“Where is the Value in Education for Me?”
Experiences and Perspectives of Ontario Secondary School Students at Risk of
Non-Completion of Their Ontario Secondary School Diploma

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Abstract

This study examined students considered at risk of non-completion of their Ontario Secondary School Diploma and aimed to offer insight into the questions, “What factors currently lead to school disconnect” and “How can these factors be addressed?” Eight students currently enrolled in an alternative learning environment participated in the study. Each was asked to take part in two, digitally recorded interviews that were subsequently transcribed by the researcher. The data were then coded and analysed according to specific themes: obstacles, empowerment, goals, views about success, opinions of school, and power of the teacher. From these themes, three broad focus areas emerged that were used to keep the data analysis focused: worldview, school effects, and self-image. Variances between the data collected and ideas presented in the current literature were highlighted as a reminder that when dealing with a human population, we cannot rely on textbook definitions and theory alone.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

This study examined the students who are labeled ‘at-risk’ of non-completion of their Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD). The Radwanski (1987) report provided statistics that showed that approximately 30% of students in Ontario were dropping out of high school before completing their secondary school diploma. At this revelation, the government of Ontario committed itself to reducing the dropout rate by one third in five years. At that rate, by 1993, the dropout rate should have been decreased to 20 %. However, in 1995, it was estimated that still 30% or more of Canadian adolescents did not finish school (Government of Canada, 1995). Furthermore, according to the 2007 Ontario budget, the student high school graduation rate, although increased, was 73% for the 2005-06 school year (Sorbara, 2007). This equates to a 27% dropout rate. Moreover, the Government of Canada (1995) suggests that almost 67% of the students who are dropping out of school have a grade 10 level of education or less and are 17 years of age or younger. The amount of high school dropouts, as well as the age, has staggering implications that we, as educators and as a society, cannot be apathetic towards.

The persistence of this problem is not due to a lack of awareness. For decades, education in Ontario has been in a state of flux, continuously trying to satisfy the scrutiny of those untrusting of the system in place. The latest curriculum change in 1999 was yet another attempt to get Ontario students up to par with a certain standard of academic success. As part of this new curriculum, Advanced, General, and Basic level courses were replaced by University, College, and Workplace levels (Ministry of Education and Training, 2000). Also, evaluative measures and teaching expectations were changed to encourage teacher accountability for student success. Finally, initiatives, such as the
Teacher Advisory Program (TAP), Individual Education Plans, and a standardized literacy test at the grade 10 level were implemented. However, despite any good intentions of the new curriculum, in 2003-04, 68% of Ontario students were graduating high school (Sorbara, 2007).

Why can we not seem to fix the problem? Perhaps it is because new programs are not being utilized to their full potential, or because teachers are not being trained effectively to deliver them. Block, Everson, and Guskey (1995) suggested that as a result of money and time constraints, school improvement programs are implemented piecemeal which, according to their research, very seldom results in lasting changes. Since then, the government of Ontario, under new leadership, has addressed a lot of funding issues and initiated many training programs for teachers regarding improving student learning, literacy, and retention. Although improvements have been made, there is still more to be done.

The problem of high school non-completion is so multifaceted that to try and create a standard for all is impossible. Regardless of the curriculum in place, there continues to be students who flourish, and students who struggle. Without neglecting the students who do well, we need to pay special attention to those who are having difficulty. A study of those students can help in identifying where that attention will be most beneficial.

At this point in time, there seems to be a general consensus in the literature about who these 'at-risk' learners are. In a recent report, the Expert Panel on Students at Risk in Ontario (Ontario Government, 2003) wrote that the term 'at-risk' includes:

- Elementary students who are performing at a level 1, or below grade expectations
• Secondary students who would have studied at the Modified or Basic level in the previous curriculum
• Secondary students who are performing significantly below the provincial standard, earning marks in the 50s and low 60s and who do not have the foundations to be successful in the new curriculum
• Students who are disengaged, with poor attendance

Research indicates that characteristics of those considered at risk tend to fall under certain categories with demographic, socioeconomic, and institutional factors (Brown, 1995; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Druian & Butler, 2001). In addition, a term that is becoming popular within the discourse on at-risk learners is 'resiliency'. Meriam-Webster's Online Dictionary (2005) defines resiliency as an 'ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change'. Many students who are labeled at-risk have been described as having a lack in such ability. Gibbs (1995) would suggest that this is a symptom of an insufficiency in emotional intelligence. Gibbs (1995) describes someone with such intelligence as someone who possesses the skills of self-reflection and understanding of his or her own feelings as well as being empathic towards the feelings of others. For a better part of the last century, the focus was mostly on reasoning as intellect; the elements of passion and emotion were largely ignored. However, according to Gibbs (1995), theories that ignore the role of emotional intelligence ignore the fact that IQ scores do not necessarily guarantee student success in the future. Moreover, a child with low emotional intelligence is likely to be isolated from his/her peers resulting in anger and depression. Gibbs (1995) writes, "students who are depressed or angry cannot
learn. Children who have trouble being accepted by their classmates are 2-8 times more likely to dropout" (p.114).

