, and to reflect on how these experiences may have impacted his or her life. Let us meet each one in turn:

## Nathaniel's Profile

Nathaniel is a twenty year-old man whose early academic difficulties and consequent dislike of school might be attributed to an undiagnosed learning disability in reading. Notes from my researcher's journal summarized Nathaniel as: *a caring, humble, intuitive and sociable young man who left high school after a series of unfortunate and painful events.* He has recently returned to school, and expects to graduate in June 2007. He lives at home with his parents and girlfriend in rural Ontario.

### *Early Family Experiences*

Nathaniel was born in a small Ontario town in 1986. He described his early childhood as very happy, with four siblings from his father's previous marriage, as well as a brother, with whom he was very close. As the youngest, Nathaniel loved to play with his older brother:

> I remember doing lots of fun stuff like fishing. We lived right across the road from a farmer and we would help with the hay, but it was mostly fishing that I remember, because we lived right beside a river.

Nathaniel's family was filled with musicians:

> My whole family is pretty much musically inclined. My grandfather and his two brothers are in the Hall of Fame. They played folk and country classic. They would play in bars all around. It was really enjoyable, they would like to have drinks, too. They would get rambunctious and play…it was good!

While Nathaniel never learned to play an instrument, he did mention his desire to learn the guitar. Nathaniel's mother returned to school as an adult, and became a nurse. His father never completed high school, but worked as a painter and renovator for many years.

*Elementary School Experiences*

School began on a positive note for Nathaniel. He cited many of his primary teachers as caring, "easy-going, bubbly, happy and polite." His grade three teacher was particularly memorable:

> She was a nice polite person. She was easy-going and she explained things and helped me a lot. She was right there if I was having trouble and she made you know that she would be there. That was good. She was a happy person, too.

But his learning difficulties would soon surface. Learning to read was arduous:

> I was never a good reader. I still don't really enjoy reading, but I do a little bit of it. I do what I have to, but I don't enjoy reading for pleasure. I would rather go and do something with my hands, or go and fish or something. I was never really a reading-kind of guy.

Notes from my researcher's journal recalled a study by Morawski (1993) of earliest recollections of learning to read. Morawski found that proficient readers had early (usually pre-school) memories of learning to read, while struggling readers had later

memories (usually school-aged). Based on these notes, I asked Nathaniel about his earliest recollections of learning to read at our next interview. He responded:

> That's a good one...whew! I can't really remember...the earliest one that I can remember is probably at Holy Name...I think it was grade 5 and 6, and you had to go around and read a paragraph or a sentence. And we would go around the room like that...I never liked that. It was torture. So I was never really good at reading.

Interestingly, his earliest memories of learning to read were negative. A review of his Ontario Student Record (OSR) revealed an Individual Education Plan as a result of these learning difficulties, although no formal psycho-educational evaluation was ever completed as the school board he attended did not provide this service.

> In the younger years, like Kindergarten to grade three, it was good. But once all of the work started piling on, you say to yourself, what for? You don't understand why you are going through all of this; you don't really want to be there. I can think of other things that are more fun to do outside. You have to do school things, and some kids just don't understand that.

Nathaniel did have many talents; his strengths appeared in math, history, and physical education—he even made the track team in grade seven. He was also a very sociable youngster:

> I never had any problems making friends. I am one of those people that sticks up for my friends. If they have problems, they don't need to worry about it, I'm there. I have always been that type of person. If people have problems, they come to me, and I help them, no matter what it was. School work, something else, like with a bully.

In his late elementary years, Nathaniel met his girlfriend, who also dropped out of school early. While the two have had their struggles, they remain together to this day. Nathaniel described their relationship as loving and caring.

*Secondary School Experiences*

Nathaniel's high school began in grade eight, and students graduated at the end of grade twelve (grade thirteen had been discontinued the year he began grade nine, making him a member of the double cohort). Because of his learning difficulties, he was streamed into applied and workplace level courses, where he had some success. However, his frustration with his reading difficulties often led to inappropriate behaviours, including chronic absenteeism. Nathaniel's file documents a particularly challenging time when he was absent for forty-seven days over a nine-month period. These unexplained absences resulted in an additional forty-one days worth of suspensions, for a total of 88 missed days of school. It was during this period that he began to experiment with drugs and alcohol. Eventually, his absences and conduct caught up with him and his departure seemed inevitable.

*Dropping Out*

In time, Nathaniel was put on a contract. He found it difficult to relate to his teachers, and began to rebel:

> When I was in grade ten, I got real sick. I started acting on the feelings that I was having with the teachers, and the work that I was getting. I'd skip classes, and that's when it started going down hill, when I started skipping. Then they started picking my classes for me, and it was not enjoyable anymore to go to school. I would go to some classes like geography…but I'd cut a couple of classes or even full days…Some teachers had totally different attitudes. They weren't bubbly and

> happy. It was pretty much sink or swim. They had me in vocational classes. I wasn't even aware of this stuff.

One of the most poignant stories he related concerned his brother, who was ill with schizophrenia. At the time, the illness was not formally diagnosed.

> My brother is a schizophrenic, and he wasn't doing well either. That was another problem. It's kind of hard to deal with. We were in geography class together, and I sat a couple of desks ahead of my brother. The teacher just asked my brother a simple question and he went way off into the clouds. He was talking about something completely different. And the teacher, Mr. D, pointed that out, and there were all of the little giggles from the class...I just got up out of my class and left...after we had that tiff, I was missing a lot of days, especially in geography because that was the class that my brother was in and I just didn't want to be there. Mr. D excluded me from the rugby team. I was good at rugby, he knew that and he wanted me on his team, but I didn't get to make the team, and that was actually pretty important to me because I was good and I believed we might have had a chance to win.

My personal responses to this experience, recorded in my journal, were vivid. I had similar embarrassing experiences with my brother (with whom I was very close) during high school; he was later diagnosed with manic depression and schizophrenia and took his own life at twenty-five. *I understand Nathaniel's emotions, and feel so sorry for the mental anguish and turmoil that his family is experiencing. What does the future hold for his brother?* I decided not to share stories of my brother's illness with Nathaniel.

Nathaniel recalled one meeting with the school principal that was especially difficult:

> I went to sign back in and my Mom came with me. He brought us into his office and he pretty much sat down and told my mother, very bluntly, *We don't take your troubled cases just to make Ontario Works happy*....I stood up and said, *Okay, let's go. I am not going here. I am going to the other high school. Let's leave.* My Mom was fuming. I didn't bother going back. I tried to register at the other high school, and it was like the teachers called and made them aware that I was coming or something. They wouldn't accept me because of my credentials from my first high school. I only had eight credits and I was there for two years. That's not a very good standard. So, I just left it all alone and I went to work.

Many factors, therefore, appeared to influence his decision to leave—an inflexible school day, that did not consider his individual needs, personal pain relating to his brother's illness, and an inability to connect, on an emotional level, with many of his teachers. Together these brought about his untimely departure from high school. While he did attend an alternative program for a few months, he described it as "nothing but a bunch of clowning around." Feeling like a failure, he felt there was nothing he could do at the time to better his educational standing.

*Dropping In*

For the next few years, Nathaniel was employed in labour-intensive dead-end positions:

> I worked for a moving company for a few years, and then for a farmer. I think I planted like 2500 onions in two days! It was horrible. I was on my hands and knees, and my ears got so badly sunburned—the tops of my ears were peeling. It was just horrible.

Eventually, he gave this up, but found that he had too much leisure time, and was bored.

> You get pretty bored sitting around not doing anything. I wanted to make something of myself so that I could do something, that's kind of how I came to the decision to come back to school…One time my uncle had given me a subscription to a fishing magazine. He came over and asked me if I had read any of it, and he said, *Probably not! You probably don't read it, you just look at the pictures, you probably just get the girlfriend to read it to you!* That kind of changed my life…it kind of made me want to come back to school and improve my skills in certain places.

Nathaniel's girlfriend urged him to return, and even set up the initial appointment with the adult high school. She had completed her diploma the previous year in an adult education program, and was familiar with the courses and expectations. In my journal, I wondered: *Is Nathaniel worried about losing his girlfriend because of his incomplete education? How much of his decision to return to school was based on these motives?* When asked about this, Nathaniel stated why he was ready to try again:

> I started thinking about things. I didn't want to lose my girlfriend because I don't have an education, and she may find someone better or something…I guess that was kind of in the back of my head. I guess that maturity came into play. I just didn't realize most of the stuff that I realize now…the importance of school. The importance of being there on time and attending.

Once back, Nathaniel relied on family supports. Because he was still living at home, his parents provided the emotional and financial stability he needed to succeed:

> When my Dad saw my report card, he said, *Well, it's been a long time since I have seen one of them!* He said it was one of the best reports that I had ever got from high school. It made him happy, I guess.

Nathaniel saw many differences between the adult education system and the regular high school program:

> The people are different and so are the teachers. Some of them are older; they're not youth and they aren't focussed on the wrong things. They've got it all together and they are going for the work. There is actually a mixture of high school [younger] people and older people.

Nathaniel's teachers were exceptional as well:

> They don't look down at you. The teachers here treat you like an adult, and respect you. They are more flexible.

A review of the field notes corroborates this; the teachers clearly respected their students and were not agitated if students were absent or late. Further advantages of the adult program were mentioned:

> The scheduling is good. Also, I was late today and I didn't get a late slip. The absences are flexible, too. I am not saying that it's a good thing, because some people might take advantage of that, but it is nice for me…I think in this program I can get my work done faster. I can take courses quicker as well with the independent studies. You don't have to go at the same pace as the class.

Nathaniel's grades were good within this program. While there were no accommodations for his reading difficulties (reading and writing remain a challenge), his teachers reported that he was focussed, attended class regularly, and had a good attitude towards his work. During the classroom observation, he worked quietly, and a few of his peers sought his help on a math question. However, the temptation to skip loomed continuously over his head. I wondered, in my journal, if he would stay the course:

> You just have to resist the temptation, that's all. It's not that hard. Some of my friends are falling into the old routines, like skipping and trying to get you to skip. One buddy has been skipping and going fishing. Yesterday, he and another buddy wanted me to skip and go fishing [it was a beautiful sunny day]. I felt like a high school kid again! I thought, no, I don't think so. I think I am going to go to school. Besides, I can go fishing after school. I catch all of the fish anyways! I've got a horseshoe or something! I always catch all of the fish!

Nathaniel remained steadfast and described himself as changed:

> I see myself on the right path…I am in school now and I am going to be able to make it somewhere and I won't be a bum with no education and no job. It has helped me in the area of self-esteem and all that.

When asked about college, he was unsure whether he had the ability to take on such a venture. His plans for the future were uncertain, although he did mention an apprenticeship that would lead to owning his own business. In my journal, I worried about Nathaniel: *He doesn't understand the importance of continuing his studies! He has the ability to be a skilled tradesman, but he may not have the self-confidence to carry this out.* With one year left until he graduates, Nathaniel has plenty of time to consider his options.

## Linda's Profile

Linda is a 39 year-old woman who has lived a life of adversity, yet remains a resilient and positive individual. Linda has three children and two grandchildren and lives with her common-law husband in a small town in Ontario. Notes from my researcher's journal summarized Linda as: *…a woman who has lived too much in her thirty-nine years—she comes across as a friendly, no-nonsense kind of woman who is not afraid to*

*"tell it like it is."* She recently returned to an adult education program and graduated in September 2006.

*Early Family Experiences*

Linda was born in 1967 in rural Ontario. She described her mother as a loving home-maker with whom she had a close relationship. Her father spent some time in the Air Force, and later became a lay-preacher with the Anglican church. Her only sibling, an older brother, married when she was only four. When Linda entered kindergarten, her mother became ill with cancer; Linda recalled taking on more household responsibilities over the next few years, and the emotional toll took its course.

> I did all the cooking and cleaning, groceries, paying bills. Basically a lot of responsibility that should have been an adult's, but because I was the only other body in the house, I'd get home from school and there would be a note: *Linda, run down and pay the bill.* The money would be there, so I would have to go downtown and pay the bill...the hydro or whatever it may have been.

Linda's mother eventually succumbed to cancer when Linda was only nine. Unfortunately, her father began to rely more and more on alcohol as an escape:

> Dad had some issues. Unfortunately, with Mom's health, Dad turned to alcohol and that was his main staple...Dad's idea of breakfast was a 40 and a 2-4. By lunch, he was driving back down to get more. And when he was driving, we were in a number of accidents with him being impaired. I can remember being in the front seat and after an accident I was in the back window. Back then, we didn't have seatbelts and the restraints they have now.

By the time Linda was twelve, her father's alcoholism was too much to bear. Numerous social agencies were involved in an attempt to stabilize the family, but it soon became

obvious to Linda that she was unable to live with her father's alcoholism. Her grandparents wanted to intervene, but social services granted custody of Linda to her brother (her grandparents were deemed too elderly). At that time, Linda's brother was beginning to teach at a university in southern Ontario.

> I would have been twelve or so, my brother would have been around twenty-six. He had been married for a number of years. I went to spend the summer with them. By the end of that summer, Dad had convinced them that he wasn't drinking anymore and that's when we ended up moving. It was kind of a nasty way that things got dumped on me. My brother and I went into town one day, and he said, *Oh, I just have to stop here into a friend's place, I'll be right back.* He came back and said, *Okay, you can get out here.* I looked and there was my Dad. And within an hour and a half of them leaving, a U-Haul and a car pulled up and out jumped four of my Dad's drinking buddies and two children. They all got drunk and us three kids unloaded the truck and set up the apartment.

When she was fifteen, Linda left home. Notes from my journal include reflections of my life at fifteen—while there was some rebelliousness during my teenage years, I did not have to face the same degree of loss and dysfunction as did Linda. When describing key experiences in her life, she invariably invoked her father's alcoholism as a major obstacle, along with the untimely deaths of her mother and later on her brother, who also succumbed to cancer when Linda was pregnant with her third child.

*Elementary School Experiences*

Despite losing her mother, Linda's early school experiences were quite positive. She did well academically, and her student records indicated that she was an average student. Linda cited numerous teachers who had a significant impact on her day.

> Mrs. M was my favourite teacher. She was a caring and compassionate lady. And when you did well, she really made you feel good about yourself. She really had a way of connecting with the kids like that. Another one was my grade four teacher. The last year that Mom was really sick, she was just fantastic. She would bring extra lunches to school. She would bake little things and send them home with me. It was just…she went over and above the call of duty. It was the same with the Principal. I'll never forget him either. Same thing. I can remember him stopping by the house asking, *Do you need anything? Is there anything I can do?*

Because her mother was ill so often, Linda did miss a considerable amount of school. However, she again mentioned caring staff members who were willing to accommodate her needs:

> I did miss a fair bit of school with Mom being sick. I was pretty much stuck to her. But everybody was more than willing to accommodate me with me not being able to do my work. And I excelled. I had excellent marks all the way through school. Even though I was dealing with all of this other stuff, I was still able to do well.

Linda enjoyed learning in all areas of the curriculum, but had a particular interest in language and the arts. Furthermore, she made friends easily:

> I always really got along with everybody; I never really had a group. I could walk into any group and get along. I was one of those ones that was so versatile. I didn't hang out with any one in particular in my younger years. I had lots of friends depending on what I felt like doing.

A review of her OSR indicated a socially well-adjusted young lady who appeared to get along well with her peers.

Linda attended the same elementary school from grades one to four. In grade five, she attended a junior high school within the same community. When Linda was thirteen, and about to enter grade eight, she moved to southern Ontario and attended a new school in a larger town. She remembers feeling quite betrayed and abandoned by her brother, who had dropped her off at her drunken father's new apartment just weeks earlier. But a surprise awaited her when she started school that September:

> I didn't speak to my brother for almost eight months after that. So, it came September, and it was time to go to school, and lo and behold, I walk in the school and I knew that I had family from my mother's side in the area, and I knew that one of my cousins was a teacher, but I hadn't seen him in such a long time. And I walked into my class and sure enough, who's the teacher? My cousin! So that made grade eight a lot easier. He sort of understood where I was coming from. He knew the family history and what was going on.

Once again, Linda found the emotional support she needed from a teacher. She continued to do well in school, and appeared to have a good year in her new surroundings.

*Secondary School Experiences*

Linda's experiences at high school were short-lived. She was able to complete grade nine and some of grade ten, but her memories of high school were not as positive as those of her formative years. She began to associate with the "wrong crowd." Academically, she enrolled in mostly General-level courses (the equivalent of College-C and Workplace-E level courses in present terms). After her grade nine year, she gained four out of eight possible credits. Absenteeism was rampant—ranging from 25 to 58 periods, depending on the course. Linda preferred to spend time with friends, and did not have the self-discipline to attend classes on a regular basis. While in school, Linda

decided to take on a part-time job at McDonald's. This decision meant that there was little time for homework.

> I am still with my Dad, and I go up to my new high school, and about the middle of grade nine, Dad started acting up again really bad. And I couldn't handle it anymore, so I ended up taking a part-time job at McDonald's so that I wouldn't have to go home at night. I ended up meeting some girls through there that I was working with and by the end of my grade nine year, I would have been fourteen or so. There were five of us, and we moved into a house together. At that point I had gotten another part-time job at a fish and chips restaurant. So I was working two part-time jobs and that was why I switched schools…it was closer to the other high school.

Linda acknowledged that homework was not a priority for her in high school. She was busy holding down two jobs, and returning home was not an option that she was willing to entertain.

*Dropping Out*

Juggling two part-time jobs, and attending school on a full-time basis was challenging, to say the least. She lived the party lifestyle, experimenting with drugs and to a lesser extent, alcohol. When she changed schools to be closer to her new home, she befriended Paula. Paula's older brother caught Linda's eye, and the two began dating:

> In that high school is where I started chumming around with my then best friend Paula. Then I met her older brother and needless to say, along came my daughter!

Linda was pregnant at sixteen, living on her own, and overwhelmed with school and work. Yet, she persisted, wanting to finish her grade ten year despite the pressure she felt to leave.

> I went through hell and high water to say the least! I was setting a bad precedent, because we're talking about the early eighties. I was…they tried to shame me, they tried to make me feel like the lowest, the worst. They weren't going to allow me to attend classes. The principal, the teachers, the board…they tried to force me to leave but I took it to battle. I fought them on it and they couldn't. They could not make me leave! I just wrote them letters. And all of the teachers were really nasty about it. And I got really big being pregnant with her…The only one that would fight for me was Mr. H. Him and his wife. He said, *No way! Linda is one of my best students. I am not going to let her lose her year for the sake of this. She's willing to make the effort to be here. Let her be!*

Mr. H made a lasting impression at a most difficult period in Linda's life—her pregnancy and desire to stay in school. Linda recalled:

> I was getting really big in school. So, most of the time, in the desks, I would have to sit sideways. Mr. H…I would go to his class and he would give me his desk with the chair and would pull out a student desk for himself to use. He was an absolute sweetie.

Mr. H's kindness extended beyond the classroom:

> My Dad took it upon himself to pull me out of school. He pulled me out in February or so, and he shipped me to an unwed mother's home out of the county. Again, Mr. H, thank God for him, he came. He found out where I was, through my girlfriends, and came to the home. He told them who he was, and they came to me and said, *Do you know a Mr. H??* And I said, *YES!* And I was pushing her out of the way! Anything to see a loving, familiar face, even though he was a teacher. And it was him and his wife. And he sat down with the people who were there,

> and convinced them that they should start up an in-house school program for the girls and he used to come over one night a week and he would do in-house lessons to help anybody that wanted to do correspondence and help them finish. He helped me finish my year.

*How many teachers today would be so concerned about a student?* I asked myself in my journal. Furthermore, I observed that every time Linda appeared to be in crisis, there was a teacher there to help ease the burden of pain. Linda recounted several stories of teachers going above and beyond their regular teaching duties to show their support and concern for her well-being. Her father, however, reacted quite differently:

> I had people pushing abortion down my throat when I got pregnant…and adoption, too…it's a wonder she even survived. I suffered, at the hands of my father, a really nasty beating when he found out.