Terminology such as 'disengagement' or 'detachment' is often used to describe the at-risk student and his or her role within the school environment. Alienation of students through academic achievement (or lack of), peer relationships or by the teacher causes a sense of detachment or disengagement (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Druian & Butler, 2001).

In today's society there are so many external influences that can be contributing to this at any given time. Cohen (1999) stated, "The young are facing everything from increased pressure to achieve academically to the disturbing prevalence of AIDS; from violence to premature sexual and drug related experimentation, and, far too often, the crushing impact of prejudice and poverty" (p. 6).

The consequences of students dropping out before completing a high school education will be reflected in the economy and social framework of our province and country. In today's society, a high school education is considered to be the minimum level of achievement for the majority of jobs. As we continue to grow technologically and globally, the demand to stay competitive in the global market will only exacerbate the hardships faced by high school dropouts. On behalf of the At-Risk Working Group, O'Connor (2003) wrote, "[We] believe that significant work needs to begin immediately [with regard to the at risk student] or we will have a large number of students who will not graduate and who will become disenfranchised young adults without hope for their future" (p. 4).

Having students achieve their OSSD but doing so while feeling disconnected and uncertain about how their education is valuable is an equally unacceptable end. After all,
the achievement of an OSSD should not be the only factor in measuring student success as some students may complete grade 12 with severe learning gaps. As Druian and Butler (2001) suggest, working with at-risk youth should not simply be a focus on lowering the number of dropouts, it should focus on the actual amount of learning that is taking place as well. As it is possible to complete an OSSD and not feel fulfilled, true success with at-risk students can only be found when those who felt disconnected feel reconnected. When the at-risk student truly feels that the education that he/she is receiving is worth having, he or she and the school system have found success. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the term ‘at-risk’ is not limited to a label for potential drop-outs based on standard criteria. Instead, ‘at-risk’ includes a student who, regardless of standard criteria, is at risk of non completion of his or her OSSD or of completing the OSSD with severe learning gaps due to personal beliefs about school and priorities outside of school.

Statement of the Problem in Context

This study examined those students who are labeled at risk of dropping out of Ontario's high schools. That is, it was to be an examination based on a discourse with those students. To date, although the problem seems to garner a lot of attention, many of the proposed solutions seem to have been developed by those who are themselves 'disengaged' from the lives of at-risk youth. For instance, the At Risk Working Group and the Curriculum Implementation Partnership of the Ministry of Education and its Ad Hoc Advisory Committee, both designed to develop solutions to the problem, are made up of administrators, teachers, parents, and members of the community. There is no mention of student involvement. As administrators, teachers, parents, and community members, do we not stand outside of the inner circle of at-risk students? As teachers and
administrators, is it not fair to suggest that it might be hard for us to empathize because we ourselves have found academic success? As parents and community members, is it not fair to suggest the same because sometimes we are blinded by our own desires for student success?

By neglecting the voice of students who have been labeled 'at-risk', we are saying, as a society, that their voices do not count and, in effect, adding to the problem. We are suggesting that the criteria that are being used to predict and determine those who will be and those who are potential dropouts are absolute; there is no room for variation in the students' backgrounds, ethnicity, social status, and gender. This, of course, we know is untrue as there are many students who are and have the potential to be 'at-risk' who do not fit into the current popular ideas about who and what they should be.

Many of the studies done on the at-risk student population in Ontario have been done quantitatively in that they are survey based and serve the purpose of determining statistics. (Government of Canada, 1995; Morris, Pawlovich, & McCall, 1992; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2003). What is being largely ignored is the human aspect of the problem. In its report (Government of Canada, 1995) Statistics Canada suggests that such studies can only estimate numbers; that more studies need to be done to elaborate on these numbers and what they mean.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate beyond the labels and binary constructions of the who of the 'at-risk' issue. The goal was to raise awareness that students who are 'at-risk' do not represent a homogenous group by presenting some of the variations to the current ideas. In engaging in discourse with these students, it was hoped
that a greater understanding of their whole persons, their wants, and perceived needs would be achieved. Through interviewing, this study aimed to give a voice to some of the students in today's Ontario secondary school system who are currently enlisted in an alternative learning environment because they were not getting what they needed from the regular school system, a system that left them first disconnected from school and consequently, at risk of non-completion of their high school diploma. In doing so, it aimed to highlight some of the current factors leading to student disconnect within the mainstream high school.

Question to be Answered/Objectives

The central questions guiding this study were "What are some of the factors that currently lead to school disconnect?" and "How can these factors be addressed?" It is believed that these are questions that should have been asked of students considered 'at-risk' from the very beginning and should continuously be asked, as the face of 'at-risk' students is always changing, as are their needs.

In attempting to answer these questions, my main objective was to engage in discourse with students who are considered at risk to see how the theories interact with the population whom they are supposed to serve and, if there are shortcomings from the perspective of the at-risk learner, where those shortcomings are and how they might be fixed.

Rationale

The issue of at-risk students in Ontario needs to be studied because a consistently high dropout rate will have a staggering impact on Ontario's and Canada's economy and social framework. When you add to the numbers students who may get their OSSD but
do not take with them any understanding of the benefits of their diploma, the impact will be even more devastating. At this point in time, the majority of high school dropouts have received less than or equal to a grade 10 level of education (with that, there can be assumed a number of learning gaps if the problem has grown over time (Government of Canada, 1995). This level of education is not even necessarily sufficient to receive an entry-level position and secure a basic standard of living. Concerns, such as female lone parents, children in poverty, illiteracy, the decline of after-tax family income, and crime rates, are believed to be correlated to education and, therefore the effectiveness of our educational system (Brown, 1995; Cohen, 1999; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Downing & Harrison, 1990; Druian & Butler, 2001; Expert Panel on Students at Risk in Ontario, 2003; Government of Canada, 1995; Raham, 2003). Perhaps the most important revelation that we must have is that this is a problem that will not just go away; in fact, it will only swell and gain momentum with each generation if left unattended.

I believe that studies on at-risk students have the potential to help those people in a position to reach these students in a proactive way to do so. The better understanding that we, as educators, administrators, parents, students, and professionals have about why students become disconnected from their schooling and choose to drop out of high school before completing their OSSD, the better equipped we are to curb the problem. It is important to note that this study is not looking for a cure-all, but instead simple growth towards a more enlightened framework. We must take accountability for the problems that face our province and nation and we must teach our children to do the same. Inasmuch, this is a problem that we cannot give up on.
Upon graduation with my B.Ed., although my training was thorough, I felt as though I still had questions concerning the field of education, more specifically, concerning classroom management. I felt that the readings and videos provided interesting insight, but were too general in their depictions of students, student issues, and resolution strategies. As a result, I enrolled in the M.Ed. program as a means of learning more and hopefully, clarifying some of my issues.

When I began the M.Ed. program, I was working as a counselor at a Halfway House for Federally Sentenced Women. At this position, I received my first practical experiences with an 'at-risk' population. It was in this position that I began to look at the human side of classroom management, realizing that no matter how good a theory might be, it was not guaranteed. I also realized that, when the women I worked with were given a sense of ownership over decisions made in the house, there was usually more follow through with regard to positive changes as well as more positive feedback.

It was through the Master's program that I got my first teaching position. Despite my background in the junior/intermediate levels, I was hired to teach senior level English in an alternative learning environment. The students varied in age with the youngest at 16 and the oldest around 60. My average class started with an enrolment of 36, the majority of whom were males in their late teens, early 20s; they were suffering from learning gaps, memories of negative school experiences, and anger at their teachers, the school system, and themselves.

The school was scheduled in 6-week modules, where a student had the potential to earn two credits in 6 weeks, up to 12 credits per school year. Every 6 weeks, my classroom dynamic changed. Although the majority of my students were consistently
male, their stories were different, their levels of motivation were different, and their abilities were different. Further, the female population began to grow, and their stories were equally varied. I developed strategies for working at this school, and a recommendation I received at the end of my time there suggests that I was reasonably successful. Yet, if someone asked me how to work with students in an ‘at-risk’ environment, I would find myself unable to give anything but generalized ideas. My classroom dynamic was always changing, and, therefore, my strategies were always changing.

My next position only supported this idea. When I was hired to teach a class of 20 children from affluent families at an independent school, although I was told that they were a tough class in terms of self-discipline, I thought that besides the room for growth in the areas of curriculum and experience, this would not challenge me in terms of classroom management. The reality is that it challenged me more than some of the classes I taught elsewhere. Again, the stories were all different and I had to understand a whole new wealth of reasons for student disconnect from school.