Obviously, the family supports were just not there for Linda.

With the birth of her daughter, Linda entered a new stage in her life that left little time for school. She lamented the loss of friendships:

> Everybody was so upset to see me leave. I had a big circle of friends. They were all really supportive…really good, lots of visits. I had two or three different girlfriends that used to make a point of coming to babysit. By the time she was six or eight months old, the novelty had worn off, and they were back doing high school stuff.

Linda and her boyfriend were living on their own, and both were working to pay the bills and support each other and their new child. Sadly, when the baby was six months old, Linda walked in on her boyfriend and another woman (Note from my journal: *What a rat!*):

> I caught them right in the act. So that wasn't very nice. He came chasing after me because I hit the girl I caught him with, and he laid me out in the lobby. I spent two weeks in the hospital.

The next ten years would witness the break-up with the abusive father of her first child, the birth of her second and third child by another man, and the subsequent failure of that relationship. It was also during this time that Linda lost her only brother to cancer. Throughout all of this emotional upheaval, Linda held a series of low-paying jobs, ranging from short-order cook to maid to an attendant in a home for the elderly. While she did remain on relatively good terms with her father, he did not have a real presence in her life. He currently lives in southern Ontario in a home for the elderly.

*Dropping In*

In 1990, Linda decided it was time to return to her hometown that she had left so many years before. Her maternal grandparents were still there, and she longed for a renewed sense of family:

> My grandfather's physical health was deteriorating. Mentally he was still doing wonderful, physically it was becoming a challenge…he'd get up at night to go to the washroom and was falling in the house…So, then once I was back, at least I was just a phone call away…So, I came back for those reasons, and so that my children could have a sense of family…I just couldn't deal with living on unemployment…it was running out so I had no choice but to start working. I managed to latch on to a few part-time jobs, mostly food industry which was all old hat to me. I did that for a number of years, then thought that I wanted to do something different, so went back to school again and went to the Hair Academy, and in the midst of all of that, ended up with some medical problems and had to

> have surgery and wasn't able to go back to school. I ended up with this wonderful OSAP loan hanging over my head...no work, no money, big loan, not able to go back to school...she wouldn't refund me anything. I had a major fight with them. She ended up losing the school because she was actually in receivership or something. So I kind of got screwed over for that one. Well, I got through all of that, again, back in the food industry again...

Linda's frustration with a labour force that demands a high school diploma at minimum was clear:

> Ya. I've had jobs, and been doing them for two or three months and then it's like *Oh, Linda, you didn't give us your diploma, we need that.* And I'd say, *Well, I don't have one.* And they would say, *Well, what do you mean? How can you do all of this?* And I would say, *Well, exactly. I can do everything...better in some cases!* But, no. They want that pre-requisite paper work, which I think is just so unfair. I really do, I think it is so unfair.

She began to think seriously about returning to school. Linda described the transformation that was sparked by the birth of her grandchildren:

> My [common law] husband convinced me to take a year and relax and find me again, because for many years, I was doing it for others. I've been playing with the idea of coming back since last year, since my grandbabies were on the way. I thought *Oh my God, Linda. Get it together. You are about to be a grandmother!*

Now that her children were grown and starting their own families, the time seemed right for a new beginning:

> Not that I can't go out and get a job...I can get by, but I am sick of just getting by...I've had jobs, and I would be doing them for two to three months and then

> they ask for my diploma. They want that pre-requisite paperwork… I took a long look back at all that I had been through, and said, *To hell with this. I am tired of struggling and I am tired of working minimum wage jobs.* I know that I can do it…I have no doubt in my mind about that.

Linda described her return in the fondest of terms:

> I walked in on the sixth, went down the stairs and there was the teacher. She is just a sweetheart…an amazing lady. Amazing, amazing. I ended up with a really good rapport with the class. They called me the teacher's pet or a brown-noser because I brought in treats for everyone in the class. I was grasping everything so fast. It was fun, and she made coming to school enjoyable…When I was doubting myself, she gave me encouragement. She said you can do it! It's her personality, her enthusiasm, her sincerity as a teacher.

Once again, my journal noted: *…a teacher was there to help Linda during her transition. She has the uncanny ability to find someone to give her the emotional and academic supports she needs to help her achieve her goals.* Linda's teachers reported that she was doing extremely well in her studies. A review of her grades revealed just that—mostly nineties in all of her subjects. After attending summer school in 2006, Linda graduated. She has a strong desire to attend college and work in the field of social services. The question of funding remains an issue, but she is investigating her options.

## Peter's Profile

Peter is a 31 year-old man from a large family of eleven children. He has been on a disability pension for several years, and has recently returned to the adult high school to obtain the three additional credits he needs to graduate. His dislike of high school as an adolescent led to his decision to drop out early, but he has been unable to find steady

employment in the past 10 years. My researcher's journal summarized him as *an odd, yet humourous man, whose mannerisms and idiosyncrasies remind me of someone with autistic tendencies.* Unmarried, Peter lives alone in a village in rural Ontario. He graduated in June 2006.

*Early Family Experiences*

Peter was born in 1975 in a small town nestled within an agricultural and forestry community. As child number nine in a family of eleven siblings, Peter recalls his childhood as "crowded" but happy.

> There were three of us in a room. And it was a small room. We got along most of the time. There were more hands to do all of the chores, so it wasn't bad.

Peter's father, now retired, owned his own auto body business. His mother was a homemaker, and did the books for the family business. Peter has many happy memories from his early childhood. One memory was particularly amusing:

> At home I had rabbits to play with. We had tons of them. My Dad built a big fence around the yard, and he dug it three or four feet into the ground so the rabbits couldn't tunnel out. They bought two rabbits at the beginning...and the next summer all of these tiny little rabbits starting coming out of the hole!

When asked about difficulties at home during his formative years, Peter replied:

> We never really had any big problems at home. Dad was the head of the household and we listened...he wasn't an abuser though.

It appeared, therefore, that Peter's early development occurred within a functional and supportive family. While it was a busy household, Peter described these experiences warmly and fondly. Neither of Peter's parents had any post-secondary education, and he was unsure if either of them finished high school. My journal notes questioned this: *How*

*could he not know if his parents finished high school?* I wondered the value placed on education if even he was unsure of this basic fact?

*Elementary School Experiences*

Peter's early memories of school were generally negative. He had difficulties with focussing on his work—a condition that, as an adult, would be diagnosed as ADHD. Peter explained how his inability to attend to his work often resulted in unwelcome behaviours:

> In elementary school, I was so bored, so I guess I acted out. I would act like a class clown. So, I got put into special education a couple of times. I thought, *Oh God, this is retarded.* They take you from normal and they put you into slow motion. I thought, *Oh God! This is even worse than the regular class. Get me the hell out of here!* They figured I was acting out because I wasn't smart. Well, I was smart, I just didn't want to be there....they just thought I was frigging stupid.

Early anecdotal records and report cards were absent from his file, however, his records did indicate that he repeated grade three. One screening of his academic abilities, assessed using the Canadian Adult Achievement Test Level C (completed as an adult and was not part of a comprehensive psycho-educational assessment) indicated Below Average to Average results. In the researcher's journal, I asked, *Where were the supports for Peter? Why did it take so long to identify this medical condition? How might things have been different for him had he had this diagnosis earlier in life?*

Peter described the majority of his elementary teachers as "nice," although "some were nicer than others." One teacher in particular stood out from the rest—Peter's grade seven teacher, Mr. C.

> He was laid back and easy going. He was a pretty cool guy.

He also recalled one teacher that was remarkable for all of the wrong reasons:

> It was in grade six. He was a good teacher, but he just had a temper. I never got in trouble from him, but sometimes when the class misbehaved he would slam the door and yell. Or he would slam his hand on the desk. One time he broke a window on the door. There was a piece of glass in the door and he slammed the door really hard and it broke!

When asked about his favourite subjects, Peter quickly mentioned gym, "just because there was nothing academic involved." Peter's dislike of academics was no more strongly felt than in the area of reading, an activity he dislikes to this day.

*Secondary School Experiences*

Once in high school, Peter took mostly Basic and General level courses (the equivalent of P-level and E-level in present secondary course codes). His marks were generally between 50% and 70%. He complained of being bored, and often skipped:

> I passed, usually. It was more or less boredom…I just didn't want to be there. The work was challenging, and I could do it if I put my mind to it, I could have done better. I just didn't want to be there… I started getting older and became bored.

His attendance was suffering as well:

> In high school, I skipped all the time. But, it wasn't so much skipping…I went to a Catholic high school. They had trips to church and other stupid things…I didn't want to go to church! I didn't want to go to a Mass on whatever. And the stupid assemblies. So, I would skip.

Peter dabbled in drinking as well, but it never really consumed his teen-age life. While he tried smoking pot, "it just wasn't me…what's the point of it?" Alcohol, however, became the drug of choice, preferred for its self-medicating properties:

> The only reason I drank in high school was because it has the same effect as Ritalin. Alcohol…a couple of drinks has the same effect on me as having a Ritalin now. I didn't drink to get drunk or nothing. I just felt more calm and more relaxed after having a couple of drinks.

In my journal, I made note of Peter self-medicating, and was later reminded by a colleague of the abundant research linking ADHD with substance abuse.

When asked about significant teachers in high school, Peter was able to recall one such individual.

> Mr. C was kind of cool. He taught English. If we read a book, we watched the movie. He would give us easy books to read, too.

Sadly, for the most part, Peter felt emotionally disengaged from his teachers:

> They didn't care. The school doesn't really care. I don't think anybody really cared. If you don't want to be there. Most teachers these days don't really care. One teacher basically said to me *I don't get paid to care. If you don't want to be here, I don't get paid enough to care.* It was an old teacher with a big attitude. If you were missing school, half of them wouldn't bother to ask why. They didn't really care…I think they cared more when I was younger. But when you are a teenager, I guess they expect you to be more mature…I'm not a bad person, but they called me a bad kid because I would get bored and start fooling around. Things were better when I was put on drugs [as an adult he was prescribed Ritalin].

Peter had a few close friends, but it was usually his family name that preceded him (he had eight siblings go through high school before him, and some of them were rowdy teens).

> I had a couple of close friends. I wasn't real popular or unpopular. Everybody knew who I was...I didn't have a lot of friends but everybody knew who I was...My older brother had a new girlfriend every second week, and I was trying to follow in his footsteps! I thought he was cool. I had lots of different girlfriends...well, I wouldn't exactly call them girlfriends...female friends. I had quite a bit. I had more female friends than guy friends.

In my journal, I recalled individuals in high school that were like Peter: *He reminds me of Steve [an old friend from high school]...just a little too weird for the guys to hang around with, but the girls loved him! It doesn't surprise me that he had more female friends than male friends.* Peter, while describing many acquaintances, had few stories to tell about close friends. His high school experiences might be summed up as a combination of poor concentration and motivation, low grades, poor attendance, and an emotional disconnect that led to his ultimate decision to leave.

*Dropping Out*

When recalling the reasons for his leaving school early, Peter evoked several rules associated with attending a Catholic high school:

> I didn't like my school because of the stupid rules... Well, when I went there, you couldn't have ripped jeans—that was frowned upon. You couldn't have a rock t-shirt. You couldn't have a t-shirt that said something like Led Zeppelin on it. They would make you turn it inside out and make you walk around with an inside out t-shirt all day...and guys were not allowed to have earrings. Any guy with an earring had to cover it up with a band aid...a flesh-coloured bandaid! So you would see twenty-five guys walking around with a flesh-coloured bandaid...I'm like, that doesn't look stupid!?...There was a guy in my school that had a Blue

> [beer] shirt. They said, *That's a beer shirt, go change or turn it inside out. And while your at it, put a band aid on your ear!* It was ridiculous! I can understand them not wanting t-shirts with foul language on them, or something offensive on it, but what's wrong with AC-DC or Led Zeppelin or something?

The rules and dress-code were a stark reminder of the school's inability to let him express himself. Eventually, Peter convinced his parents to enrol him in a public school, but even that transition was not ideal. The public school that he wanted to attend was now inaccessible to him, due to a change in boundaries:

> I wanted to go to that school, but because they changed the boundaries…they made a rule. If you lived in my area, you now had to go to the other school. So, I couldn't go to the school I wanted to.

I wondered, in my journal, that *if Peter had the opportunity to attend his preferred school, whether this really would have changed the outcome?* In grade eleven, Peter finally decided to leave for good:

> I just didn't want to be in school. I just didn't see the need for it. I just wanted to work.

That summer, Peter's Dad landed him a job picking up garbage, and the lure of a steady paycheck was tempting:

> I didn't want to come back. My Dad had a garbage truck company and he hired me and a couple of friends of mine. I was making eight or nine dollars an hour picking up garbage for a few years. I was only seventeen or something like that. I said to hell with going to high school. I will just do this.

It was over a decade, and numerous odd jobs later, before Peter was ready to return to high school.

*Dropping In*

Peter was a dropout at seventeen. For the next few years, he held several low-paying, entry-level jobs. It was during this period of Peter's life that he hitch-hiked across Canada and back, a trip that he said changed his life forever:

> I really learned to appreciate things more and not to take things for granted. When I was out there, I met some people that would eat out of the dumpsters of restaurants...KFC, Tim Horton's. I met a trucker that free-based crack. And another that wanted me to drive his truck for him. We were in Saskatchewan and he said not to worry, to just hold the wheel and keep it straight. He put it into gear and got me going, then went to sleep in the back...some of these guys were so far gone.

At one point, he did try college as a mature student, but was unable to stay focussed on the work for long enough to complete his assignments. Once Peter began to collect social assistance, he was referred to a physician for an assessment. The referral led to a startling revelation into Peter's learning profile—he was diagnosed with ADHD and prescribed Ritalin, a medication that he continues to take. Peter's frustration with collecting a disability pension for his condition surfaced many times during the interviews:

> I think they should have done more to get me off of this pension. As soon as I walked in the door and talked to him for five minutes, he said that I should have a disability pension and *then* look for a job. It has been seven years and they haven't really done anything to help me.

Last year, Peter's mother saw an ad in the newspaper for a free course offered at the local adult high school:

> She said to me, *You're unemployed, why don't you take this course for Retail Sales Associate?* And I thought, well, OK. I want something better. So, I took that course, and they told me I only need three credits to graduate. They said come back to school, work hard and get your high school diploma…it was just boredom at home. I thought, I'm not busy so…

Peter's return was also motivated by his desire to join the Canadian Forces, a career that demanded a high school diploma as an entry requirement. *Is this a realistic goal?* I wrote in my journal. *I do have some experience in the military [I served in the Army Reserves for four years as an administrative clerk]. I don't think that he would pass the medical and/or psychological tests.*

Once back, Peter quickly found that he could be successful. He found the courses much easier, and the staff much more caring. He took Ritalin during the week to help him focus at school, but preferred not to take it on weekends as the Ritalin disrupted his sleep:

> If I would have known that adult high school was so easy, I would have dropped out of regular high school when I was sixteen and come straight to adult high school! But I have also matured. There is no point in chewing up your pencil or drawing on the desk. That's what some people used to do.

He appreciated the time that staff took to ensure that everyone was successful:

> He tells us what is going to be on the quiz so you are not studying stuff that isn't going to be on it. He gives you enough time in class to do your homework. And they are more lenient with attendance. And you get to go to the computer room if you are done. He'll let you leave the class…you can't skip school, but he'll let you leave the class and go out and have a smoke whenever you want.

Peter's teachers reported that his attendance was excellent, and that he put forth a good effort on all of his assignments. My field notes indicated a quiet and hard-working student who enjoyed interacting with the teachers, but less-so with his younger peers.

When asked, Peter identified several challenges that he faced when learning. For instance, Peter felt that there were too many younger students in the class—ones that were not ready to commit to their studies. He described fights amongst some of the younger students, and being drawn into a lover's quarrel:

> There's one girl in my class...she had a boyfriend and wanted me to see if he was in class yet. Or she'd ask me to pass a note to him! That's the kind of thing that pisses me off. I'm here trying to learn, and I get this seventeen or eighteen year-old...my God! Smarten up!

In my journal, I wondered if transportation was an issue for Peter. He lived some distance from the school. During the next interview, I asked Peter about travelling to and from school. Astonishingly, Peter hitchhiked twenty kilometres each way, to and from his house, in order to attend high school. During the winter months, it was particularly difficult for him:

> Sometimes I get a ride with my sister-in-law. But if she is working at six in the morning, I have to hang around town for three hours. I sat at Tim Horton's last winter and was told that if I didn't buy anything, then I would have to leave. It was like minus twenty degrees. I told them I wasn't making any trouble. But I had to buy more coffee or go out. A couple of times I had to go to the bank machine because it was warm. I would sit and read the paper. Where else can you go? A lot of restaurants aren't open, and if they are, they don't want you just sitting there and doing nothing.

Peter reported that his family was proud of him, and that they supported his dropping back in after so many years.

> My younger brother said he would buy me a case of beer and take me out for dinner! [when he graduated]

His parents continue to support him, both emotionally, and by providing him an apartment in one of the rental units that they own. While he was unable to articulate any supports provided by his peers at school (journal entry: *He is so different from the others in this respect*), he did mention one helpful person, his worker at the disability office, as someone on whom he could rely:

> He has covered my expenses. He gave me money to put on a deposit for my car insurance when I was working at the restaurant. They helped me get boots, gloves, and a hardhat when I was working construction.

Peter's employment goals rest with the military. He is planning laser surgery to correct his vision, and hopes to join within the next six months. Peter graduated with his high school diploma in June 2006.

### Katherine's Profile

Katherine is a twenty year-old woman who left school in grade ten. She has been incarcerated several times, and was in and out of institutions and youth facilities from the time she was thirteen. Katherine became pregnant at eighteen, and attributed her turn-around to her two year-old daughter, Hope. They now live in a small town in rural Ontario, where Katherine attends a day-program for adult learners. My journal notes summarized her as *a young woman, really still a child in many ways, who needs to have faith in her abilities. She needs to stay strong and focussed on what she wants in life. She*

*is so intelligent, yet so easily distracted by the dysfunction that surrounds her.* Katherine will graduate in June of 2007.

*Early Family Experiences*

Katherine was born in 1985 in an urban centre in southern Ontario. Adopted at birth, and the younger of two children, Katherine described herself as the "black sheep" of the family. She believed that her adoption was the source of many of her emotional problems (journal entry: *I wonder if children who are adopted are at a greater risk of dropping out?*):

> When I was a child it [the adoption] was very significant to me. Subconsciously and consciously it played a huge part in a lot of what happened when I was a kid...just not knowing who I was, and where I came from. It was a big deal. Some of my family's reactions to the fact that I was adopted...my father's sister and my cousins have always been the worst for making me feel that I was not a part of the family. She is a real bitch...Occasion after occasion I would be told that dogs were more a part of the family than me. *Nobody wants you here.* When my grandmother died and when I was at the funeral, my grandmother and I didn't get along very well, but I became close with her before she died, well my cousins made that funeral very difficult for me. They said, *Nanna didn't even like you.*

Although Katherine did not feel supported emotionally, her early childhood was privileged—her parents were well-off financially, and had the means to provide for their girls. But for Katherine, that meant that there was less time for family activities:

> I had a different childhood, that's for sure. Even when I was young, I was a latchkey kid. Dad owned his own business and Mom was a nurse who was in an

> executive position. She ran the health care for retirement homes. It was a very white-collar family. Everything was done by the book. Very proper.