Therefore, for me, this study provided an opportunity to step out of the teacher role and into the role of researcher where I could offer some of the students considered ‘at-risk’ a chance to speak candidly about their experiences and feelings about education as well as their priorities and academic aspirations. I view it as an opportunity for me to grow as an educator, but also I view it as a chance to allow these students to speak up. I feel as though it is owed to them. Mitchell (1997) suggests that one of the main goals of the Canadian Education system is to be an equalizer. In the case of these students, that goal has not been reached.
This study was not designed to suggest a step by step instruction booklet for the handling of at-risk students. However, it is meant to help educators better understand their students and personalize their teaching style as a result. Furthermore, it is hoped that this study will aid at-risk students to understand themselves and realize that although they feel disconnected, they are not alone and that they have to help themselves as well as be willing to receive help from others. It was hoped that those who design curriculum and who decide on budgets and mandates can find a better understanding through studies such as this about who they are doing budgeting and making mandates for as it is impossible to know from statistics and surveys alone. In essence, this study is about recognizing that the at-risk population in Ontario's high schools is a human population, and in being that, it is complicated and multifaceted and ever changing. Therefore, to successfully work with those considered at-risk, we must always be directly engaged with this population.

Scope and Limitations of Study

This study focused on students at the high school level between the ages of 18 and 21. The participants were students enrolled in an alternative learning environment. The participants were studying full time, in an attempt to complete their OSSD. The students who attend this school live in a variety of socioeconomic conditions. The participants were chosen in such a manner that they appeared on the surface to be reasonably similar. It was believed that despite their surface similarities they would have varying ideas concerning the questions posed.

This study is based on interviews with a variety of students labeled at risk using open-ended questions about their experiences and ideas concerning education. Some of
the limitations that must be noted are as follows. Firstly, as much as using a variety of students will help with an understanding that at-risk students do not have a fixed template, it limits the amount of understanding that can be done on any one population, such as males or females. Also, the participants for the study were selected based on past interaction with them. Therefore, a possible limitation is whether or not the participants selected are ones who will represent a variety of degrees of academic success/failure, and wants/needs.

Furthermore, the study was conducted at an alternative learning environment. Therefore, students had already been removed or have removed themselves from a traditional high school environment and will have insight into different methods of administering curriculum. In addition, the study is based on interviewing which means that the results of the study are reliant on the accuracy of the recollections of the participants and the level of which they felt comfortable to share with the researcher. The study was based on memory and personal opinion, which means that the research is limited to the accuracy and completeness of the memories and ideas. Also, the data and conclusions of this study can only be truly applied to the students who participated in it.

As a researcher, I must acknowledge the limitations that I brought to the study. I questioned whether or not I applied a personal bias to the responses of the individuals and whether my interviewing students that I had a rapport with would affect our interaction. Also, I considered whether or not the forum that I created for the students in which to participate was indeed an open and inviting one. In addition, there was a time limitation as this study was conducted during school hours and time slots had to be adhered to.
Terminology

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions apply:

OSSD: Ontario Secondary School Diploma

at-risk student: a student who, regardless of standard criteria, is at risk of non-completion of his or her OSSD or completing the OSSD with severe learning gaps due to personal beliefs about school and priorities outside of school

success: student achievement of not only an Ontario Secondary School Diploma, but of an education that they consider relevant and valuable.

Outline of Remainder of Document

In this chapter I introduced the background to the problem, put the issue of school non-completion into context, and discussed the purpose and my rationale for conducting the study. The remainder of the document begins with a review of selected literature surrounding theories and initiatives concerning the at-risk population and drop-outs in Canada and the United States of America in Chapter Two. In Chapter Three I discuss the methodology that was used to conduct the study including participants, tools, data collection, and limitations. In Chapter Four I present the findings of the study and offer the researcher’s interpretation of the data. Finally, I outline possible applications of the findings, suggestions for further research, and implications for both theory and practice in Chapter Five.
CHAPTER TWO: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

For decades, education in Ontario has been in a state of flux in an effort to find a system that achieves what Raham (2001) suggests is one of its most important goals: to serve as an equalizer for all. However, despite many efforts, it remains that approximately one quarter of secondary school students will leave school before completing their OSSD. Moreover, there are a number of students who, despite their persistence within the system, suffer from detachment from their school life and considerable learning gaps that hinder their progress. The consequences of students dropping out without completing their high school education will be reflected in the economy and social framework of our province and country. According to Mitchell (1997), it is indicative that Canada is developing a class system complete with an underclass and all of the upheaval that that can include. O’Connor (2003), as chair of the At-Risk Working Group (ARWG), writes, “[We] believe that significant work needs to begin immediately [with regard to the at-risk student] or we will have a large number of students who will not graduate and who will become disenfranchised young adults without hope for their future” (p. 4). For this reason, much attention is being paid to the at-risk youth in hopes of preventing these students from eventually dropping out.