Much of her care fell to her older sister Lucy, who was ten years her senior. Their relationship was complex—Katherine was devastated when Lucy left for university—but also resented many of her sister's talents. Ultimately, Katherine did not feel as though she belonged:

> I am adopted, so that throws a lot of relevance into everything…it just caused other problems for me…things were kept from me. Later on, as I became older, I had more knowledge of what it meant…my sister was always a part of the family. She went on to university and did her Masters. She's the perfect one, the shining star, she is part of the herd and I am the black sheep.

When Katherine was three, the family moved to another town in southern Ontario and remained in the area for several years. It was in this community that Katherine's educational journey would begin.

*Elementary School Experiences*

Katherine's recollections of elementary school varied. Academically, she excelled:

> I have never had a problem with the school work. It has never been about the school work. I was always an excellent reader. Memories that I have of my parents when I was young, things were still good at home. We would read every night. They would do stuff with me. Something changed at some point. I think a big change happened when my sister left for university. I was pretty young then. She left at eighteen, so I would have been eight.

Katherine described feeling extremely alone once her sister left. In my journal, I wondered to what extent siblings affect one another's learning. *Lucy was there everyday for Katherine. She provided her with companionship and guidance after school, and was the one constant in her life.* When Lucy left, Katherine was devastated:

> I had anxiety from the separation. Everyone thinks that it is only a thing for dogs when I talk about it, but I had severe separation anxiety surrounding my sister leaving. It was pretty traumatic.

In my journal, I noted that *many of the participants have experienced significant trauma and emotional pain or loss.* Socially, Katherine began to have difficulties relating to her peers. Her file indicated problems with group work and conflict resolution and in grade six, was identified as a behavioural student.

> School was really bad. I got beaten up a lot. It went on for a long time before anyone knew. And I was one of those kids that was hungry for knowledge. I wanted to learn about everything at one point. They thought that I was ADD and they screwed around with drugs. That probably screwed me up for a while too. They had me on different medications.

Eventually, a psycho-educational evaluation was completed, although a copy of this report is missing from her student profile. Numerical results from another cognitive assessment (Otis-Lennon School Ability Test, Sixth Edition) were on file, however. These results suggested that Katherine was an extremely bright student, especially within the verbal domain. Her overall abilities ranked her at the 83$^{rd}$ percentile, which is well within the High Average range. At one point, she was screened for the gifted program within her district, but again, the results were missing from her file. Katherine offered

these thoughts on the numerous psychological and academic assessments that she has endured:

> That showed them a lot...how they really had it screwed up. It wasn't that I was...couldn't focus or I was stupid as they thought I was. I was excessively bright and did everything faster than everyone around me and I was bored. I overanalysed everything. And they also didn't realize how tormented I was at school. I have been tested for bi-polar, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder...I was basically psychologically screened. A lot of what psychologists would come to in the end was *a product of emotional scars and distress, etc., etc.* It was all Borderline, Borderline, Borderline...I was a difficult kid...I don't even blame half of the kids sometimes for the way I was picked on because I was an asshole! I was an asshole child, I can say that! As I got older, I was able to make friends really well, but I wasn't able to keep friends. I lashed out on other people, or I guess I didn't know how to interact with them.

Journal entries note the lack of close friendships during Katherine's schooling. *She didn't talk about best friends like Linda, the other female participant,* I wrote. In an attempt to straighten their daughter out, Katherine was sent to a private Christian school in grade eight, which she described as "hateful," although her report card indicated that she was quite successful despite documented difficulties with organization and assignment completion.

All in all, Katherine's elementary education was emotionally draining and while she was a bright student, she appeared to lack the social skills, self-confidence and self-discipline needed to be successful. She harboured many negative feelings towards her parents and extended family, and continues to struggle with her adoption.

*Secondary School Experiences*

Katherine was unable to complete grade nine within a regular high school. Her aggressive behaviour led to an assault conviction, the result of an altercation with another female student. She was suspended several times for truancy, for failing to hand in assignments, and for aggressive/defiant behaviours. She also reported being assaulted by two boys on the bus. Her parents tried to home school her for a few months, but Katherine was unable to be successful in her studies. When she was fourteen, she entered a Section 19 residential classroom mid-way through her grade ten year, and was identified as having a behaviour/emotional disorder. By this time, she was living in a residential facility.

*Dropping Out*

That September, she enrolled again in a regular high school, but the events following this period are sketchy, according to Katherine. Her records indicate that she attended five different high schools between September 2000 and April of 2003 and was in and out of custody facilities and group homes. Her parents moved, and were having marital problems:

> They told me that it was because of me that they moved…I completely ruined their lives there, but they had their own problems. My dad's business went under…that was my fault, too. I moved out pretty quick. I actually tried to go back with my family and back to school…I didn't really have any choice whether I was in or out of school because I was usually in a program or group home after high school. When I was seventeen and returned to a regular school, I had just gotten out of jail, and I was in a house that was structured… But then it went down hill because I was living on the streets. First I moved in with a boyfriend

> and the relationship got abusive and I was hospitalized and then I left him. I was on the streets and lived there for two years…Then I got into a different kind of lifestyle, and I was working a different kind of life…the black market.

Katherine repeatedly tried to complete high school, but she was unable to connect with many of her peers or staff, and was unable to commit to a studious lifestyle:

> Impersonal. Not much caring. But I guess it is a school. They are not your family. The Section 19 class was a better set up. But we were still children, and we still felt threatened, and that was a big deal for me because at this point, I wasn't on the same level as my peers. I was living on my own, I had gone through a lot of things that a lot of people hadn't. I was a child, but I wasn't a child, and I had some serious issues with being treated like one. I am a very strong person on give respect and you get it, and that was what we were constantly being told by teachers and by staff, but yet it wasn't being reflected back on us…High school, to me, represents something impersonal…you don't have the one-on-one or plans set up for a student's specific needs, or just the realization that every human is different and we each have different needs. It feels like cattle being herded, and that's what high school pretty much felt like.

However, there were some staff members with whom she could connect:

> I remember I had this Vice Principal that I had a very good relationship with. I was able to explain to him over the breakdown of the year what was going on. They were very easy on me and they tried to accommodate me and tried to help me stay in school, but it just didn't work out. It was just too much.

Fortunately, she was able to discuss her problems with a worker from one of the many facilities she attended.

> The person who did a lot of work with my family and with me personally…basically she became like a mother to me. If I look back at all of the hell that I have gone through in my life, that is the one person that stands out as being the most supportive to me.

As an aside, Katherine met up with this woman many years later, and was able to "express to her how important she was in my life back then, and how much she really helped, how much she had really done just by being a part of my life." However, at that earlier time in her life, Katherine finally decided to give up school for good.

*Dropping In*

Life on the streets was rough. Katherine did not elaborate to any length on this portion of her history, but did report that she lived the "partying lifestyle." When she was eighteen, Katherine became pregnant with her boyfriend's baby:

> It was scary. It was scary. At that point in my life, I was very depressed, and I guess finding out I was pregnant gave me the hope because I had a suicide attempt before I found out. But just the fact of her being there was hope and faith. She was a reason! Up to that point, my life hadn't been the best…I definitely would not be here today if I hadn't had Hope. I definitely would not be alive, not a chance. Months after I would have been gone, it was that close.

She lived on the streets until she was six months pregnant, and then moved to a maternity house. After the birth of her child, and living with friends, Katherine decided to make some changes:

> I needed to get away from these people. I wanted to bring my daughter closer to her father. She was seven months old.

Katherine's boyfriend had moved back home, and she decided to follow him back to his rural hometown. She quickly found a low-income housing unit, and began to collect social assistance. A program through Ontario Works for single parents was offered (LEAP-Learning, Earning and Parenting) and Katherine jumped at the chance to finally complete her high school education. She credited the program with giving her the chance to regain her life and while she did have some valid complaints about program regulations, she acknowledged the difference that is has made in her life.

> When I first came back, I was doing it to please my boyfriend's mom. I knew it was the right thing for my daughter and me, but I knew that I wasn't at the right spot yet. And then, I got here, and over the year, my attitude has really changed. I am looking to get this done. The school has given me a love for learning again, that is for sure. I enjoy learning new things. At first I was nervous. It was a bit embarrassing, but everyone was in the same boat.

Journal entries begin to compare the reasons for returning to school with other participants. *Katherine's initial motivation was external—she wanted to please her boyfriend' mom instead of doing it for herself. But then things began to change and she recognized the intrinsic benefits of returning to school.* She elaborated further on the changes in her life:

> Life is completely different. I guess there is still a lot of turmoil, and I still have problems that are more severe now…like when I look back on high school and the problems that I had then, they were kind of like…well they seemed severe at the times…I had a lot of problems that disrupted me in high school…but they don't seem very severe now, so I guess maturity came, so…it's just, when I think about it…I had problems back then that I couldn't deal with effectively in school. Now I

> have bigger problems that are way above and beyond what I had then, yet I manage to cope somewhat now…I have more determination now. I have a broader outlook on what life is. Having a daughter did that for me.

Up to this point, Katherine was achieving mixed results in her studies. She attended the adult program on a full-time basis and was enrolled in college and university level courses. While she does have adequate ability, her teachers noted that her assignments were often incomplete, and her grades suffered as a consequence. Finding the time to complete her schoolwork was the biggest single challenge that Katherine faced (journal entry: *...as a mother of three children under ten, I know how busy life gets. Thank God I have a husband who knows his way around a kitchen and laundry room!*)

> It gets very overwhelming sometimes. The fact that I don't have much time to do homework. When I finally get her in bed, I am wiped! Even the two hours after she is in bed, I am sweeping, mopping, …I can't do things while she is awake. She needs my constant attention. So, it gets tiring. There is so much other stuff on my mind, and it's hard to focus sometimes. I get a little bit behind, and I always seem to be trying to catch up. In ways I see myself repeating some of the same habits as when I was in high school. I have to stop myself, like procrastinating, and making everything else the first priority.

An on-again, off-again relationship with her daughter's father distracted her from her work as well. Their relationship can only be described as unstable, and at times, violent.

> I'd enjoy not having to parent ALL of the time. Having that second parent would allow me to do that. Even doing the groceries alone…just to be a normal human being and not always Mom…

Clearly, Katherine's lament has been echoed by millions of single parents. The investment of time, patience and love for her child, although rewarding, was draining as well.

Emotionally, Katherine drew a great deal of support from her friends, peers, teachers, and even her mother, with whom she had re-established a relationship.

> My mom and I have got a lot closer with me having a child. She divorced after having my sister, and she was left on her own. I guess I never realized what my Mom's situation was back then. In a way, we can finally relate to each other. She went back to university as a mature student…she can sympathize with me. She'll say how hard it really is…they're proud, and I'm proud.

While Katherine's friends, many of them in their last year in a regular high school, were getting ready for college, it appeared that she drew more support from her peer-group within the adult education program:

> It is the adult maturity thing. Everyone is very supportive and says *Way to go!* whereas in a regular school it is looked down upon. Here we joke around and call each other brown-nosers, but really we are competing with each other!.. I have so much respect for the people who are coming back as older adults…

Katherine's teachers and the structure of the program were described as exceptional as well:

> …just being able to work at your own pace is a big thing. They understand that you have other things going on in your life…and it's the respect. The teaching methods, too. They are directed at the student's needs individually, rather than the majority of the group, and there is lots of prep for tests…we can walk around freely—we do what we have to do and we get our work done…they are flexible

> with absences...the principal actually listens to you and asks, *O.K., what can we do to fix it?* He leaves the solution with the student...I think he understands that I have to miss some days...I have a sick kid sometimes, or I have to go to appointments...They make us look at the fact that this isn't just high school—this is your life! They make us really focus and give us a look at the huge, broad horizons that are out there. By walking these little hallways, it will open a world to us...They make us think that you have to do college. You are not going anywhere without it.

Katherine's teachers renewed her self-confidence and encouraged her to aim high. During an interview, they stated that although work completion (in a timely manner) was sometimes an issue, they were positive that Katherine would continue to do well in the program. During the classroom observation, she appeared engaged in her learning, and sought clarification on several points during the lesson. Since her return to school, she had a sense of purpose and direction in her life, and had a strong desire to attend college:

> I am pretty set in that I want to go in the mental health field. I want to work with youth, more than anything. I feel the need to constantly make a change. I want to be a problem solver. I think that is what I have to do...not just to fulfill my own life, but to help others.

Katherine's story is far from over. While she is often tempted to return to her "old ways," her determination and self-confidence have, up to this point, kept her compass pointed in the right direction.

## Alex's Profile

Alex is an 18 year-old male who has recently decided to return to school. He attended several alternative programs in the past few years, but was unable to complete

his graduation requirements within these learning environments. The general impressions, recorded in the researcher's journal, described him as *a person who sees himself as misunderstood. He is angry at himself for the poor decisions he has made and appears to be angry in general. He wants to succeed, but needs help with setting realistic goals for himself. This next year will be so important for him.* Alex continues to live with his parents in rural Ontario.

*Early Family Experiences*

Alex was born in a large urban area in 1988. The youngest of three, he described his early childhood as relatively happy. His family life appeared stable, and his parents had a strong relationship with each other and with their children. Alex's two sisters are five- and eight-years older than him, and are no longer living at home. Alex reported good sibling-relations with his sisters. His mother worked off and on during his formative years, and his father was employed within the automotive industry. During the first four years of his life, Alex reported four moves to ensure his father and mother could secure employment. In my journal, I noted that several studies linked transient students with high rates of non-graduation, and wondered if these moves affected Alex's ability to cope with peers. The family finally settled in a rural area that bordered a larger city within Ontario, and remained there for five or six years.

*Elementary School Experiences*

Alex's transition to school was not easy. He disliked it from the start and recalled this memory:

> About three weeks into kindergarten, I figured out how I could fake being sick, and I was often home sick…Ever since I have been going to school, I haven't

> really gotten along with a lot of different people. There have been a lot of problems.

When Alex was in grade four, he moved again, this time to a rural town nestled within a farming community. When asked to recall successes during these early years, Alex mentioned the arts as one area of interest, stating, "I like the creative stuff, like art and music. Nothing else." He hated reading and math, and generally, did not find his teachers to be helpful.

> My teachers pretty much just pushed me along. I didn't get no help. One teacher in grade five I liked...he introduced me to the guitar...he is the only teacher that I ever liked...but at the end, he was starting to get rude. I don't know what it is...my teachers just hated me because I can't grasp things the way other kids do.

Alex stated that motivation was a serious challenge that he faced. A review of his OSR clearly indicated behavioural difficulties; several suspension letters were on file for mostly aggressive and non-compliant behaviours. A psycho-educational report was not on file.

When asked about friendships, Alex reported difficulties with making and keeping friends. He recalled one particularly painful experience:

> I remember in grade eight we used to hang around a group of friends...and this one kid didn't like me, so everyone in the group turned against me and all I care about, even to this day, is that people care about me and like me. He got everybody to hate me and I didn't have any friends up until grade nine...it got to the point where I had to switch over to the other class because he was bothering me so much.

Alex's parents believed that school was important. They encouraged Alex to complete his work, but he "never did homework." He did the least amount of work needed to scrape by:

> All through my life, I do absolutely nothing for the entire school year...and right when it is time to get something done, I just pass, and just get through. I only put in the minimal effort.

Again, goal-setting and motivation were cited as key barriers to his learning. (Journal entry: *Why doesn't he understand the importance of education?*)

*Secondary School Experiences*

In high school, Alex enrolled in P-level (Applied) courses. In grade nine, he passed six out of eight courses, with his grades ranging from 50% to 68%. His performance in grade ten was not any better. Attendance was poor, and his marks were a reflection of the numerous incomplete assignments that had accumulated over the year. He began dealing drugs, which resulted in more suspensions:

> The first reason I ever got suspended, two weeks into the year, was because some of my friends got sick on some pot I got for them.

Alex, at one point, was heavily into drugs, including cocaine. He never really connected with his peer group at high school, preferring instead to spend time with an older crowd who were not attending school:

> The problem was my grades were all right, but the people around me weren't who I thought they were. I didn't feel comfortable. I always felt like the black sheep...I never really trusted anybody.

As he recalled his lack of friends, he stumbled upon this memory:

> I had one friend in particular. He was the only friend that I had. He was the only one that stepped in and talked to me. When I visited him about a year ago, he had just been arrested and charged with stealing a car…it was kind of weird because we were put in the same class back then because we acted out so much, yet we are the kids that are getting in trouble right now. I don't know…we're fed up. I bet 80% of the kids in that class had no trouble with the schoolwork, but they have been in trouble with the law.

Alex's brushes with the law continued. Eventually, he was expelled because of attendance; he frequently skipped classes to spend time with older friends who were no longer in school.

*Dropping Out*

For the next two years, Alex was in and out of alternative schools and special programs designed to keep him in school. One program involved attending an alternative school in the morning and working in the afternoon:

> I didn't do anything there. I hated the teacher. They wanted us to go to school for half of the day and the other half, work for them. I said, *No way. I don't feel like working for nothing!* They gave you hard jobs, too. You would come back and your fingers would be ripped apart. I didn't like that too much.

Alex's experiences at another alternative setting were short-lived, due to a violent outburst towards another student that resulted in an assault charge. Obviously, he was not allowed to return to that program. He offered these thoughts on his secondary experiences:

> I don't understand in high school…they take a whole course and stretch it out over four months, when I can do it in two weeks! They stretch it out. Kids don't

> want to be there and see the same faces and put up with the bitchy teachers. They end up dropping out. I wish that they would have started me on correspondence right from the start. Instead I just kept dropping out and going from school to school.

Alex was hard-pressed when asked to recall a significant teacher that made a positive impact on his learning. He was finally able to recall two individuals, the vice-principal of his high school, and one of his alternative school teachers as being somewhat helpful:

> Well, he always had an eye out for me. He asked the principal of the adult program if I could come, even though I wasn't eighteen yet. He knew that the fight was provoked…I did feel supported somewhat by him.

And:

> Mr. Williams. He used to play for the CFL. He was a great guy, understanding. He taught me my Parenting course and helped me with some correspondence courses. He likes to joke…there is a time to be serious and a time to be funny. He knows when to be funny and when to be serious. He never takes out his own problems on other students.

However, Alex would need more support than even the best teacher could provide. He was facing serious legal issues (he allegedly assaulted a fellow student at an alternative school), and had recently broken up with his girlfriend. To make matters worse, his ex-girlfriend became pregnant.

> I went through some pretty hard-core psychological stuff with her because she got pregnant and she didn't know if it was mine or her new boyfriend's kid and she went and had an abortion. That really messed up my head.

Alex was at a cross-roads. With the encouragement of his mother, he decided to return to school once again, this time as an adult. Journal entries noted how lucky he was to have the support of his family.

*Dropping In*

Alex, nearly eighteen by this time, described his life after dropping out as boring, stating that he "sat around at home and did nothing." After several months, his parents gave him an ultimatum…return to school or find a job (which he did not want to do at that point in his life). I noted in my journal that, like Katherine, his initial motivation for returning came from external forces (his parents' ultimatum). Upon his return, he described a change in attitude:

> I used to hate school. Back in elementary I hated it. I couldn't understand what I needed to learn stuff for. Now I understand that I need to learn this stuff…I don't know if I have changed that much, except for the fact that I am more motivated to get out of here.

Alex's dreams of "getting rich" or "being a judge" will likely be unfulfilled. His current teachers agree. Attendance is reported to be sporadic, and assignments are often late or incomplete. His school records indicate that he is failing two out of his four classes. My journal noted that *motivation continues to be a serious issue for this young man, and he needs to learn how to set practical short and long-term goals.* Yet, Alex remained hopeful:

> I know a lot more. School is more important to me now, just to get anywhere in life. You can't do jack shit without your grade twelve. I know that I need to climb higher. I am a lot more serious…It is just a matter of doing it! I didn't want to do shit in high school.

The constant presence of Alex's ex-girlfriend impeded his ability to stay focussed in the adult program. She was enrolled in several of the same classes, much to his dismay.