The ‘At-Risk’ Label

At this point in time, there seems to be a general consensus in the literature of who is considered at risk. Hahn and Danzberger (1987, as cited in Downing & Harrison, 1990) suggest that there is enough known about the problem that effective intervention should be possible. However, in reviewing literature on the subject, one becomes painfully aware of certain truths. First, although there are general criteria laid out for
determining who might be at risk, these are not always true indicators and, in fact, all students have the potential to be at risk and, therefore, we should perhaps begin treating them all as such. For example, psychological theorists, such as Erik Erikson, define the period of adolescence as a tumultuous one where a person struggles to find him or herself (Woolfolk, Winne, & Perry, 2000). During this time, adolescents are consistently judging and feeling judged by others which, in itself, makes them at risk; failure to perform up to the ideals that they have created or that have been created for them can have long lasting effects. There are many suggestions for working with at-risk students from mentoring to flexible scheduling. However, the statistics on dropouts would suggest that intervention efforts, although finding varying degrees of success, have been confined to small populations of students. And finally, this problem is a human problem, and inasmuch, we will never know enough about it because it is always changing.

Research shows that there are general characteristics associated with students considered at risk (Brown, 1995; Cohen, 1999; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Downing & Harrison, 1990; Druian & Butler, 2001; Expert Panel on Students at Risk in Ontario, 2003; Government of Canada, 1995; Raham, 2003;). These include socioeconomic, demographic, emotional, situational, academic and institutional factors. Although there seems to be consistent criteria used to help identify students who are considered at risk, there are some areas where the research shows contrasting ideas. For instance, the terms disconnected and disengaged are sometimes used synonymously when they are two very different things (Loutzenheiser, 2002).

Moreover, the label ‘at risk’ itself can create issues. Loutzenheiser (2002) wrote “... designations such as “at-risk” and “success-failure” are problematic. Binary
constructions such as these, leave little room for the complicated lives of these young people" (p. 441). Croninger and Lee (2001) expand on this, writing, "As a construct, risk indicates the probability of future difficulties and not an explanation for why difficulties occur" (p. 552). Swadener and Lubeck (1995, as cited in Croninger & Lee, 2001) suggest that uncertainty regarding the causes of risk has incited some to criticize the use of labels as they are confining and encouraging of stereotypes. In their review of intervention programs, Prevatt and Kelly (2003) expand on the problematic nature of attributing certain characteristics to the at-risk population in reminding us that they do not represent a homogenous group. In fact, the idea that students should not be evaluated for their potential to be at risk by a standard checklist is one that is stated in a variety of the sources reviewed.

Gleason and Dynarski (2002) conducted a longitudinal study to determine whether or not risk factors could be used to accurately determine who would be the most likely to drop out. Using the common criteria attributed to students considered at risk, Gleason and Dynarski (2002) collected data on 2,672 middle school students and 2,808 high school students from various sites and followed up with those students three years later via interviews. Gleason and Dynarski (2002) concluded that the majority of the time, risk factors did not accurately predict who would and who would not eventually drop out of school.

School Effects

Druian and Butler (2001) go as far as stating that there does not seem to be a good definition of who the students who may be potential dropouts are. What they suggest is that, in lieu of looking at dropouts as a source of information regarding at-risk
populations, we should look at the type and quality of learning that is going on inside of the actual classroom. Druian and Butler (2001) wrote that while there are some criteria that the school can not control, there are many elements that they can and that they have a responsibility to address those elements.

What type and quality of learning is going on within the classroom? Dalia (1991) suggests that the most common complaints about school made by high school dropouts include a dislike for teachers and arbitrary forms of discipline. Dalia (1991) used interviewing to collect data from five participants regarding their elementary school experiences, their transition from elementary to high school, their current situation, and their feelings about it. Although there were many differences in the stories of the individuals studied, one of the commonalities that Dalia (1991) outlines is a sense of detachment from the school environment due to negative experiences as a result of inconsistent policy enforcement.

According to Epp and Epp (2001), current school policies actually encourage student attrition for non-conformers. Through examining the relationship between behaviour policies and student attrition, Epp and Epp (2001) determined that the system currently in place in Ontario schools is such that it actually encourages early student leaving. For instance, they write that school policies do not recognize the persona of the student, and point out the irony in expelling students for attendance problems. Without denying the need for certain rules within the school system, Epp and Epp (2001) suggest that too many schools resort to removing students in an effort to easily solve problems associated with their staying in school. O'Connor (2003) recommended that students with poor attendance patterns be supported rather than penalized.
Where policies and teacher relationships are not a factor in a student’s choice to leave school or to simply lose sight of the value in it, curriculum inappropriateness usually is. Hohol (1955, as cited in Morris et al., 1992) concluded that students who believe that the program has little or no practical value to them will become disinterested and discouraged and, consequently, leave school. Furthermore, the report states that in the 1920s, four factors seemed to be responsible for low retention rates: 1) poor health; 2) lack of interest in school; 3) economic pressures; and 4) low academic achievement. These categories have remained consistent over the years, what has changed, is the degree to which each is cited, where the most noticeable change is students leaving because of a general dislike for school.

Hutchinson, Freeman, Stoch, and Chan (2004) conducted a study with the purpose of investigating factors that influenced one group of students with learning disabilities to stay in school, and another group with learning difficulties to leave before completing their OSSD. They focused on resiliency in students, analyzing the data in terms of intrapersonal support, interpersonal support, and institutional support. Hutchinson et al. (2004) found that the students in each group differed in a variety of ways, including their development of long term, personal goals, as well as the level of encouragement that they received at home, from their teachers, and the school environment.

Current At-Risk Initiatives and Ideologies

Many programming ideas are currently being investigated regarding structure, leadership, and classroom management. The Expert Panel on Students at Risk in Ontario (Ontario Government, 2003) indicates that one key to successful structuring for at risk students is to offer innovative and flexible school environments geared to their needs.
Raham (2003) suggests other strategies that schools can employ in order to make themselves more desirable for the at-risk student. These include introducing ways of conducting early identification of the at-risk student and intervention procedures at a young age, developing full service schools with integrated services, offering a broader range of programs with more flexible schedules, and encouraging secondary school teachers to be able to function as literacy coaches.

Where leadership and classroom management is concerned, there is a general consensus as to the importance of the presence of caring, dynamic, and responsive teachers who are committed to meeting student needs (Brown, 1995; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Downing & Harrison, 1990; Easton, 2002; Epp & Epp, 2001; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2003; Ontario Government, 2003; Raham, 2003; Yamauchi, 2003). One example of this is planned mentoring.

Brown (1995) writes that mentoring is a strategy that has been used by business and the outside community for the better part of the 20th century. However, it only started to be implemented into the school system in the 1980s. He describes that mentoring programs are designed to provide one-on-one counsel to students who are considered at risk. One student is matched to a mentor who is supposed to provide guidance over the time required. Mentoring programs have started to gain prevalence in the United States and Canada, however, according to Brown (1995), the mentoring of at-risk youth, although having the potential to be successful, is not always. Brown (1995) suggests various reasons for this, including: not enough structure, goals that are too simplified, and organized pairs that do not mesh well.
Another idea discussed in the literature is a programming framework that Cohen (1999) refers to as Social Emotional Learning (SEL) which encourages the development of emotional intelligence (Gibbs, 1995). At the heart of Cohen's paper is the idea that almost all of the learning that goes on inside a classroom “happens within the context of human relationships” (p. 16). Consequently, if a child does not feel safe in the classroom; safe to take chances; safe to explore and be him or herself, he or she will not learn. Cohen (1999) states that student success on achievement tests and academic grades are not true indicators of the success that they will earn in their future but that emotional wellbeing can be an indicator. Therefore, as much as we teach academic subjects, such as math and English, we should honour and teach social and emotional competencies. These ideas are reflected in studies by Hargreaves (2000) as well. In his work, Hargreaves (2000) interviewed and engaged in discourse with a group of teachers regarding their emotional responses to educational change. Hargreaves (2000) concluded that there is a distance between students and their teachers at the high school level that, “threatens the basic forms of emotional understanding on which high-quality teaching and learning depend” (p. 811).