> Just coming here and knowing that she is here. It pisses me off. My teachers let me work in a little side room, so I don't have to see her...I wish I could devote all of my attention to my work, because it is that simple and I could get out of here so fast. But I can't, no matter what. There is too much going on...

Alex's teachers do the best that they can to provide a supportive learning environment for him. Alex described his teachers as very helpful:

> He is a great guy. He used to be friends with my Dad when he went here. I guess he just sees my Dad in me. He is friendly. You can do the work and the teachers support you. He explains things well and doesn't mind helping you...and you have freedom in class. You don't have detentions here. Absences are looked over and you can get up and leave. But next semester, I won't be able to do that!

Alex's teachers understand the pressures and legal challenges that he is facing. They are more lenient with absences and understand the emotional upset that his girlfriend caused. And, for the first time in his life, he feels supported by his peers:

> They are good and supportive. It is like a family. We encourage each other. When all of this stuff happened with my girlfriend, I had the support of everybody, and I don't know what I would have done without it.

Alex had a renewed sense of self and direction:

> I felt proud. I could sleep at night knowing that I didn't do bad things. I used to worry at night...I realize that this is my life...it's fun to think that you can be rich over night, but I realize that it is hard work...this has probably only come to me

over the past month or so. If my head was screwed on right, I wouldn't have been with that girl.

Alex's teachers reported that attendance and work completion continue to impede his success, and the "honeymoon" will be over for him in the fall (an increase in pressure/expectations is planned for Alex). Soon, this volatile period in his life, adolescence, will be over, and hopefully, Alex will set his sights on post-secondary education or an apprenticeship. He expects to graduate in June 2007 and plans beyond that are undecided.

In conclusion, the five profiles highlighted a series of life experiences that led to the untimely departure and subsequent return to high school. The narratives, subjected to a specific lens that narrowed in on several key events in the participants' respective lives, reflected a series of failures and triumphs in the social-emotional and academic spheres. The following cross-case analysis will compare and contrast the personal histories to tease out common themes.

## Cross-Case Analysis

Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously and assumed, as a framework, the examination of three distinct elements of the participants' lives reflected in Seidman's (2006) three interview series. First, the focussed life history examined the educational and personal experiences that led to the final act of dropping out. Second, the details of returning to school as an adult were considered. Finally, the participants reflected on the meaning of dropping out and returning to school, and gained insight into their past as they planned for their future. A cross-case analysis of the emerging patterns in each of the participant's narratives and the researcher's journal was conducted. Following this analysis, the themes are expanded and linked to current literature on the

topic, a representation of their journey is presented, and implications for future research are offered.

*Early Family Experiences*

Each of the participants described his or her earliest family memories in the fondest of terms. All but one participant (Linda) grew up with their siblings with whom they had strong emotional connections. Furthermore, each participant lived in a household where the father was the primary wage-earner, although two of the participants' mothers worked when they were very young. Both Nathaniel and Alex moved several times during the first few years of their lives, but did not recall any anxiety associated with these transitions. Generally speaking, therefore, the first four to five years of all of the participants lives were happy, untroubled, and carefree.

*Early School Experiences*

The majority of the participants (four out of the five) reported a positive start to school. The primary years were characterized by positive relationships with teachers and peers, and relative comfort with the demands of the early school curriculum. The exception to this was Alex's account of his entry into the school system, which was marked by psychosomatic illnesses that often kept him away from kindergarten. Many of the participants, including Katherine, Nathaniel, Peter, and Alex, recalled a change in their feelings toward school around grade three or four. Interestingly, this is when the language curriculum subtly begins to change, as students are expected to read for information and meaning, relating the text not only to their own personal experiences, but also to other texts. Students are expected to have mastered some basic reading skills, with more emphasis placed on choosing appropriate reading strategies, comprehension and connecting with the text.

The reading continuum is a complex process of developing one's abilities in several areas, including motivation, active reading strategies, background knowledge, vocabulary, fluency, decoding, and phonemic awareness (International Reading Association, 2007). Learning to read begins long before children enter school, and continues into adulthood. While writing in my researcher's journal after interviewing Nathaniel (who struggled with reading), I recalled a study of early recollections of learning to read by Morawski (1993). Morawski explored the earliest memories of learning to read of 32 proficient and 30 remedial adult readers. The remedial readers recalled learning to read at a later age (e.g., school-age) than their proficient counterparts, and the memories tended to be more negative in their tone. The proficient readers, on the other hand, recalled learning to read at a much earlier age (pre-school), and the memories were positive. At the next interview, I asked Nathaniel to recall his earliest reading memory, and the story he related (see Nathaniel's profile) supported Morawski's findings—his earliest recollection was in grade five, and it was a negative memory.

In fact, all but one of the participants in the study reported major, yet undiagnosed learning difficulties or differences that contributed to their poor academic achievement or adjustment to school. Nathaniel cited difficulties with reading from an early age, yet no formal psycho-educational assessment was ever done. Consequently, he was unable to access supports (i.e., high tech equipment and resource assistance) that might have assisted with reading/writing difficulties. He was the only participant for whom an Individual Education Plan could be found during his elementary schooling. Similarly, Peter's academic records indicate poor achievement, yet no psycho-educational assessment was completed until he was an adult. At this later stage, he was diagnosed with ADHD and became eligible for a disability pension.

Alternately, while Katherine was exceptionally bright, and did undergo several thorough assessments throughout her educational life, she was always at the cusp—in her words "I was 'borderline' everything." Again, no copy of any psycho-educational report was on file, despite several references to these evaluations; an opportunity to provide comprehensive programming based on Katherine's learning strengths was missed because the information was not filed into her student record. Katherine's dislike of school was the outcome of several bullying incidences, of which she was the target. It was also during this period of her life that her older sister left for university, an event which she described as "traumatic." Linda, the only other female in this study, also experienced personal pain and trauma during her early elementary career with the loss of her mother to cancer, and the subsequent antics of her alcoholic father, which still haunt her to this day.

The quality and nature of peer relationships within the school setting varied between the interviewees. For Alex and Katherine, peer relationships were characterized as mostly negative and were somewhat dysfunctional, leading to illegal pursuits once they reached high school. On the other hand, Linda and Nathaniel described their relationships with peers as overwhelmingly positive, and each of them missed the support of their friends once they left school. Peter's appraisal of friendships was neutral in its tone, but he did mention the importance of having one or two close friends. Therefore, while for some of the participants leaving school was an escape from the mental anguish associated with a chronic inability to associate with the majority of peers, for others, leaving school marked the elimination of a social network of friends.

*Secondary School Experiences*

Most of the high school educational experiences shared by the participants were negative in their tone. Furthermore, they felt unsupported by the school, and characterized many of their teachers as uncaring and unresponsive to their needs. Peter mentioned uncaring teachers on several occasions. Nathaniel felt betrayed by his teachers in general and his geography/physical education teacher in particular. Alex held very negative perceptions about his teachers in both the elementary and secondary panels. Neither of the female participants, however, was overly negative in their recollections of school staff and/or supports. Linda was usually quite positive in her appraisal of teaching staff, especially during her elementary years and Katherine's early memories of teachers tended to be neutral in their tone—her negative memories were rooted in difficulties with her peers and family, rather than teachers and/or school staff. In my journal, I noted *many high school students have similar negative experiences, yet they stay in school. Why do they persist and how are they different from my participants?*

While most of the participants characterized their teachers as being unsupportive, uncaring, and/or emotionally distant, all of the students were able to identify at least one supportive teacher during their schooling with whom they could relate. However, the odds were stacked against them, and leaving appeared to be the only way out. For most of the participants, there were too few caring relationships with teachers to make any academic effort worthwhile.

All of the participants had low grades during their high school years, despite any individual learning plans that were put into place. Four out of the five participants took Basic and General Level courses, or what is now referred to as P (Applied), E (Workplace), and O (Open) Level courses, which are slower-paced and more practical

than the theoretical university and college-bound courses. Generally, their marks clustered within the 50% to 60% range, with a few students achieving the odd 70%. Even Katherine, who was by far the brightest in terms of her cognitive profile, took mostly General/P (Applied) level courses.

All of the participants had significant attendance difficulties that began in their elementary years. Often, the truancy was associated with a profound dislike of school. Alex, in particular, disliked school from the onset. For Linda, extenuating circumstances (her mother's illness and subsequent death) led to her early history of absenteeism. The vast majority of excessive absences, however, occurred when the participants were in high school. Nathaniel often skipped because it was painful to see his mentally ill brother and because he was doing poorly in his courses.

To summarize, several problematic structures and strained relationships contributed to the premature departure of the participants. Linda was literally forced out of high school because she was pregnant. Inflexible rules and regulations were cited as major reasons for Peter leaving high school. Large class sizes limit the opportunity for teacher-student interactions, and the ability to establish and maintain a personal connection is reduced. Teachers with poor classroom management skills invite confrontation and negative behaviours from some of their students, contributing to an overall poor classroom climate. Several of the participants cited major behavioural issues that were dealt with in an ineffective and insensitive manner. Obviously, behaviour issues plagued the school lives of all of the participants. Many of them were angry, and really felt as though the school was pushing them out. All of them identified staff members that were perceived to be especially insensitive to their needs. Lastly, attendance issues plagued all of the interviewees. Forcing students to remain at school, in spite of a track

record of extended truancy, seems counter-productive. An inflexible school day that did not consider their strengths appeared to influence the decision to leave school early.

*Dropping Out*

All of the students, some to a greater extent than others, reported a tremendous sense of powerlessness and loss associated with personal pain that coincided with their early departure. A death or illness in the family, the severing of an intimate relationship, unplanned pregnancies...all came to bear upon their decision to leave. One of the most poignant stories was related by Nathaniel, whose brother was, and obviously continues to be, ill with schizophrenia. At the time, the illness was not formally diagnosed but his brother's bizarre behaviour was both frightening and embarrassing. Linda and Katherine's unplanned pregnancies were upsetting, to say the least. Linda was pregnant during the 1980s, a time when attitudes towards teen mothers were less liberal than today. However, pregnancy in the 21st Century is still frightening, as Katherine's story revealed. Alex's ex-girlfriend also became pregnant, which obviously shook the young couple. In spite of their difference in ages, all three experienced great deal of stress, hostility, and anxiety with their pregnancies. In Linda's case, violence was also present.

The level of family supports varied between participants. At one extreme, family support was non-existent. Interestingly, this was the case for the two female participants, who were, and continue to be, the only two participants in this study who do not rely on their parents emotionally or financially. Linda left home at fifteen, but has been without a mother since she was nine. Katherine felt abandoned by her family from an early age. Adopted at birth, she cited this as a significant emotional issue that continues to haunt her, although she has begun the reconciliation process with her parents. Strong family ties

were reported by all of the male participants during the events that led up to their dropping out and each of them has maintained a positive relationship with their parents.

All of the participants related numerous minor offences often associated with adolescence (e.g., experimentation with drugs and alcohol), yet for some of the students, the troubling nature of their behaviour had serious consequences. This was especially true for Katherine and Alex, both self-professed social misfits who relied heavily on peer-approval. Katherine, who was in and out of facilities from an early age, was placed in custody on several occasions for aggressive behaviour. Alex's aggression and inability to control his emotions also led to his departure from school and ultimate arrest. Nathaniel had his share of run-ins with the law. He described himself as a target by school staff, and vividly recalled several encounters with the local police. It seemed that for the majority of participants, their involvement, or suspected involvement in illegal activities, contributed to their untimely departure.

In summary, the reasons for dropping out were intricately linked with the nature of the social and emotional disengagement that occurred prior to their final departure. For the majority of the participants, school was not a positive place to be, and for a variety of reasons, they felt unsupported by either school staff or their families. Learning differences plagued most of them, as did chronic absenteeism. All of the students described significant pain in their personal lives that coincided with their leaving school, and some of them were involved or accused of being involved in criminal activities. For those who did have strong social and emotional ties with their school peers (e.g., Nathaniel and Linda), leaving was not a voluntary act, but rather was a decision imposed upon them by the school due to their inability to conform to the rules.

*Dropping In*

All of the participants described their return as a series of events that unfolded over an extended period, more as a process, rather than a single experience. After leaving school, some of the participants found themselves employed in dead-end, low-paying positions. As the oldest, Linda held the greatest number of positions, ranging from maid to short-order cook, to an aide in a retirement residence. At one point in her life, she held down three jobs just to pay the bills. Nathaniel recalled several seasonal jobs in the agricultural sector, but found the work backbreaking and unfulfilling. Similarly, Peter became bored with the positions that he held, and, more recently, found it difficult to secure any job as a result of his disability (ADHD). Katherine and Alex, the youngest participants, have not worked at all since leaving high school. Katherine, as a young and single-mother, relied on social assistance for support, and Alex lived at home with no financial responsibilities.

The reasons for returning varied somewhat. For some, returning to school satisfied a requirement to obtain social assistance, for others, gentle parental/family pressure compelled them to try again. Despite these differences, all of the participants mentioned on several occasions that their decision to return was rooted in a deep desire to make genuine changes in their lives. They expressed a desire to be employed in a meaningful career that paid more than minimum wage and all of them cited being more mature, more committed and determined, and more serious about school and their future.

The first few weeks of adult high school were scary for all of the participants. Unsure of what to expect, each related their innermost fear of embarking on a journey that they could possibly fail to complete (again). These fears were soon put to rest, and all of them quickly realized that adult high school was much different than regular high

school, thanks to a supportive staff. Indeed, the teachers were repeatedly described by all of the participants as "supportive, caring, respectful, understanding, and flexible." Encouraging families and friends further facilitated their return for all of the participants, including Katherine, who had reconciled with her adoptive mother and was beginning to re-establish an emotional connection. Another notable differences between the adult program and the regular high school program was the high level of camaraderie that they shared with each other in the adult classroom; this appeared to be the crucial layer of support that promoted individual success. Furthermore, each of them stressed the importance of feeling welcome at school (an unfamiliar feeling for many of them), of being respected by their teachers and peers, and of having a sense of belonging that kept them motivated to learn.

The adult education program was not without its criticisms, however. When asked to describe some of the problems with the program, the two older participants (both in their thirties) stated that too many "kids," who were not serious about learning, were admitted. Interestingly, two of the younger students expressed a wish to lower the age of admittance (currently eighteen years) to sixteen, as this would have made the adult program an option for them when they were considering dropping out the first time. Transportation surfaced repeatedly as an issue for the vast majority of students. One of them hitch-hiked forty kilometres each day to attend classes. Others relied on the support of family members to shuttle them back and forth. Katherine, the exception, was provided with government funding for a taxi to daycare and then school. Unfortunately, public transit was non-existent in the community. Another problem that all of the participants overwhelmingly identified was the financial hardship and sacrifices they have made since their return. As all of them attend a full-time day program, none of them are able to work

to support themselves, and none of them work part-time during the evenings. Linda mentioned the lack of scholarships for students pursuing post-secondary education. Additionally, several of the participants indicated a lack of expertise and resources in some of the courses. By no means did they fault the teachers, whom they described as dedicated and committed, but there was a general consensus that with so few staff, it was impossible to be an expert in all areas of the high school curriculum. Further, a lack of resources and teaching materials (e.g., slides and lab equipment for science-related subjects) made learning more difficult. Nathaniel observed the lack of additional supports (i.e., computer scanners and other high tech aids) that would assist students with reading disabilities. Given the high proportion of students with learning disabilities in our adult education programs, a need for additional supports is surely warranted. My own personal observations concerned the lack of psycho-educational resource services available to these students. Many of the students came from a school board where psycho-educational resources were not available to them. Undoubtedly, some of the students had undiagnosed learning disabilities that should be recognized to enable access to available supports as they complete high school and beyond (including guaranteed accommodations at the post-secondary level, for which a formal psycho-educational evaluation is required). Perhaps the greatest challenge faced by all of the participants was the lack of time that they had during the evenings and weekends to devote to their studies. Thankfully, homework was usually completed during class, so there was often little to take home.

As the students reflected on their past, a picture of their future began to unfold. For some, the image was clear. Linda and Katherine were determined to carry on to college. Interestingly, both expressed a fervent desire to enter the field of social services

to help troubled youth and adolescents. Peter, the oldest male participant at thirty-one, just wanted a job, hopefully with the Canadian Forces. The future for Nathaniel and Alex was murky. Nathaniel realized his future hinged on further education, and expressed an interest in learning a trade, but was also realistic about his (undiagnosed) learning disability, and what he was and was not able to accomplish. Completing his grade twelve remained an achievable goal. Alex was the most puzzling of all of the participants. Barely an adult, he had unrealistic expectations about his abilities, and was not eager to enter the workforce. He seemed somewhat dissatisfied with life, but was unable to set goals for himself. He remains committed, however, to completing his high school education.

*Concluding Remarks*

This chapter presented the individual profiles of the participants. A cross-case analysis of the personal and educational experiences revealed a common trajectory charged with emotion, yet within each narrative, unique events offered greater insight into their departure and subsequent return.

# CHAPTER FIVE

# DISCUSSION

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood
And sorry that I couldn't travel both
And be one traveler I stood
And looked as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth.
Then took the other one just as fair
And having perhaps the better claim
Because it was grassy and wanted wear
Though as far as the passing there
Had worn them really about the same.
And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step and trodden black
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way
I doubted if I should ever come back.
I shall be telling this with a sign
Somewhere ages and ages hence;
Two roads diverged in a woods, and I
I took the one less traveled by
And that has made all the difference.
- Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken*

The preceding chapter offered a description of the participant profiles and a comparative analysis of the narratives. This chapter briefly reviews the study and responds to the three guiding research questions. The emerging themes are then categorized and linked to the literature.

This qualitative study examined the personal and educational experiences of five adult education students returning to school to obtain their Ontario Secondary School Graduation Diploma (OSSGD). The study adopted a three-interview format and each interview was guided by one of three research questions, which are restated below:

1. What are the educational and personal experiences that lead to the final act of dropping out?
2. What are the current educational experiences of the returning student? and;
3. What are the insights and reflections associated with dropping out and returning to school? Where does the student see himself or herself in the future?

Additional interviews with the continuing education teachers, a review of Ontario Student Records, and field notes taken during classroom observations rounded out the data collection.

The individual interviews provided a rich description of many key events and experiences that contributed to the eventual dropping out of the five participants. This chapter will distinguish themes and categorize them as either contributing to their academic and social/emotional disengagement (which led to their departure) or as contributing to their academic and social/emotional re-engagement and return to the educational system. The discussion will adopt a socio-cultural framework, in that it

underscores the social relationships within the narrative, relying on personal memories to create the structure.

## Research Question One: What are the educational and personal experiences that led to the final act of dropping out?

### Academic and Social-Emotional Disengagement: Personal and Educational Experiences Leading to Their Departure

This section will explore the first research question: *What are the personal and educational experiences that led to the final act of dropping out?* Each of the participants related unique stories of his or her departure and all of them characterized individual disengagement as a process or a series of events, rather than a single incident, a finding reflected in several studies (e.g., Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000; Alexander, Entwisle & Horsey, 1997). Tinto (1975), in his examination of college dropouts, argued that "it is the individual's integration into the academic and social systems of the college that most directly relates to his continuance in that college" (p. 96), a statement perhaps equally applicable to the secondary level.

Several themes emerged within the category of social and emotional disengagement, impacting the individual students in diverse ways. The eventual disconnect was characterized by mostly positive early school experiences that gradually became less constructive. Undiagnosed learning differences, poor academic performance, pregnancy, truancy, and physical/structural barriers that inhibited their learning were often cited as the basis for their departure. These reasons support McCaul's 1989 analysis of survey data of rural youth, which indicated that rural students were more likely to drop out due to marriage, pregnancy, job opportunities, disability or illness, or because they could not get along with their teachers.

*Physical and Structural Barriers*

Several structures and policies within the school setting were identified as barriers. Perhaps the most obvious example of this was revealed by Linda, who was shamed into leaving school because of her untimely pregnancy. Peter also cited "stupid rules," such as a t-shirt and jean policy as major irritants when he was at school. Policies for late assignments, large class sizes, and punitive, unnatural consequences for truancy (i.e., suspension) further alienated the youth, a finding supported by Gallagher (2002). Moreover, a balanced school day, that would accommodate students on a part-time basis (leaving the remainder of the day for work, caring for children, or other responsibilities), was not an option for any of the students. These corroborate Rutter and Margelofsky's findings (1997), where they cited the impossibility of balancing all of the demands placed upon a student. To find balance, several students chose to leave behind the commitment that would have the least impact on their immediate lives (Rutter & Margelofsky, 1997).

*Relationships, Social Skills and Support Systems*

Three of the five participants shared several stories of negative relationships with their peer-group. Many students who are at-risk of dropping out manifest insufficient knowledge of the steps involved in social interactions (Bullis et al., 2001). These findings support Gallagher's (2002) assertion that the quality and nature of peer relationships within the school setting influenced several of the students' decision to leave school. For Alex and Katherine, deficits in social skills led to aggressive behaviours, and ultimately, expulsion. Alex did not recall any social skills instruction in school, nor did his records reflect any such intervention. Katherine, on the other hand, received intensive support through Section 19 programs, yet she was unable to stay in school. Bullis et al. (2001), in

a review of social skills training programs, examined the integrity of such programs, and criticized many as ineffective due to a lack of fidelity, intensity, and duration.

All of the participants reported negative relationships with the majority of their teachers, especially at the secondary level. Nathaniel felt betrayed by his teacher, Katherine felt as though she was treated like a child, Linda was disgraced by many teachers because of her pregnancy, Alex felt as though his teachers hated him, and Peter believed he was considered stupid by his teachers. While they could all recall helpful teachers who were caring, most of the stories they related about their teachers were overwhelmingly negative. Opportunities to build connections with the school community were limited as only one of the five (Nathaniel) participated in extra-curricular activities. Furthermore, Hardre and Reeve (2003), in a study of motivational intentions of rural youth, were intrigued by the possibility that "rural students' academic motivation may be relatively more embedded in the quality of their teacher's motivating styles"(p. 354).

The degree of family support varied between participants when the decision to leave school was finally made. Generally, participants described their family as either very supportive or not supportive at all. Interestingly, both female participants described their family as the latter, that is, extremely unsupportive. Linda, as you may recall, was living on her own, with no help and little contact with her alcoholic father. Katherine, in and out of custody and not living at home, had a rocky relationship with her parents at this time in her life. For the male participants, family support appeared to be quite strong, especially from their mothers who had advocated on their behalf with school staff on several occasions. While little qualitative research exists that examines the nature of family supports at the time of school departure, Jimerson, Egeland, Srouge, and Carlson (2000) contend that the quality of the child's home environment and early care giving are

powerful predictors of dropping out. It was difficult to objectively assess the quality of the home environment and early care given to the participants. However, there was a consensus that their early childhoods were both happy and functional, possibly refuting Jimerson et al. (2000).

*Undiagnosed Learning Differences and Poor Academic Performance*

The majority of participants (four out of five) experienced significant learning differences that, too often, went undiagnosed. For instance, Nathaniel's reading difficulties were well documented, yet psycho-educational services were not available to investigate his intellectual abilities. Peter had considerable difficulty focusing in school, and became frustrated with always being labelled as the "bad kid" for attentional problems that were later diagnosed as ADHD. Katherine was exceptionally bright, yet was unable to succeed in school, partly due to her inability to maintain positive relations with her peers. Essentially, despite their intellectual profiles, all of the participants achieved within the Low Average range at the high school level. Furthermore, there was little evidence in the student files to suggest that substantial supports or accommodations were in place to meet their individual needs (i.e., no IEPs at the elementary level). These findings corroborate the literature, where achievement, attitudes and behaviours influence dropout rates independent of socio-economic factors (Alexander, Entwisle, Horsey, 1997). Further, Frymier (1992), in his pioneering study of dropout predictors, listed a learning disability (or difference) as a significant pre-cursor to leaving school early. Finally, students in rural areas consistently achieve at lower rates and drop out at higher rates, when compared to their urban counterparts (Roscigno & Crowley, 2001).

*Attendance*

Not surprisingly, attendance was a sizeable barrier to their learning. All of the participants had serious lapses in attendance, particularly at the secondary level. The reasons for truancy varied from being bored, to wanting to be with friends, to working, to looking after an ill family member, to a dislike of the teacher. The absences were at times lengthy, and resulted in several suspensions for the majority of participants, further exasperating the problem. This cycle of self-defeating behaviours is a common and well-established theme in dropout research (e.g., Fine, 1991; Gallagher, 2002; LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991).

*Illegal Activities/Behaviour*

All of the participants engaged in illegal activities, some more serious and risky than others. These pursuits included underage drinking, the use of soft and hard drugs, drugdealing, and stealing. In Peter's case, he discovered the self-medicating properties of alcohol during adolescence, reporting that it helped him to relax and stay calm. Dr. Timothy Wilens, a leading expert on ADHD and Substance Abuse Disorder, explained why such a correlation exists:

> This is a question that has yet to be fully answered...but the primary school of thought is that adults are self-medicating their ADHD symptoms. Data presented at the American Psychiatric Assocation convention suggesting that the two main reasons for substance use in adult ADHD seem to be mood attenuation and help with sleep (Wilens, 2006).

The literature mirrors this result, and clearly acknowledges elevated substance abuse in adolescents and adults with ADHD/ADD (e.g., McGough, Smalley, McCracken, Yang, Del'Homme, Lynn & Loo, 2005; Molina & Pelham, 2003). Thankfully, Peter did not

describe himself as an alcoholic; his experimentation with alcohol and soft drugs as an adolescent did not develop into a serious substance abuse disorder.

Other delinquent behaviours described by the participants led, in some instances, to incarceration, one (Katherine) at length. Another participant (Alex) is currently facing charges of assault. This finding supports the literature in that students who engage in risky, illegal behaviours are often at greater risk for dropping out (Alexander, Entwisle & Horsey, 1997; Frymier, 1992).

*Personal Pain*

The theme of personal pain was overtly present in all of the personal histories recorded in this study, a risk factor previously identified by Frymier (1992) in his study of over 21,000 students in grades four, seven, and ten. Their pain was, at times, stark and absolute in its profundity. Alex's uncontrollable anger, the failed relationship and loss of an unborn child "really messed up [his] head." Peter's belief that he was labelled as "stupid" fuelled his hatred for school. The embarrassment, anger and resentment experienced by Nathaniel (because of his brother's mental illness) was palpable in its retelling. Katherine was suicidal and "pretty screwed up," felt rejected by her parents and was in an out of jail prior to her departure and subsequent pregnancy. Finally, Linda was dealing with an absent alcoholic father, an unwanted pregnancy, and a failed relationship when she left the educational system. All of the participants were in crisis, and most believed that they were leaving an unbearable set of circumstances as students. These corroborate Gallagher's findings (2002), in her phenomenological study of five dropouts. The participants in her study maintained that they were leaving one thing, but going to another. The act of departure, in their view, was constructive and "in their thinking, they

were leaving a dysfunctional, confused, and unfamiliar setting and entering one over which they believed they had more control" (p. 43).

Both women in this study were teen mothers. For Linda, the unplanned pregnancy, although admittedly scary, did offer her the chance to nurture and love a child, to succeed where there had only been failure. Katherine was suicidal at that time in her life, yet, when she learned of her pregnancy, she saw that "just the fact of her being there was hope and faith…she was a reason." Interestingly, Rauch-Elnekave (1994), in his study of a program for teenage mothers (N=39), stated that fewer than half reported negative reactions to their pregnancies. He further speculated that parenthood represented a positive option for many, and provided them with opportunities for success that may have been unavailable to them at school, a speculation that warrants some consideration in this study.

Analysis of the personal and educational incidences that led to the final act of dropping out revealed this course of action as a culminating event, preceded by a series of painful, challenging, and significant life experiences. Unplanned pregnancies, family illness, personal pain and loss, truancy, undiagnosed learning differences, deficits in social skills, illegal pursuits, and academic failure resulted in their social and emotional disengagement from school.

## Research Question Two: What are the current educational experiences of the student?

### Academic and Social-Emotional Re-Engagement: Current Educational Experiences

This section will explore the second research question: *What are the current educational experiences of the returning student?* Just as leaving school prior to graduation may be characterized as a process rather than a single event, so too might the eventual return be similarly considered. Entwisle et al. (2004) believe that a "lifecourse

perspective" sheds light upon the life trajectories of school dropouts and graduates. The previous section explored the unique personal and educational circumstances surrounding the dropout of five Canadian students. This section will examine the themes emerging from the narratives of their return, with a particular emphasis on the students' current educational experiences and personal circumstances.

Numerous themes emerged from the analysis of the individual narratives that chronicled their return to high school. Students who drop out of high school are often described as disengaged, which encompasses a variety of academic, social and emotional factors that places them at risk for failure. This general unhappiness and inability to function within a traditional school setting was experienced by all of the participants, and was, in some cases, extreme. Several factors appeared to influence their decision to re-kindle their relationship with school, which in turn, made the conditions ripe for their subsequent academic re-engagement. The emerging themes were: maturity; goals and motivation; personal well-being; support systems; and challenges. For each participant, the significance and meaning constructed within each of the themes varied, but all played a role in defining their academic, social and emotional readiness to re-engage.

*Support Systems*

The participants' dropping back in was supported by a network of family, friends, peers and teachers, all of whom provided the social and emotional backing they needed for success. Indeed, support from family, friends, teachers and peers was a crucial element in the stories of current educational experiences. Nathaniel described a loving family intent on seeing him do well. Katherine regained the respect of her parents, and is re-establishing a connection with them. In Alex's case, family support was more tangible in nature. He relied on his mother to drive him to and from school every day. The

emotional support that they offered was briefly mentioned by Alex, but he has yet to recognize the significant efforts that his family has made on his behalf (i.e., mother negotiated his entry into the program when he initially did not meet the age criteria). Surprisingly, Nathaniel was the only participant who cited his family as his primary support system. While many of the others were on good terms with family members, the majority of them did not live at home. Consequently, the capacity to tap into these supports was, for some participants, quite limited.

Friends outside of school were rarely mentioned as a crucial support system ("most of my friends never finished high school"—Peter). However, many of the students did mention that their close friends were happy to see them return to high school. Their new school peers, however, were frequently cited as a very important social network on whom they rely. Linda, for example, appeared to be an important leader amongst her peers. She advocated to teachers on behalf of her peers if there were problems, and would model appropriate classroom behaviours within the adult education setting for the younger students. This gem of a story needs to be shared—Linda's chastisement of disruptive classmates:

> And me, just being me, I turn around and see these young lads screwing around in class and it's like, *Do you want this pencil case right upside your head? I am here to get some work done. What part of the sign out there did you not comprehend...it says Adult High School. This is why you didn't make it the first time around. This isn't a playground. You are here to do what I am here to do, so let's get on the ball. If not, don't let the door hit you on the way out!...Hey, I'm a Mom. I don't care! You don't scare me!* They all looked at me and were like, *Wow! Someone nasty!* And the older ones in the class all just giggled. They

thought it was hilarious. I said to them, *Don't worry about the teacher, you better worry about me! You have to go out to the smoking area with me! And you're getting an ear full! We're adults now, and I will give you a kick in the ass!*

Linda related this story with humour, but the serious undertones of her message came through loud and clear. She had many stories of "whipping" new recruits into shape, but she did hold their respect and esteem; her tough yet loving approach worked well within the social network of an adult education program, and her peers appeared to respond well to her individuality. While she reported that her fellow-students relied on her support, I believe that they, in return, fulfilled her need to continuously help and mother those around her. It was a reciprocal relationship that worked well. Katherine, who told most of her friends that she was upgrading because she was embarrassed to tell them the truth, relied on the peer-supports that she found at school, frequently mentioning the encouraging camaraderie that has developed within the school community. Nathaniel, by far the most socially skilled of the male participants, mentioned the value of peers in helping with his assignments. Peter, however, voiced his frustration with his peer-group, specifically those who were much younger and immature. Therefore, while most of the students appreciated the support offered by their friends at school, not all did.

All of the returning students perceived their teachers as the leading provider of social and emotional support at school. Their teachers were repeatedly mentioned as being respectful, caring, more relaxed and encouraging and, at times, humourous individuals who instilled within their students the confidence needed to reach their goals. Several of the participants appreciated the individual attention that their teachers provided, as well as their teaching styles and ability to explain things well. The courses were not rushed; students learned at their own pace. Of equal importance was the

flexibility demonstrated by the staff; student absences were dealt with in a compassionate and understanding way, and teachers were lauded for their sympathetic and supportive approach to teaching and learning. Lastly, several students appreciated the confidence that the teachers instilled in their students, and the newly opened doors towards which their teachers were nudging them.

The student supports offered by family, peers, friends, and school staff were characterized by encouraging relationships that promoted their sense of belonging and accomplishment at school. All of the participants mentioned that they would have left had they not found such a supportive school environment.

Research Question Three: What are the insights and reflections associated with dropping out and returning to school? Where does the student see himself or herself in the future?

## Research Question Three: Reflection on the Meaning

This section will explore the final research question: *What are the insights and reflections associated with dropping out and returning to school? Where does the student see himself or herself in the future?*

### *Maturity*

Being more mature was cited on several occasions as one factor that facilitated their return. Each student expressed a more mature attitude towards his or her school work when compared to past educational experiences. Individual levels of maturity and work ethic appeared to correspond with age; while the older students (e.g., Linda and Peter, who were in their thirties) reported good marks, attendance, and had a strong work ethic, the younger students struggled in some of these areas. Obviously, with life experience comes a certain level of maturity. Older students often find themselves adapting to an environment primarily designed for those much younger, a point made by

Bradley and Goldman (1996) in their study of students who return to school. For the three adolescent participants on the verge of adulthood, there was a recognition of the role that maturity plays in their ultimate success or failure at school. Nathaniel realized the importance of attending school, and has matured over the past two years. Having a baby broadened Katherine's horizons and she is more determined than ever to succeed. For all of the participants, maturity appeared to be a deciding factor in their successful return to the adult education system. The ability to dedicate themselves to their studies, attend classes on a full-time basis, complete homework assignments day after day to realize their goals—all of these factors demonstrated a level of maturity that was unseen in previous attempts at high school.

*Aspirations and Motivation*

During the period that preceded their return to school, and while enrolled at the adult education school, the students articulated a series of personal insights that acknowledged the value of education to reach personal and financial goals. All of the participants were receiving governmental assistance, either through Ontario Works (social assistance), Employment Insurance, or through the Ontario Disability Support Plan. Each of them sought independence and a comfortable standard of living where they could afford the basic necessities in life without the added stresses of financial hardship. The theme of motivation and ability to set and reach goals connected each of their stories. While some were more motivated and purpose-oriented than others, the majority were encouraged and determined to meet their goals after so many years had passed. Nathaniel summed up the passage of time in this lament:

> I should be done school! That's the one feeling I have about school. I should be moving on to something else, which is kind of disappointing, but I have to be

> here. I do like it, but there are pros and cons....I am kind of disappointed in myself...I want to make something of myself so that I can do something. That's kind of how I came to the decision to come back to school.

While he admitted that it was sometimes hard to stay motivated, he persisted, as did the majority of his co-participants. For Alex, motivation continued to be an on-going struggle; he needed to learn how to set practical short and long-term goals.

To summarize, each participant described himself or herself as being more motivated, although the initial impetus for their return differed slightly between participants. Initially, extrinsic factors (pleasing someone else, desire to attend school rather than work, desire to gain more education to get a better job) motivated most of the participants to initiate their return. Eventually, the intrinsic benefits of returning to school were experienced by all and are described below as contributing to an increased sense of personal well-being.

*Personal Transformation and Well-Being*

Most of the participants expressed some sort of emotional transformation or change in their lives that enabled their return to school. These changes provided the impetus and motivation to return to school, and included a renewed sense of self and direction and improved feelings of self-worth. For some, including Katherine and Alex, relationship difficulties have complicated their return to school, but both felt that they are now in a better place despite the emotional turmoil. Linda described the transformation that was sparked by the birth of her grandchildren. Nathaniel described himself as "being in the right place," and felt better about himself since his re-entry. Peter stated that after his return, he felt more confident in his abilities, but did not see himself as being transformed in any significant way; he did not classify his return to the adult education

system as a life-changing experience, as the others did do. Thus, while deep feelings of change may not necessarily accompany a return to high school, the narratives strongly suggest that it usually does.

*Challenges*

Several challenges were cited as significant obstacles in their ability to be successful in the program. Financial hardship was the most common challenge that plagued all of the participants. All but one was receiving social assistance in one form or another, yet they desperately wanted to become employable. The personal sacrifices made by the students to study on a full-time basis were genuine and considerable.

Finding the time to complete homework and other assignments and attend school regularly was another serious challenge. Katherine, a single mother of a two-year old daughter, confronted this on a daily basis as she tried to juggle motherhood, school, and running a household. The added emotional stresses of a broken relationship and her attempts to re-connect with her birth parents, left little time for thoughts of school. Nathaniel, Alex, and Katherine, all under twenty-one in years, described feeling tempted to revert to their old ways (i.e., skipping), but knew that they needed to remain steadfast by exerting their willpower to stay in school. The older participants did not struggle as much as the younger students with issues of time management, but they did mention that it was sometimes challenging to find enough hours in the day to get everything done.

Transportation was another issue mentioned frequently by several students. There was no public transportation available to them, and many of the students lived outside of the community where the school was located. Peter hitch-hiked the 20 minute trip (each way) on a daily basis, and was rarely late for school. Nathaniel and Alex, still living at home, were fortunate to have a ride in each day with one of their parents, although Alex

had to wait for two and a half hours after school for his mother to finish work and take him home. Linda had an older-model car, and sometimes drove her peers home on snowy or rainy days. Katherine was fortunate to be involved in a government-funded program where she was eligible (along with her daughter) for taxi rides to and from the daycare and school.

All of the participants cited the lack of resources dedicated to adult learning programs. Whether their lament was the scarcity of books, the facilities (e.g., no science lab, no child care), the lack of teaching resources and materials available to staff, or the lack of human resources, all of these criticisms were not expressed lightly, nor should they be taken as so. My own observations included the lack of high tech aids such as screen reading software, or audio books, to assist struggling readers (who are numerous in adult programs). The scarcity of human resources was evident as well. Teachers were expected to be experts in several disciplines, and to their credit, they did the best that they could with the resources available to them. Finally, the lack of assessment support (i.e., psycho-educational support staff) to identify learning strengths for teachers and students, could have serious implications for those who wish to pursue post-secondary studies, but would not be eligible to attend without a diagnosis of a learning disability provided by a psycho-educational assessment. The fact that all colleges and universities hold places for students with learning disabilities should not be lost on those willing to continue their education. Furthermore, the lack of local scholarships to support a transition into college or university is unfortunate.

While all of the students listed major barriers to their learning, all of them faced these challenges with resolve. The financial hardship they experienced was real, the program continues to face limited resources and issues of transportation plague the rural

student. Time management, or lack thereof, seriously compromised their ability to succeed in the program, yet they remained steadfast and determined to graduate.