Nowicki, Duke, Sisney, Stricker, and Tyler (2004) conducted a study that evaluated the impact of the Effective Learning Program (ELP) on at-risk students attending a rural high school in Louisville, Kentucky. The ELP is based on two core constructs: locus of control and interaction. According to Nowicki et al. (2004), students who are at risk tend to have an external locus of control and poor relationships at school. The ELP focuses on working with the student to recognize internal locus of control and build positive interaction skills.
Nowicki et al. (2004) followed three groups of students: a group enrolled in the ELP, a group who had qualified for enrollment in the ELP but were not placed within it, and a group from regular education classes comparable to the ELP group in age, gender, and race. The study was conducted over two years in an attempt to discern the impact this program had on reducing the rate of dropouts. Students who were enrolled in the ELP experienced schooling very differently from their peers not enrolled. Six teachers were appointed to approximately 90 students to teach math, English, and the humanities. The students learned in a ‘team’ environment where special events, such as birthdays, were recognized and field trips and reward days played a central role. Inside this classroom, the students were taught a “relationship language” where they could communicate with teachers with little chance of misunderstanding. According to Nowicki et al. (2004), the students were made to face their attitudes and behaviours head on, making them more accountable for themselves and their success. The study found that at the end of the 2 year cycle the “ELP intervention [was] associated with the desired changes in school attendance and retention” as well as “…associated with variables conceptualized to play a part in producing greater retention, such as internality, fewer non-verbal errors, and interpersonal styles that were less hostile and dominant” (p. 235).

Through a review of literature on effective schooling practices, Druian and Butler (2001) set out to establish a link between the techniques being used in effective schools and the needs of at-risk students. Druian and Butler (2001) assert that the research on effective schools was conducted on “school effects, teacher effects, instructional leadership, curriculum alignment, program coupling and educational change and implementation” (p. 3). What the research showed was the effective schools, or, schools
where every student was meeting the primary objectives, had three contributing factors to their success: a system of leadership where everyone in the school recognized the school as a place for learning and stayed focused on that goal; a climate supported by the idea that everyone truly believed that all students could learn; and classroom management that included a variety of instructional methods, clear objectives, and consistent monitoring of the student progress in meeting those objectives. According to Morris et al. (1992), “There is a unified agreement among researchers that programs should be matched to student needs and problems, and that strategies should take advantage of student interest and strengths” (p. 75).

The At-Risk Issue in Ontario

In Ontario, school reform has been an issue of contention that has gained incredible momentum over the last two decades. An overhaul of the curriculum, the expectations of students and teachers, and “almost every facet of the management and delivery of education” commenced in 1995 (Lasky, Moore, & Sutherland, 2001). Despite desires to make a more efficient system, this reform gained much notoriety. For instance, Ross, Hanny, and Hogoboam-Gray (2001) conducted a study using interviews and surveys with 20 teachers and a sample of grade 9 students to investigate the impact of secondary school reform on student assessment. The teachers participated in two interviews: one regarding their assessment practices and any changes that they had been making, and the other discussing changes made to the curriculum in the same time period. The study found that, in general, although teachers were attempting to change their assessment techniques, the “multidimensional innovation” that assessment was a part of was itself an obstacle in making the change. The increased demands on students
and teachers with the new curriculum and the lack of congruence between elementary and secondary strands, as well as with student and teacher perceptions regarding the change were the leading impediments.

This type of confusion in implementation is also mentioned in studies by Lasky, Moore, and Sutherland (2001) where they conclude that such confusion led to a lack in teacher effectiveness in the classroom. This is extremely unfortunate. Morris, Pawlovich, and McCall (1992) outline the depth that this problem has when they write,

> There is a strong belief among researchers that it is the strength of teachers’ sense of professional accountability that is the fundamental strength in effective schools. An overriding belief... is that whatever the technical feature of schools and programs, schools without the basic commitment will remain ineffective.

(p. 75)

Furthermore, in a report presented to the Ontario Public Supervisory Officials’ Association (2000), the ‘School Organization Committee’ stated that, as a result of funding changes and reorganization, a very different school culture was developing in which Ontario students were suffering a “significant loss to the educational experience” (p. 1). Guidance, library, extracurricular activities, special education, ESL, alternative education, and co-operative education are all areas in which reductions have resulted in losses for students. In short, despite lofty goals for increased success for all students, the overhaul of the educational system in Ontario has yet to see any substantial positive impact.

In 2004, the Ontario government announced a Student Success Strategy designed to increase the level of student retention, high school graduation rates, and the pursuit of
post secondary education. This strategy includes the opportunity for students to focus on their interests and career paths, participate in apprenticeships and co-op placements, and receive increased support and extra guidance in their studies (Sorbara, 2007). In addition, Student Success Teams have been created in every high school so that every student can have access to added support when they need it and more funding has been allocated for teacher training. These are all positive steps which, since implementation, have led to an increased level of credit completion and a dropout rate decreasing from 32-27% (Sorbara, 2007). With continuous attention to the at-risk learner, adaptability, and perseverance, Ontario's success rates can only improve.