*A Look to the Future*

Beyond the goal of completing high school, all but one participant (Alex) expressed a desire to work at a well-paying job (e.g., more than minimum wage) that would make use of their skills. Both women were adamant about attending college in the field of social work/community services, but were unsure about the finances involved with this journey. Nathaniel was considering college to learn a skilled trade, but lacked confidence in his ability to succeed at this level, despite obvious talent in hands-on or mechanical endeavours. Peter, the oldest male participant, wanted to join the military, and stated that he needed laser-eye surgery to correct his vision before the Army would consider his application. The surgery was planned for the fall of 2006. Alex, the youngest participant, was unsure about his future. He reported that he was not in any hurry to enter the workforce. The future for all of the participants remains hazy because of the finite nature of this study. Happily, two participants graduated as this study concluded, however, the other three participants have another year of coursework to complete before realizing their dream. And, while many of them expressed goals that were reasonable and within their reach, their prospects remain uncertain.

*Additional Themes*

The findings of this study suggest that several factors contributed to the departure and subsequent return of the participants. One underlying theme, woven throughout the narratives, was that of resilience. Resilient functioning, especially in children and adolescents, has been a topic of great interest in the literature as of late (Condly, 2006; Haskett, Nears, Ward, McPherson, 2006). There is general conformity in academic and

clinical circles that resilience is not a dichotomous characteristic. Rather, the literature supports the notion that:

> ...resilience is better perceived as a label that defines the interaction of [an individual] with trauma or a toxic environment in which success, as judged by societal norms, is achieved by virtue of the [individual's] abilities, motivations, and support systems (Condly, 2006, p. 213).

Garmezy's definition (1991) included three factors that led to resiliency in individuals. First, the person's inherent intellectual abilities and temperament was an important factor. Second, familial support systems were significant. The last factor included the external support systems that assisted the individual and possibly his/her family. Condly (2006) contended that virtually all definitions of resilience included these three factors.

When considering Garmezy's (1991) three factor definition, the participants in this study varied in their intellectual profiles. One was extremely bright, two were of average ability, and two were below average in their learning profiles. All but one had significant familial support systems at home. However, all had significant support systems at school that included both teachers and peers.

A final thought worth considering is that "resilience and risk are multifaceted; that is, they are not unitary in their origin, expression, being, or maintenance" (Condly, 2006, p. 224). Many see it as a process that adjusts according to the situation. Thus, for the participants in this research study, the inability to complete high school the first time around represented an inadequate display of resiliency, at least in the academic arena (and not necessarily in other areas of their lives). Yet, in spite of the trauma, all of the participants overcame hardship and returned to school believing that they had the inner

resources to succeed, a notion supported by the literature (Staudinger, Marsiske, & Baltes, 1993; Watt, David, Ladd, & Shamos, 1995; Werner, 1995).

In conclusion, the findings relating to the academic and social-emotional re-engagement contribute to the body of literature in the field of adult education and the at-risk learner. Woven within each of the five narratives were the notions of maturity, goals and motivation, personal well-being, support systems, and challenges. For each participant, the intensity of colourful experiences that shaped their return varied, but each experience added to the resilient tapestry that has become the testimony of their success as they prepare for their future.

# CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.
- William Wordsworth, from *Tintern Abbey*

The previous chapter briefly reviewed the study and responded to the three guiding research questions. The emerging themes were categorized and linked to the literature, to either support, contradict or extend existing scholarly knowledge. This concluding chapter offers distinct contributions to theory in the form of a visual representation. This graphic aid proposes a framework for the participants' journey back to school. Contributions to theory and practice are made. The limitations of the study are presented, followed by suggestions and implications for future scholarly inquiry within the field.

## Contributions to Theory: A Longitudinal Representation of Dropping Out and In

While many studies have chronicled the onset of adult learners into post-secondary institutions, the literature is surprisingly thin in its consideration of the high school dropout's return to school (never mind the *rural* dropout). Therefore, the following representation (see Figure 1 on page 163) is offered to extend the body of knowledge both in the fields of adult education, as well as that of the at-risk learner. The representation depicts their experiences as a fluid process fraught with emotion, failure, disengagement, re-engagement, and ultimately, *hopefully*, success. In the first stages, which is presented as a left-to-right flowchart, the participants' disengagement from school is characterized by barriers to their learning, weak support systems within the school setting, issues with attendance and possibly illegal activities, and personal pain. These factors combined in unique ways, further weakening their commitment to the school community. An event that finally pushed them over the edge was apparent in all of their stories. A degree of stress and disappointment was associated with their transition out of the school system, although relief to be free of the system may have surfaced as well. They adapted to their new lifestyle, and possibly entered the workforce or took on

another primary role, other than student (e.g., mother, employee). Eventually, the participants re-evaluated their personal circumstances, and became less and less committed to their current situations. This loss of commitment to poverty, unemployment, dead-end jobs, and inability to pursue their dreams culminated in a major event that triggered their re-entry into the school system. Once they had returned, the re-engagement process, both socially and academically, was quickly set into motion. This process was marked by increased maturity levels, renewed commitment to their studies, strong support systems, personal well-being, academic success, and perseverance despite the barriers they faced. The final stage of the representation (which is uncertain and incomplete) depicts either graduation or the participants' returning to the initial stages of the flowchart, where they disengage from school once again.

## Contributions to Practice (Recommendations)

When considering the practical implications of this study, the discussion invariably returns to the support systems in place for the student. Beginning with teachers and other human resources, adult learners also require high tech aids and financial support to reach their goals.

### *Finding (and Keeping) Exceptional Teachers*

First and foremost, excellence in teaching was a critical component of their successful return. Finding and keeping teachers who are committed, compassionate, and respectful should remain a priority for adult programs. Offering incentives, such as paid professional development, would encourage rural educators to broaden their expertise, as they are expected to have a range of skill and proficiency in more subject areas than their urban counterparts (because of limited resources) and mainstream secondary education colleagues. Further, they often have limited access to professional development

opportunities because of distance. Fortunately, for the participants in this study, both of the teachers who were interviewed were committed lifelong learners actively engaged in furthering their professional knowledge; this may not be the case in all adult programs.

*Psycho-educational Assessment*

Many of the participants had considerable learning difficulties, yet a thorough assessment of their intellectual abilities was not available to them. The provision of assessment services would enhance the teaching staff's ability to teach to their strengths, and would offer the student personal insight into their individual learning styles. Perhaps most significantly, when considering the "lifecourse trajectory," mentioned earlier in this discussion, a diagnosis of a learning disability by a psychologist would provide many more opportunities for study at the post-secondary level, where reserved places for students with learning disabilities exist and accommodations are guaranteed.

*Assistive Devices*

Students attending adult education programs often have difficulties reading the course material, a point made by several participants in this study. While computers have become an integral part of any educational program, other high tech aids are not as easily accessible, especially in rural areas where resources are limited. For instance, scanners with screen-reading software, textbooks on tape or in PDF format that could be digitally read to the student would go a long way in reducing the barriers to learning that plague many adult learners. Encouraging students to borrow books on tape for novel studies would ease the anxiety faced by students who cannot read. Essentially, promoting and accepting the use of high tech aids and assistive devices in the adult classroom would be a worthy and viable goal.

*Financial Aid*

Rural adults returning to high school face immense financial hardship, especially if they are full-time students. Bursaries and scholarships would offer some welcome relief, and would create a system of incentives and rewards for deserving students. Unfortunately, no local scholarships were available to the students in this study, yet many were considering post-secondary studies.

*Expanded Notions of Literacy*

Students who disengage from school often face barriers to their learning, especially in the area of literacy. Recent literature on multiple literacies might be of interest both to rural intervention programs for students at-risk, as well as to the adult education program. A curriculum that supports the use of multiple literacies appears to re-engage students, as these individuals are encouraged to discover and explore personal narratives using a variety of dynamic genres, digital technologies, and multi-media representations.

To conclude, adult education programs are dedicated to increasing the opportunities of the students they assist. These programs are microcosms of possibility that could improve their effectiveness by ensuring the best teachers remain in the field, that the variety of services available to younger students (i.e., in the elementary and secondary panels) are extended to the adult student, by promoting the use of high tech aids and multiple literacies, and by establishing scholarships and bursaries from local businesses and organizations.

## Limitations

The purpose of this study was not to determine the causes of early departure and re-entry into high school, nor was it to assign responsibility for the unfortunate

experiences of the participants. Rather, it was to furnish a symbolic collective voice for a group of individuals whose stories have gone unheard for too long. Yet, one cannot assume that the stories recounted on the previous pages are representative of all dropouts. While the individual portraits *may* resemble the lives of other early school leavers, the narratives are intended to be singular, unique representations of real persons.

This study was further limited in its small number of participants and the limited amount of time devoted to data collection and analysis. Obviously, a cautious approach to any study with so few participants is justified. The narratives of the five participants, who ranged in aged from seventeen to thirty-nine, yielded personal histories that were extraordinary in their depth and range. Comparing the experiences of such unique individuals was challenging, yet the similarities in their stories offered new insight into the rural adult learner. Given more time, the study might have followed all of the participants through until graduation and beyond to document their experiences as they began a new chapter in their lives; the fact that data was collected over the period of a school year was limiting when drawing final conclusions. Furthermore, supplementary data might have been collected from additional participants (e.g., friends, family, former teachers, etc.).

Another significant limitation involves the trustworthiness of the participants. Case study research relies heavily on self-reported data (e.g., interviews). Perceptions and selective memories could lead to the participants' misrepresenting themselves and others. However, such studies demand the collection of perceptual data to ensure that a rich description of the phenomenon is captured. Furthermore, the in-depth, three-interview format attempted to address this risk by exploring and re-exploring the experiences over several weeks and months and additionally, through the use of member checks of

transcripts. Lastly, recognizing the value and necessity of the researcher-participant relationship in creating meaning out of a series of events compels the reader to abandon the epistemological view of validity in favour of a constructivist approach.

## Future Research

The field of adult education includes extensive opportunities for inquiry and dialogue, particularly in the area of students returning to complete their high school diploma. One interesting finding that emerged from this study concerned the limited use of assistive devices and high tech aids. Future inquiry might investigate the value, perceived or real, of such aids, and whether the use of such aids contributes to higher rates of graduation. Furthermore, what compels the dropout to return? While the present study examined this question briefly, it remains largely unanswered and hardly generalizable due to the small number of participants. Additionally, what can school boards and governments do to accelerate the return to high school? How can school boards keep adults in school once they have returned? It appears that many new questions flow naturally out of this study, and they are equally worthy of our consideration. Lastly, and of particular value to this study, future research might include studies that track adults through their entire educational journey to investigate whether they graduate, and what lies beyond graduation for them. The value of such longitudinal studies should not be understated. Many students who return to high school do not persist in reaching their goal; studies that investigate the nature of their persistence (or inability to persevere) would be of great interest.

## Final Thoughts

### *Implications*

McWilliams, Everett and Bass (2000) present a template for designing predictor models in rural areas that look beyond SES factors to investigate latent influences that schools can manipulate to dissuade students from dropping out. Indeed, much of the dropout research has focussed on fixed attributes, such as low SES, that extend beyond the school's reach. The findings of this study indicate that dropping out is a complex process that involves a unique set of circumstances and personal characteristics, and that the journey back to high school can be facilitated by supports at a variety of levels. Thus, the practical implications and theoretical contributions of this study will lead to recommendations for teachers, principals, school boards and policy writers intent, firstly, on reducing the dropout rate and secondly, on improving the circumstances surrounding re-entry.

### *Why Study Former Dropouts?*

One hundred years ago, the term *high school dropout* was unheard of. Yet as high school graduation became the expected norm by the mid-20$^{th}$ century, the term *dropping out* quickly became a familiar expression associated with *poor* and *socially and culturally deprived* children. In the ensuing years, the language has evolved from the *disadvantaged* to, more recently, the *disengaged* student (Barr & Parrett, 1995). Unlike the past, however, few opportunities for the dropout exist in a modern, highly skilled workforce. Many of them will fill our correctional facilities and will continue to burden our social welfare system. Robert Barr and William Parrett, in their influential book *Hope At Last for At-Risk Youth (1995)*, see only one solution to the crisis:

> It is now clear that the solution to the crisis of at-risk youth, or for that matter at-risk adults, is education. Regardless of whether the at-risk person is a malnourished and abused kindergarten student, a third-grader far below grade level in reading and math, a disruptive, illiterate middle-school kid, a punk-rock dropout drowning in a sea of drugs, or a 50 year-old displaced, middle-class petroleum worker, the only solution is education. We can even be more specific. The solution is not just the traditional high-school education. It is an education that enables employment, that accesses a meaningful job. It is education that creates literacy. It is education that leads to productive participation in our society (p.8).

Historically speaking, schools have adopted a patch-work approach to the dropout issue and have met with few widespread successes, likely due to lack of will, resistance to change, and inadequate long-term, stable funding (Barr & Parrett, 1995). The vast majority of schools have limited resources (both human and financial) to affect the kinds of changes that need to take place. This study chronicled the stories of several rural dropouts to remind educators, governmental policy-writers, and the general public of the human presence behind the statistical dropout data. Further, the intention was to provide a lifelong perspective into the human costs associated with the dropout crisis, and to compel district and governmental policy writers to maintain the current level of dialogue and interest in secondary student success initiatives and to renew their commitment to adult education programs.

References

Alexander, K. L., Entwisle, D. R. & Horsey, C. S. (1997). From first grade forward: Early foundations of high school dropout. *Sociology of Education. 70(2)*, 87-107.

Baker, J. & Sansone, J. (1990). Interventions with students at risk for dropping out of school: A high school responds. *Journal of Educational Research, 83(4),* 181-186.

Barr, R. D. & Parrett, W. H. (1995). *Hope At Last for At-Risk Youth.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Battin-Pearson, S., Newcomb, M. D., Abbott, R. D., Hill, K. G., Catalano, R. F., & Hawkins, D. J. (2000). Predictors of early high school dropout: A test of five theories. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 92(3),* 568-582.

Birdwhistell, M. C. & Beard, R. L. (1971). Intervention with pregnant students. *Personnel and Guidance Journal, 49(6)*, 453-458.

Bowman, B. T. (1994). The challenge of diversity. *Phi Delta Kappan, 76(3)*, 218-224.

Bowman, D.S. & Roth, J. (1994). Factors that contribute to students at risk persisting to graduation. *The Journal of At Risk Issues, 1(1),* 31-37.

Bracey, G. W. (1989). Moving around and dropping out. *Phi Delta Kappan, 70(5)*, 407-410.

Bradley, G. L. & Goldman, J. D. G. (1996). Educational providers' views of students who return to school. *Journal of Educational Administration, 34(3),* 65-82.

Bullis, M., Walker, H. M. & Sprague, J. R. (2001). A promise unfulfilled: Social skills training with at-risk and antisocial children and youth. *Exceptionality, 9(1&2)*, 67-90.

Burns, B. (1998). Changing the classroom climate with literature circles. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 42(2)*, 124-128.

Camp, W. L. (1967). Follow-up of a classroom program for potential high school dropouts. *Psychology in the Schools, 4(4),* 346-351.

Campbell-Whatley, G. D., Obiakor, F. & Algozzine, B. (1997). Effects of innovative programming on youngsters at risk. *Journal of At-Risk Issues, 4(1)*, 3-9.

Cantor, J.A. (1992). *Delivering Instruction to Adult Learners*. Toronto, ON: Wall & Emerson.

Cardon, B. W. & Zurick, G. T. (1967). Personality Characteristics of high school dropouts of high ability. *Psychology in the Schools, 4(4),* 351-356.

Chapman, M. V. & Sawyer, J. S. (2001). Bridging the gap for students at risk of school failure: A social work-initiated middle to high school transition program. *Children & Schools, 23(4)*, 235-240.

Cocklin, B. (1991). Adult Re-entry to Secondary School: Experiences and Implications. Paper Presented at the Annual Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education.

Condly, S. J. (2006). Resilience in children: A review of literature with implications for education. *Urban Education, 41(3),* 211-236.

Damico, S. B. & Roth, J. (1994). Factors that contribute to students at risk persisting to graduation. *The Journal of At-Risk Issues, 1(1),* 31-37.

Davis, W. E. (1995). Students at risk: Common myths and misconceptions. *Journal of At-risk Issues, 2 (Summer)*, 5-10.

Dorn, S. (1993). Origins of the "dropout problem." *History of Education Quarterly, 33(3),* 353-373.

Dunn, C., Chambers, D., & Rabren, K. (2004). Variables affecting students' decisions to drop out of school. *Remedial and Special Education, 25(5),* 314-323.

Elkström, E. (2003). Earning effects of adult secondary education in Sweden. Working Paper Series. Institute for Labour Market Policy Evaluation. Retrieved October 11, 2005 from http://www.ifau.se/upload/pdf/se/2003/wp03-16.pdf

Ensminger, M. E. & Slusarcick, A. L. (1992). Paths to high school graduation or dropout: A longitudinal study of a first-grade cohort. *Sociology of Education, 65, April*, 95-113.

Entwisle, D. R., Alexander, K.L., & Olson, L.S. (2004). Temporary as compared to permanent high school dropout. *Social Forces, 82(3),* 1181-1205.

Evans, S. W., Axelrod, J. L. & Sapia, J. L. (2000). Effective school-based mental health interventions: Advancing the social skills training paradigm. *Journal of School Health, 70(5),* 191-194.

Fine, M. (1991) *Framing dropouts: Notes on the politics of an urban public high school.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Fitzsimmons, S.J., Cheever, J., Leonard, E., & Macunovich, D. (1969). School failures: Now and tomorrow. *Developmental Psychology, 1(2),* 134-146.

Fortin, L., Marcotte, D., Royer, E., & Potvin, P. (1999). Les comportements intériorisés et extériorisés des élèves du secondaire: une analyse des facteurs personnels, familiaux et scolaires. Communication présentée dans le cadre du Congrès canadien sur l'éducation des élèves manifestant des troubles de comportement: Du lien à la relation d'aide, Université Laval, Québec.

Friesen, D. (1967). Profile of the potential dropout. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research, 13(4),* 299-309.

Frymier, J. (1992). Children who hurt, children who fail. *Phi Delta Kappan,* 74(3), 257-259.

Frymier, J., Barber, L., Denton, W., Gansneder, B. Johnson-Lewis, S., & Roberston, N. (1992). *Growing up is risky business, and schools are not to blame.* Final report, Phi Delta Kappa study of students at risk, vol. 1. Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa.

Gadbow, N. F. (2002). Teaching all learners as if they were special. [Electronic version]. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 93,* 51-61.

Gadbow, N.F., & DuBois, D. A. (1998). Adult learners with special needs: Strategies and resources for postsecondary education and workplace training. Malabar, FL: Krieger.

Gallagher, C. J. (2002). Stories from the strays: What dropouts can teach us about school. *American Secondary Education, 30(3)*, 36-60.

Garmezy, N. (1991). Resilience in children's adaptation to negative life events and stressed environments. *Pediatric Annals, 20(9),* 459-466.

Garnier, H.E., Stein, J.A., & Jacobs, J. K. (1997). The process of dropping out of high school: A 19-year perspective. *American Educational Research Journal, 34(2)*, 395-419.

Glaser, B. G. & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory.* Chicago: Aldine.

George, A. & Duquette, C. (2006). The psychosocial experiences of a student with low vision. *Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness, 100(3),* 152-163.

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. *Effective Evaluation.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1981.

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research (Chapter 6). In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (eds.). *Handbook of qualitative research.* pp. 105-117. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Hadre, P. L. & Reeve, J. (2003). A motivational model of rural students' intentions to persist in, versus drop out of, high school. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 95(2),* 347-356.

Haskett, M. E., Nears, K., Ward, C., McPherson, A. V. (2006). Diversity in adjustment of maltreated children: Factors associated with resilient functioning. *Clinical Psychology Review (26),* 796-812.

Hawkins, J.D., Catalano, R.F., Kosterman, R., Abbott, R., & Hill, K. G. (1999). Preventing adolescent health-risk behaviors by strengthening protection during childhood. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine, 153*, 226-234.

Haughey, M. (1996) It's all about success: Learning and living in a small rural Alberta school. *The Alberta Journal of Educational Research, 42(3),* 252-266.

(HRDSC) Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (2000). Dropping Out of High School: Definitions and Costs—October 2000 downloaded October 11, 2005 http://www11.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/cs/sp/hrsdc/arb/publications/research/2000-000063/page05.shtml

International Reading Association (IRA). Using multiple methods of beginning reading instruction: A position statement of the international reading association. Retrieved March 14, 2007 from http://www.reading.org/resources/issues/positions_multiple_methods.html

Janosz, M. (1994). Étude longitudinale sur la prédiction de l'abandon scolaire, l'hétérogénéité des décrocheurs et l'intervention différentielle. *Unpublished doctoral dissertation*, Université de Montreal.

Janosz, M., LeBlanc, M., Boulerice, B., & Tremblay, R. (1997). Disentangling the weight of school dropout predictors: A test on two longitudinal samples. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 26(6),* 733-762.

Janosz, M., LeBlanc, M., Boulerice, B., & Tremblay, R. (2000). Predicting different types of school dropouts: A typological approach with two longitudinal samples. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 92(1),* 171-190.

Jimerson, S., Anderson, G. E. & Whipple, A. D. (2002). Winning the battle and losing the war: Examining the relation between grade retention and dropping out of high school. *Psychology in the Schools, 39(4),* 441-457.

Jimerson, S., Egeland, B., Srouge, L.A., & Carlson, B. (2000). A prospective longitudinal study of high school dropouts examining multiple predictors across development. *Journal of School Psychology, 38(6),* 529-549.

Johnson, E. S. & Legg, C. E. (1948). Why young people leave school. *National Association of Secondary Schools Principals Bulletin, 32,* November. 24.

King, A. J. C. (2002). Double Cohort Study: Phase 2 Report for the Ontario Ministry of Education, *Social Program Education Group, Queen's University*, October 17, 2002, p. 18.

Kuperminc, G. P. & Allen, J. P. (2001). Social orientation: Problem behavior and movations toward interpersonal problem solving among high risk adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 30(5),* 597-622.

Lane, K. L. (1999). Young students at risk for antisocial behavior: The utility of academic and social skills interventions. *Journal of Emotional & Behavioral Disorders, 7(4)*, 211-244.

LeCompte, M. & Dworkin, A. (1991). *Giving up on school: Student dropouts and teacher burnouts.* Newbury Park, CA: Corwin.

Livingston, A. H. (1958). The dropout: A challenge to the schools. Administrator's Notebook, 6(5), 1-4.

Mayer, G. R., Mitchell, L. K., Clementi, T., Clement-Robertson, E., Myatt, R. & Bullara, D. T. (1993). A dropout prevention program for at-risk high school students: Emphasizing consulting to promote positive classroom climates. *Education and Treatment of Children, 16(2),* 135-146.

McCaul, E. (1989). Rural public school dropouts: Findings form high school and beyond. Research in Rural Education, 6(1), 19-24.

McClelland, M. M., Morrison, F. J. & Holmes, D. L. (2000). Children at risk for early academic problems: The role of learning-related social skills. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 15(3),* 307-329.

McWilliams, A. E., Everett, P. C., & Bass, M.L. (2000). A model of underlying influences on students' decisions to drop out. *The Journal of At-Risk Issues, 7(1),* 42-50.

Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Miles, M. & Huberman, M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: A sourcebook of new methods (2nd ed.).* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Ministry of Education. (2003). *Building Pathways to Success, Grades 7-12.* Toronto, Ontario: Queen's Printer for Ontario.

Ministry of Education. (2005). Technical Paper 2005-2006. Toronto, Ontario: Queen's Printer for Ontario.

McGough, J., Smalley, S., McCracken, J., Yang, M., Del'Homme, M., Lynn, D., & Loo, S. (2005). Psychiatric comorbidity in adult attention deficit hyperactivity disorder: findings from multiplex families. *American Journal of Psychiatry, 162(9),* 1621-1627.

Molina, B. & Pelham, W. (2003). Childhood predictors of adolescent substance use in a longitudinal study of children with ADHD. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 112(3),* 497-507.

Mombourquette, F., McEwan, R., & McBride, A. (1999). Narrowing opportunities for adults in Ontario secondary schools: A study of students affected by the changes to provincial funding of adults and the Education Act 1996. NALL Working Paper #9-1999. Retrieved October 11, 2005 from http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/depts/sese/csew/nall/res/09narrowing.htm

Morawski, M. & Brunhuber, B. (1993). Early recollections of learning to read: Implications for prevention and intervention of reading difficulties. *Reading Research and Instruction, 32(3),* 35-48.

Movement for Canadian Literacy. (2003). Adult learners, what do you think? Survey Results. Report submitted to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources Development and the Status of Persons With Disabilities. Retrieved October 11, 2005 from http://www.literacy.ca/govrel/submit/cover.htm

Nafpaktitis, M. & Perlmutter, B. F. (1998). School-based early mental health intervention with at-risk students. *School Psychology Review, 27(3),* 420-433.

National Center for Education (1998). Percent of high school dropouts. Retrieved September 13, 2005 from http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/data/Dropouts.asp

Natriello, G., Pallas, A. M. & Alexander, K. (1989). On the right track? Curriculum and academic achievement. *Sociology of Education, 62(2)*, 109-118.

Nunn, G. D. & Parish, T. S. (1992). The psychosocial characteristics of at-risk high school students. *Adolescence, 27(106),* 435-441.

Orfield, G. (2004). Losing our future: Minority youth left out. In Gary Orfield's (Ed.), *Dropouts in America: Confronting the Graduation Crisis.*, pp. 1-11. Cambridge: Harvard Education Press.

Owens, B. R., Morris, J. D., & Lieberman, M. G. (2001). A model to predict high school dropouts in a rural Florida school district. *The Journal of At-Risk Issues, 7(3),* 12-17.

Paasch, K. M. & Swaim, P. L. (1995). More rural students are graduating from high school, but a serious dropout problem remains. *Rural Development Perspectives, 10(3)*, 24-34.

Pallas, A.M., Natriello, G., & McDill, E.L. (1989). The changing nature of the disadvantaged population: Current dimensions and future trends. *Educational Researcher, 18(5)*, 4 and 16-22.

Patterson, G.R., DeBaryshe, B. D., & Ramsey, E. (1989). A developmental perspective on antisocial behavior. *American Psychologist, 44(2),* 329-335.

Peart, N. A. & Campbell, F. A. (1999). At-risk students' perceptions of teacher effectiveness. *Journal for a Just and Caring Education, 5(3),* 269-284.

Peterson, K. D., Bennet, B. & Sherman, D. F. (1991). Themes of uncommonly successful teachers of at-risk students. *Urban Education, 26(2),* 176-194.

Pierce, C. (1994). Importance of classroom climate for at-risk learners. *Journal of Educational Research, 88(1)*, 37-44.

Randolph, K.A., Fraser, M.W., & Orthner, D.K. (2004). Educational resilience among youth at risk. *Substance Use & Misuse, 39(5),* 747-767.

Rauch-Elnekave, Helen. (1994). Teenage motherhood: Its relationship to undetected learning problems. *Adolescence, 29(113),* 91-103.

Roscigno, V. J. & Crowley, M. L. (2001). Rurality, institutional disadvantage, and achievement/attainment. *Rural Sociology, 66(2),* 268-292.

Rumberger, R. W., & Lamb, S. P. (2003). The early employment and further education experiences of high school dropouts: a comparative study of the United States and Australia. *Economics of Education Review, 22(4),* 353-366.

Rutter, R. A. & Margelofsky, M. (1997). How school structures inhibit students at risk. *Journal of At-Risk Issues, 3(2),* 3-12.

Safran, S. P. & Oswald, K. (2003). Positive behavior supports: Can schools reshape disciplinary practices? *Exceptional Children, 69(3),* 361-373.

Seidman, I. (2006). Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences, 3rd Ed. New York: Teachers College Press.

Schofield, A. & Rogers, T. (2004). At play in fields of ideas. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 48(3), 238-248.

Stake, R. (1995). *The Art of Case Study Research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Statistics Canada School Leaver Survey (1995). Government of Canada.

Staudinger, U.M., Marsiske, M., & Baltes, P.B. (1993). Resilience and levels of reserve capacity in later adulthood: Perspectives from life-span theory. *Development and Psychopathology 5(4),* 541-566.

Thurston, L. P. (2002). Practical partnerships: Analysis and results of a cooperative life skills program for at-risk rural youth. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 7(3),* 313-326.

Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research, 45(1),* 89-125.

Tinto, V. (1982). Limits of theory and practice in student attrition. *Journal of Higher Education, 53(6),* 687-700.

Tinto, V. (1988). Stages of student departure: Reflections on the longitudinal character of student leaving. *Journal of Higher Education, 59(4),* 438-455.

Watt, N.F., David, J.P., Ladd, K.L., & Shamos, S. (1995). The life course of psychological resilience: A phenomenological perspective on deflecting life's slings and arrows. *Journal of Primary Prevention, 15(3),* 209-246.

Waxman, H. C. (1992). Reversing the cycle of educational failure for students in at-risk school environments. In H. C. Waxman, J. Walker de Felix, J. Anderson, & H. P. Baptiste (Eds.), *Students at risk in at-risk schools: Improving environments for learning* (pp. 1-9). Newbury Park, CA: Corwin.

Waxman, H. C., Huang, S. L., Saldana, D. S., & Padron, Y. N. (1994, April). *Investigating the pedagogy of poverty in inner-city elementary and middle schools.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans.

Waxman, H. C. & Padron, Y. N. (1995). Improving the quality of classroom instruction for students at risk of failure in urban schools. *Peabody Journal of Education, 70(2),* 44-65.

Weissberg, R. P., Shriver, T. P., Bose, S. & DeFalco, K. (1997). Creating a districtwide social development project, *Educational Leadership, 54(8)*, 37-39.

Werner, E.E., (1995). Resilience in development. *Current Directions in Psychological Science 4(3),* 81-85.

Western, B., Schiraldi, V., & Ziedenberg, J. (2003). *Education and Incarceration.* Washington: Justice Policy Institute, August, pp. 7-9.

Wilens, T. (2006). ADHD and Substance Abuse Disorder (SUD): Is There a Connection? Retrieved December 27, 2006 from http://www.emedicine.com/infosite/shire-adhd/article-abuse.html

Williams, R. L. & Pickens, J. W. (1967). Contributing factors to school departures in Georgia. *Psychological Reports, 20(3),* 693-694.

# Appendix A

## Oral Description of Study for Recruiting Teachers of Adult Education Students

My name is Anne George, and I am a part-time student at the University of Ottawa. I am also an employee of the Renfrew County District School Board and I work for the Special Education Department with elementary students. I am currently working on my Master of Arts thesis and would like to do a research study with adults who have returned to high school. I would like to tell you about my study, with the hopes that some of you might be interested in participating. The reason for this study is to gather information about your experiences to help others understand some of the issues that you and your students are facing, some of the challenges that you have tackled in your past teaching experiences, as well as what is working well for you now as an educator of adult students. This information, I hope, will help teachers, administrators and policy writers make informed decisions about adult education programs.

The criteria for participating in the study are that you must be a teacher of adult education students who are returning to school to complete their high school education. Your participation would entail your attending one 45-minute taped interview (at a time and place convenient to you) where you would answer general and specific questions about teaching adult education students. You will also be asked questions that pertain to one or more specific students in your class. Lastly, your participation would involve a 45-minute observation period where I sit quietly at the back of your class and observe your interactions with your students and the strategies and techniques that you use in the classroom. The transcripts of the taped interviews will be sent to you to be edited and approved.

I am looking for five of you to complete a consent form to confirm your interest. If you are interested, please return the forms to me by the end of the week. **The first five consent forms that I receive will be chosen to participate.** I will be in contact with you shortly after that to set up a time for me to present my study to your class.

If you have any questions about this study, please call me (Anne George) at 735-0151 ext. 291

# Appendix B

## Oral Description of Study for Recruiting Primary Participants (Adult Education Students)

My name is Anne George, and I am a part-time student at the University of Ottawa. I am also an employee of the Renfrew County District School Board and I work for the Special Education Department with elementary students. I am currently working on my Master of Arts thesis and would like to do a research study with adults who have returned to high school. I would like to tell you about my study, with the hopes that some of you might be interested in participating. The reason for this study is to gather information about your experiences to help others understand some of the issues that you are facing, some of the challenges that you have faced your past educational experiences, as well as what is working well for you now as an adult student. This information, I hope, will help administrators and policy writers make informed decisions about adult education programs and leaving school early in general.

The criteria for participating in the study are that you must be an adult returning to high school to complete your diploma. You must also be considered a rural student, which means that most of your school experiences will have occurred in a rural area, like Pembroke and/or the surrounding area. I am looking for 5 of you to fill in an Information Form related to your school experiences.

If chosen, you would be asked to participate in three 90-minute individual interviews. The questions will be about your own experiences. The interviews will be held at a time and place convenient for you. They will be audio-taped, and the transcripts with your typed answers will be sent to you to be edited and approved. This study also includes a teacher component, which means that one of your teachers will be interviewed about teaching adults in general, but some questions may refer to teaching you specifically. **All interviews will be kept in the strictest confidence, and your teacher will not have access to any of your transcripts or interviews.** Lastly, your participation would involve a 45-minute observation period where I sit quietly at the back of your class and observe your interactions with your fellow students and teacher, taking particular notice of the teaching strategies and techniques used in the classroom as well as the nature of the personal interactions that occur during the class. At no time will you be identified as the participant; I will not speak to you in any manner that may reveal your participation, unless you choose to reveal this information publicly yourself.

If you would like to participate in this study, please complete the information form which I have just given you and place it on your teacher's desk in the sealed envelope by the end of the week. **The first five consent forms that I receive will be chosen to participate.** I will be in contact with you shortly after that to set up an interview if you are chosen.

If you have any questions about this study, please call me (Anne George) at 735-0151 ext. 291

## Appendix C

## Participant Information Form

Name:

Address:

Telephone:

Email:

Date of Birth:

**Contact:** Anne George 735-0151 ext. 291

| Name of School & Location | Years or Grades Attended |
|---|---|
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |

1. What grade are you in?
2. Where are you in your course of studies and how many credits do you have?
3. When do you expect to graduate?

## Appendix D

## Script of Telephone Call for Exclusion from Study

Participants will be informed by telephone of their exclusion from the study. The researcher will read the following script:

*Hello. Thank you for your interest in the University of Ottawa study on rural adult education students. There has been a great deal of attention given to the study, so much so that I am unable to include all students (or teachers) who expressed a willingness to participate after my initial presentation. Unfortunately, you were not chosen to participate in the study because:*

- *your consent form (and participant information form) was not one of the first 5 that I received.*
- *I am looking for a male/female participant to ensure that I have met my criteria of 2 males + 3 females or 2 females + 3 males.*

*I would like to thank you for your interest, however, and I hope that you will review the results of the study in a year or so, when they are published.*

# Appendix E

## Consent Form (Student)

**Title of the Study**
Dropping Out and In: Returning to High School in Rural Canada

**Name of Researcher**
Anne George, Student, University of Ottawa and Employee of the Renfrew County District School Board.
Tel (work): (613) 735-0151 ext. 291
Email: georgea@fc.renfrew.edu.on.ca

**Name of Supervisor**
Cheryll Duquette, Ph.D. Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa.
Tel: (613) 562-5800 ext. 4040

**Invitation to Participate**
I am invited to participate in the abovementioned research study conducted by Anne George and supervised by Dr. Cheryll Duquette.

**Purpose of the Study**
The purpose of the study is to explore the perceptions of the educational experiences of the rural, early school leaver who has returned to an adult education program in Eastern Ontario.

**Participation**
My participation will consist of completing a brief (10 minutes) participant information form and attending three x 90-minute taped interview sessions. The sessions will be scheduled one week apart during the 2005-2006 school year. I will also be asked to review the researcher's interview transcriptions to check for accuracy. Lastly, my participation would involve a 45-minute observation period where the researcher would sit quietly at the back of my class and observe my interactions with peers and staff. The purpose of the observation period is to identify successful teaching strategies in use, as well as to observe the nature of my interactions with peers and staff.

**Access to Ontario Student Record**
I give my explicit consent for the researcher to have access to all documents and data contained in my Ontario Student Record. I understand that the researcher would like to review my school records to develop an understanding of my learning profile and history, and to document any additional supports (i.e., special education support) that I may have received during my past educational experiences. Any reference to information in the Ontario Student Record will be further subjected to member checks, and I understand that I have the right to withhold any data from being included in the study if I so choose.

**Risks**
My participation in this study will entail that I volunteer personal information about my early and current family and school experiences and that this may cause me to feel uncomfortable. I have received assurance from the researcher that every effort will be made to minimize these risks by limiting the intensity of the personal questions being asked or by terminating the interview upon my request.

**Benefits**
My participation in this study will allow the researcher to compare and contrast the educational experiences of several adult education students to see if similarities exist. My participation will also allow me to explore my personal experiences, and may assist my understanding of past, present and future experiences and events that have shaped my life. Furthermore, the results of this study will be framed as a collective narrative of the personal stories of adults returning to

school in the face of adversity. These collective stories will remind educators, governmental policy-writers, and the general public of the human presence behind the statistical dropout data, and will provide a lifelong perspective into the human costs associated with the dropout crisis to compel governmental policy writers to maintain the current level of dialogue and interest in preventing future dropouts.

**Confidentiality**
I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used in preparation of a Master's thesis. I understand that the contents may also be cited as a study, and that a summary of the findings may be presented at a university symposium, and/or may be submitted to an academic journal for publication.

**Anonymity**
Anonymity will be guaranteed, as there will be no mention of the name of any schools or school boards at any time. Pseudonyms will be used for all participants, and descriptive details of the participants may be strategically altered.

**Conservation of Data**
The data collected (taped interviews, print and electronic transcriptions, print and electronic field notes and participant information forms, and copied documents from the Ontario Student Record) will be kept in a secure manner on the home computer and within a filing cabinet of the researcher for 10 years, and then destroyed. The researcher and thesis advisor will be the only individuals with access to the data. Results may be submitted for publication to an academic journal outside of the university.

**Voluntary Participation**
I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. Participation is strictly voluntary, and my participation or non-participation in this project will have no bearing on the evaluation of my adult education courses. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be destroyed.

**Acceptance:** I, _____, agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Anne George of the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa that is under the supervision of Dr. Cheryll Duquette.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or his supervisor. If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 159, (613) 562-5841 or ethics@uottawa.ca. There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Participant's signature: _____Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____Date: _____

# Appendix F

## Consent Form (Teacher)

**Title of the Study**
Dropping Out and In: Returning to High School in Rural Canada

**Name of Researcher**
Anne George, Student, University of Ottawa and Employee of the Renfrew County District School Board.
Tel (work): (613) 735-0151 ext. 291
Email: georgea@fc.renfrew.edu.on.ca

**Name of Supervisor**
Cheryll Duquette, Ph.D. Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa.
Tel: (613) 562-5800 ext. 4040

**Invitation to Participate**
I am invited to participate in the abovementioned research study conducted by Anne George and supervised by Dr. Cheryll Duquette.

**Purpose of the Study**
The purpose of the study is to explore the perceptions of the educational experiences of the rural dropout who has returned to an adult education program in Eastern Ontario.

**Participation**
My participation will consist of attending one 45-minute taped interview session. The sessions will be scheduled during the 2005-2006 school year. I will also be asked to review the researcher's interview transcriptions to check for accuracy. Lastly, my participation would involve a 45-minute observation period where the researcher will sit quietly at the back of my class and observe my interactions with students as well as the strategies and techniques that I employ in the classroom.

**Risks**
My participation in this study will entail my volunteering information about my student's school experiences and my personal teaching experiences and that this may cause me to feel uncomfortable. I have received assurance from the researcher that every effort will be made to minimize these risks by limiting the intensity of the personal questions being asked or by terminating the interview upon my request.

**Benefits**
My participation in this study will allow the researcher to compare and contrast the educational experiences of several adult education students and teachers to see if similarities exist. My participation will also allow me to explore my personal experiences, and may assist my understanding of past, present and future experiences and events that have shaped my career as an adult educator. Furthermore, the results of this study will be framed as a collective narrative of the personal stories of adults returning to school in the face of adversity. These collective stories will remind educators, governmental policy-writers, and the general public of the human presence behind the statistical dropout data, and will provide a lifelong perspective into the human costs associated with the dropout crisis to compel governmental policy writers to maintain the current level of dialogue and interest in preventing future dropouts.

My participation in this study will remind educators, governmental policy-writers, and the general public of the human presence behind the statistical dropout data, and will provide a lifelong perspective into the human costs associated with the dropout crisis to compel governmental policy writers to maintain the current level of dialogue and interest in preventing future dropouts.

**Confidentiality**
I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used in preparation of a Master's thesis. I understand that the contents may also be cited as a study, and that a summary of the findings may be presented at a university symposium, and/or may be submitted to an academic journal for publication.

**Anonymity**
Anonymity will be guaranteed, as there will be no mention of the name of any schools or school boards at any time. Pseudonyms will be used for all participants, and descriptive details of the participants may be strategically altered.

**Conservation of Data**
The data collected (taped interviews, print and electronic transcriptions, print and electronic field notes and participant information forms, and copied documents from the Ontario Student Record) will be kept in a secure manner on the researcher's home computer and/or within a filing cabinet for 10 years, and then destroyed. The researcher and thesis advisor will be the only individuals with access to the data. Results may be submitted for publication to an academic journal outside of the university.

**Voluntary Participation**
I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. Participation is strictly voluntary. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be destroyed.

**Acceptance**
I, _____, agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Anne George of the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa, that is under the supervision of Dr. Cheryll Duquette.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or his supervisor. If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 159, (613) 562-5841 or ethics@uottawa.ca. There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Participant's signature: _____Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____Date: _____

## Appendix G

### Interview One Protocol: Focused Life History

1. Tell me where and when you were born?

2. Tell me about your early family experiences

3. Tell me about your early school experiences
   - Academic successes? Extra-curricular successes?
   - Favourite courses/subjects?
   - Favourite teacher, why?
   - Academic challenges?
   - How did you feel about school?
   - Parents attitudes towards school?
   - Any other family members who did not complete high school?
   - Siblings and relationship with them?
   - Special resources at school? Identified as an exceptional learner?
   - Other children's attitudes?
   - Clubs?
   - Friendships?

4. What school experiences were especially important?
   - Why? Was there a helpful person or class that prepared you for life after high school?

5. Tell me about the years leading up to your leaving school.
   - Home life?
   - Social life?
   - School life (academics, extra-curricular)?
   - Any intervention strategies?
   - Are there any supports that you wished you could have had, that just weren't there for you?
   - Personal health?
   - Was there one incident that led to the final dropout? If so, tell me about it.

6. What happened when you left school?
   - How did you feel?
   - Reaction of parents (what reaction would you have liked)?
   - Reaction of school (what reaction would you have liked)?
   - Reaction of friends (what reaction would you have liked)?
   - Had you secured employment or did you have employment plans?

Thank you

## Appendix H

### Interview Two Protocol: Recent School Experiences as an Adult Learner

1. Tell me again about your decision to leave high school.
2. What happened after you left high school?
3. How did you come to be a student again?

4. Tell me about your current personal and educational experiences.
   - Home life?
   - Social life/friendships?
   - School life (academics, extra-curricular)?
   - Academic success?
   - Challenges?
   - Favourite courses/subjects?
   - Favourite teacher, why?
   - How did you feel about school?
   - Parents/family attitudes towards school?
   - Siblings and relationship?
   - Special resources/interventions at school?
   - Other people's attitudes?
   - Clubs/social activities?
   - Personal health?

5. What happened when you returned to school?
   - How did you feel?
   - Reaction of parents/family and was it expected (what reaction would you have liked)?
   - Reactions of friends and was it expected (what reaction would you have liked)?
   - Is there a helpful person/class that is preparing you for life after you obtain your GED?

6. Do you have any employment plans/goals?

7. Thank you.

# Appendix I

## Interview Three Protocol: Reflection on the Meaning

1. Given what you have said about your life before you became an adult student and given what you have said about your life now, how do you understand your educational experiences? What does all of this mean for you? How do you see yourself in light of all of these experiences?

2. What experiences in the past lead you to think this way? Can you tell me again about each of these experiences, and tell me again what this means to you now? (Ask participant to reflect on key experiences mentioned in previous interviews)

3. What sense does this make to you?

4. What differences do you see between the two systems of education... high school versus adult education? How has this system (adult education) helped you...what are the advantages, for you, of the adult education system? What are the problems with the adult education system? What would you change if you could?

5. How have you, both as a person and as a student, changed since high school?

6. How might things have been different for you?

7. Where do you see yourself in the future?

8. Thank you for your participation.

## Appendix J

## Interview Protocol for Teachers

1. Tell me about how you became a teacher in the adult education program.
2. Tell me about your experiences here at this school.
3. Describe the programs here at the school.
4. How is the day structured for the adult learner?
5. I would like to turn the conversation to the students that you teach. What can you tell me about adult education students in general? (e.g., background, how they adjust to adult ed system, if they graduate and get jobs)
6. What kinds of educational experiences do these students bring to the adult education program?
7. How do you suppose learning differs for them when compared to an adolescent learner?
8. How is teaching them different than from teaching an adolescent?
9. Tell me about Participant 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5. (Strengths, weaknesses, goals, educational experiences thus far, barriers to learning)
10. In general, what challenges do adult education students face?
11. What challenges do you face when teaching them?
12. What kinds of goals do your students have?
13. Do you think that they will reach their goals? Why/why not?
14. What do you think the ideal adult education program would look like?
15. What changes do you think would benefit adult students?

Thank you

## Appendix K
## Summary of Major Findings Related to Dropping Out

| Researcher(s) | Results |
|---|---|
| Alexander Entwisle & Horsey (1997) | The authors track 790 Baltimore school children from entrance into first grade to their eventual graduation or early departure. Several measures (personal qualities, first-grade experiences, and family circumstances) were found to influence dropping out which were independent of low SES. The authors support a long-term, developmental view of disengaging and dropping out. |
| Battin-Pearson, Newcomb, Abbott, Hill, Catalano, Hawkins (2000) | A comparative analysis of five theories classifies existing models into unique sets of influences or processes associated with high school failure. After a lengthy and thoughtful discussion, the authors concluded that none of the theories was able to fully explain the data, although all of the theories could be supported by some of the data. |
| Bullis, Walker & Sprague (2001) | A review of the literature pertaining to social skills training at three levels: preschool and elementary, middle school, and high school. The authors highlight three problems that continue to plague effective social skills training programs: improper/inadequate assessment of social skills deficits, length and intensity of instruction, and the fidelity of implementation. Recommendations for future practices are made. |
| Camp (1967) | A revolutionary study of a classroom program for potential dropouts. The program's features included an empathetic teacher intent on providing a supportive classroom climate, vocational inquiries, field trips, frequent discussion of goals and aspirations, less formal evaluative methods, and a small class size (N=18). Results yielded significant differences in 11/27 categories between the experimental and control groups. Analysis of these differences indicated positive changes for the experimental group. A four-year follow-up, however, did not reveal significant differences in their feelings about school, learning, and their suggestions for change in the curriculum. Both groups voiced a need for schools to become more flexible to meet the needs of the at-risk learner |
| Condly (2006) | A review of the literature pertaining to resilience in children. A complex array of factors helps to explain why some children are resilient. Implications for programs to promote and support resilience is discussed. |
| Damico & Roth (1994) | Qualitative study (N=18) of factors contributing to at-risk students persisting to graduation. Perceptions of persisters corroborate previous research—students respond positively to caring teachers, and quality instruction and learning opportunities. A model of engagement factors that influence student academic attainment is presented. |

| Researcher(s) | Results |
|---|---|
| Davis (1995) | Seven myths and misconceptions about the at-risk learner are discussed. |
| Dorn (1993) | A historical analysis of the origins of the dropout problem. Long-term economic trends, demographic patterns in education, and the evolution of the role of learning institutions (i.e., high schools) are discussed. |
| Dunn, Chambers & Rabren (2004) | Examined factors related to dropping out for students with Learning Disabilities and Mental Retardation (N=228). A model is presented, with several variables emerging (disability status, helpful person, helpful class, and general preparation). |
| Entwisle, Alexander & Olson (2004) | An examination of the motivational differences between temporary vs. permanent dropouts. Results suggest that temporary dropouts had more positive motivational qualities and were more often employed than permanent dropouts. |
| Friesen (1967) | An early at-risk survey of 2,425 Canadian high school students. Most potential dropouts (students who would leave if they could) were not achieving as well as their peers and were disinterested in school, preferring instead to orient themselves to activities outside of school. Parental and teacher influence was weaker for both male and female potential dropouts, and these students were more likely to engage in risky behaviour. |
| Frymier (1992) | A study of over 21,000 students in grades 4, 7, & 10 in over 80 U.S. communities. Several risk factors for dropping out emerged: personal pain, academic failure, family SES, family instability, and family tragedy. Teachers were able to assist students with personal pain and academic difficulties. |
| Gallagher (2002) | A phenomenological study of leaving school early. Results show that many dropouts believe that they were removing themselves from a dysfunctional situation and entering into a new setting where they had more control. Dropouts felt emotionally disengaged from school, so much so that leaving seemed the only option available to them. |
| Hardre & Reeve (2003) | A study of motivational intentions of rural youth. Differences noted in rural versus urban youth in the area of teacher support on student's perceived competence. The authors are intrigued by the possibility that "rural students' academic motivation may be relatively more embedded in the quality of their teacher's motivating styles" (p. 354). |
| Haskett, Nears, Sabourin-Ward, McPherson (2006) | An overview of research concerning resilient children is presented. A summary of factors associated with resilient children is provided (individual characteristics, family context, and broader experiences). Implications and recommendations for practice are made. |
| Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (2000) | A Government of Canada paper entitled Dropping Out of High School: Definitions and Costs. Current research is presented, and the costs, both human and financial, are borne out. Policy options for reducing the dropout rate are discussed. |

| Researcher(s) | Results |
|---|---|
| Janosz (1994) | Janosz divided dropouts into four categories: (i) *maladjusted* who are low achievers and who behave poorly (ii) *underachievers* who just have poor grades (iii) *disengaged* who perform better scholastically, than its two predecessors, but who do not like school, and finally (iv) *quiets* who have slightly lower grades than the persisters, but who resemble graduates more than dropouts. |
| Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay (1997) | The authors have identified several predictors of dropping out, including family, behavioural, school, social and character-related variables. The authors posit that collecting such data from students, in the form of a questionnaire, would assist schools in targeting appropriate intervention strategies responding to the four categories of dropouts listed above. Further, longitudinal studies by Janosz and his colleagues have demonstrated that these predictors are relatively stable over time, with school experience variables (e.g., retention, academics, commitment) being the most important predictor in the screening questionnaire. |
| Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay (2000) | The authors explored the value of a typological approach when studying the dropout. Four types of dropouts were identified as useful profiles when considering the etiology of early school leavers: quiets, disengaged, low-achievers, and maladjusted. The theoretical and practical importance of the typology is discussed. |
| Jimerson, Anderson & Whipple (2002) | A review of the literature demonstrates that grade retention is a powerful predictor of dropping out of high school. A discussion of the effectiveness of grade retention is presented, followed by a model of development that emphasizes the long-term nature of dropping out. |
| Jimerson, Egeland, Srouge & Carlson (2000) | A study that provides a conceptual model of dropping out as a long-term, developmental process that begins at an early age (i.e., before children enter school). Results indicate that the quality of the child's home environment and early care giving are powerful predictors of dropping out. |
| King (2002) | An observational study of the creation of smoking groups in an Ontario secondary school. Over an eight-month period, the group doubled in size, with a ratio of three girls to two boys. The author asserted that smoking was "a clear marker of alienation and a formal statement of disengagement from school." |
| Mayer, Mitchell, Clementi, Clement-Robertson, Myatt & Bullara (1993) | A study that attempted to reduce the number of dropouts in an urban school district by making the classroom environment less punitive. Two hundred ninth graders from a school district in Los Angeles County who were frequently absent from school were chosen to |

| | |
|---|---|
| | participate. Twice weekly visits by the trained consultants occurred to assist with the development of positive classroom practices to make the classroom a more desirable place to learn. The results of the study showed measurable improvement in teacher rates of approval. Further, students engaged in on-task behaviours much more frequently, and the number of student suspensions declined dramatically. |
| McCaul (1989) | A comprehensive analysis of the data gathered from the High School and Beyond (HS&B) survey, in which over 30,000 American sophomores participated. Results indicated that rural students were more likely to drop out due to marriage, pregnancy, job opportunities, disability or illness, or because they could not get along with their teachers. |
| McWilliams, Everett, & Bass (2000) | The authors present a template for designing predictor models in rural areas that look beyond SES factors to investigate latent influences that schools can manipulate to dissuade students from dropping out. |
| Nunn & Parish (1992) | An examination of the psycho-social characteristics of 111 students, 64 of whom were at-risk. Significant differences were found in the following areas: locus of control, self-concept, and personal style of learning. Implications and suggestions for improving social adjustment and achievement are presented. |
| Randolph, Fraser & Orthner (2004). | A sample of 692 low-income, single-parented children were followed between 1989 and 1997 to examine the relationship between first grade retention and completing high school. Being retained increased the risk of dropping out in high school. Results also show a link between retention, the level of participation in extra-curricular activities, and high school completion. |
| Rauch-Elnekave (1994) | A study of a program for teenage mothers (N=39) questions the assumption that their pregnancies were unintended. The majority had not undergone a psycho-educational assessment despite significant academic delays. Fewer than half reported negative reactions to their pregnancies. No evidence of impaired self-esteem was found among the girls. The author speculated that parenthood represented a positive option for many, and provided them with opportunities for success that may have been unavailable to them at school. |
| Peart & Campbell (1999) | A qualitative study that examined the reflections of 47 young African American students on teacher characteristics that identified them as valuable and effective teachers. Four characteristics emerged from the data: good interpersonal skills, sound instructional methods and delivery, the ability to motivate their students, and high expectations that were not swayed by racial undertones. |

| Researcher(s) | Results |
|---|---|
| Pierce (1994) | A case study examined how one effective classroom teacher created a classroom climate that enhanced learner outcomes for at-risk students. |
| Rutter and Margelofsky (1997) | Employed a mixed methodology design using both qualitative and quantitative data to investigate the effects of large group instruction and long inflexible school days with youth at-risk. More than a third of the students surveyed identified large group instruction as problematic for them, hindering their academic performance. Limited opportunities for interaction between teacher and student, lecture-type teaching and an inflexible school day were found to be problematic to the at-risk learner. |
| Safran & Oswald (2003) | A review of the literature of the use of school-based positive behaviour supports (school-wide, specific setting, & individual student level). Overall, results of these supports were positive, validating their implementation across school districts. |
| Schofield & Rogers (2004) | A description of a collaborative youth literacy program that encourages at-risk students to explore their personal experiences within a multiliteracy framework. The authors base the program's success on its ability to engage students with a flexible, popularized curriculum, its focus on personal narratives, as well as its ability to recognize and validate the lives and interests of the students expressed through multi-media projects. |
| Thurston (2002) | Analysis of a cooperative lifeskills program for at-risk rural youth (N=114 youth aged 14-21). Focus was on school-to-work transition skills. Participants made positive gains in areas of life management concepts, self-esteem, and social skills, with students generalizing these gains in natural settings. Author advocates inter-agency partnerships as an effective means of addressing challenges of at-risk rural youth. |
| Tinto (1975) | Model presented that explains the interactions between the individual and the institution that leads some students to drop out of college. The decision to drop out is influenced by the student's degree of academic integration and social integration. |
| Tinto (1988) | An extension of the discussion of Tinto's 1975 model. The stages of student departure are presented: separation, transition & incorporation. These stages are applied to academic and social areas. An appeal for new research on student departure is made. |
| Waxman & Padron (1995) | Focuses on poor classroom instruction for at-risk students. Three successful instructional approaches are highlighted: cognitively guided instruction, critical/responsive teaching, and technology-enriched instruction. Practical and policy-changing initiatives are discussed. |
| Western, Schiraldi, & Zeidenberg (2003) | A review of previous research on dropouts and their high incidence in correctional institutions. In 1999 among men ages 30-34, 13% of Caucasian and 52% of African |

| | |
|---|---|
| | American males without high school diplomas had prison records. Recommendations include: (a) ensuring high quality schools, (b) increasing student supports. (c) expanding community-based learning and services. |

## Longitudinal Representation of Dropping Out and In

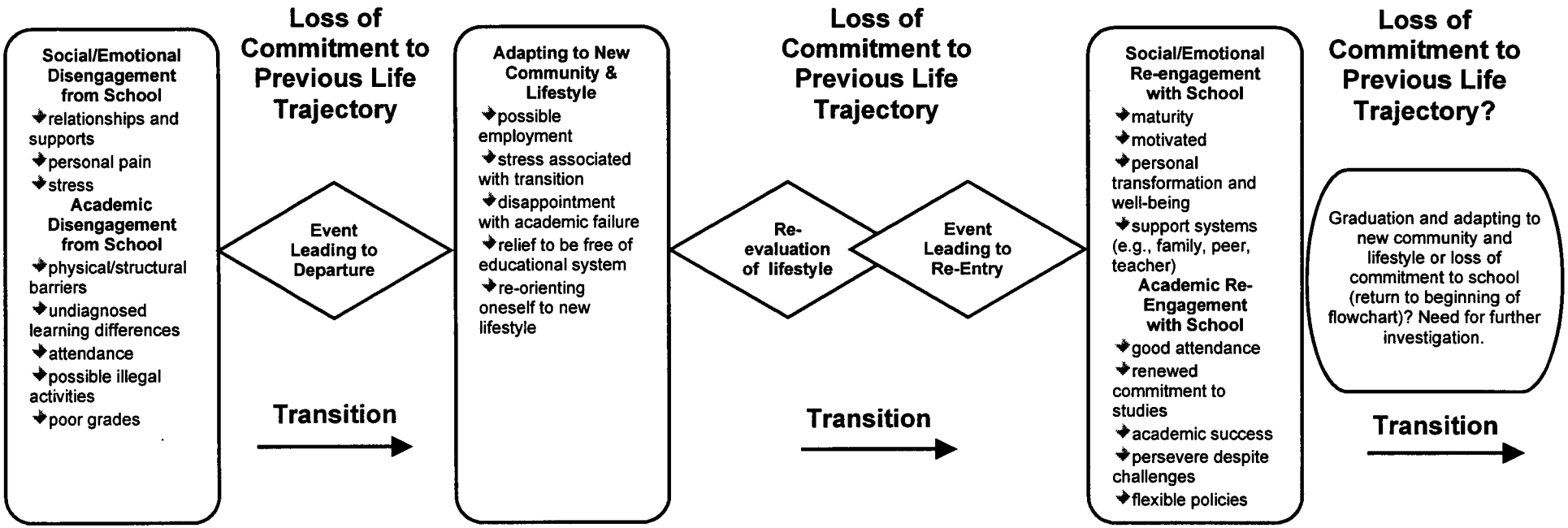


**Figure 1. Longitudinal Representation of Dropping Out.** Dropping out and returning to high school is a complex process. This visual representation adopts and supports a life course trajectory perspective.