Finding the Student Voice

It is obvious through the research that much thought and attention is already being paid to the at risk learner. However, much of the research reviewed neglected to include a student voice in programming efforts. Nor did it discuss the idea that success does not necessarily come through students completing their OSSD, but instead through students finding value in their education. Some mentioned one or the other, some neglected both, most did not recognize both at the same time.

Easton (2002) and Loutzenheiser (2002) focused specifically on addressing the student voice in attempting to better understand those whom we are supposed to serve. Easton (2002) asked students enrolled in an alternative learning environment to write informal statements regarding their past experiences in school that had led them to their current placement and what the new placement offered them that was positive. Easton (2002) found that they had a lot to say about what they considered negative influences in their prior school lives and positive influences in their current situation. Easton (2002)
summarized the students’ words in discussing their lack of self-esteem and their desire for more accountability, personalized learning, caring teachers, a safe learning environment with high expectations of them, and opportunities to engage in active and self-directed learning.

Loutzenheiser (2002) conducted an interview based study that was similar in that it examined students in an alternative environment and their experiences prior to and in their current placement. Loutzenheiser’s (2002) goal was to examine student disconnection and reconnection to school through their eyes; to celebrate what they knew rather than point out what they lacked. Loutzenheiser (2002) found that there were trends among the girls in that their perception of self was “partial and unstable”, their beliefs about the causes of their leaving the mainstream system were similar, and their belief that school effects can alter students’ feelings of connection to school and teachers. Perhaps the most striking similarity amongst the girls interviewed is the fact that they felt their voices were ignored when it mattered most to them. This left the participants feeling as though they did not matter enough to acknowledge or that the school system just did not care. Loutzenheiser (2002) writes, “Voices – literally the words – of children of all ages can’t be heard enough in educational research, especially the stories and perspectives of marginalized, ‘dangerous’, or ‘damaged’ youth” (p. 144).

In their study, Hutchinson, et al. (2004) not only included the student voice, but also mentioned the idea that success can be found in areas outside of the purely academic realm. Through interviewing two groups of students about possible factors that contributed to one group leaving while the other stayed, the study used the students’ perspectives to analyse elements that led some students to be more resilient than others.
In their recommendations, they suggest, "placing less emphasis on the academic aspects of school and more on the social-emotional component" (p.11).

Motivation

Psychologists who study motivation focus on the choices that people make, the time that it takes people after the decision has been made to behave as they have chosen, the intensity or level of involvement with which they engage themselves in the behaviour and what causes them to persist or give up, and, finally, what they are thinking about throughout the process (Woolfolk et al., 2001). There are many factors that drive our behaviour, from incentives to curiosity and more. Csikzentmihalyi (1994) states, "Every human being has [a] creative urge as his or her birthright. It can be squelched or corrupted, but it cannot be extinguished completely" (p. 5).

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs offers some insight into motivation and "gives us a way of looking at the whole person, whose physical, emotional and intellectual needs are all interrelated" (Woolfolk et al., p. 362). According to Maslow’s theory, all humans have lower and higher level needs. Maslow’s hierarchy implies that if a student is lacking satisfaction in one of the lower level needs, he or she will be unlikely to be motivated to try to fulfill one of the higher level needs. The better the needs of the child are met, the more likely he or she will be to achieve success. Maslow’s ideas are reflected in Cohen’s (1999) work when he writes, "Emotional well-being . . . is dramatically and positively predictive of . . . academic achievement" (p. 7). Furthermore, Cohen (1999) stresses the need for students to 'know thyself' or be self-aware in order to be successful which is representative of the top of Maslow’s hierarchy – self-actualization.
A theory that can be used to understand the motivational influences behind students' resolve to continue versus drop out of school is self-determination theory (Hardre & Reeve, 2003). According to Woolfolk et al. (2001), self-determination theory is "... the need to experience choice in what we do and how we do it" (p. 364). Deci, Vallerand, Robert, Pelletier, Luc, and Ryan (1991) write that self-determination theory addresses three basic psychological needs: competence, relatedness, and autonomy. This means that students must feel confident in their abilities and challenged to test them, affiliation with the school environment, and an internal locus of control. Deci and Ryan (1996) suggest that the more these needs are being met, the more self-regulated a learner will be and write that many studies in the area of self-determination theory have been founded on the notion that self-regulation is equated with a higher degree of success than being controlled.

When this theory is applied to education, it is about nurturing in students a desire to learn through activities and educational endeavours that empower them by making them feel competent in their abilities and are interesting as they relate directly to the students' lives (Hardre & Reeve, 2003). Hardre and Reeve (2003) used questionnaires to test a motivational model that they had developed. In the model, the students' perceptions of how 'autonomy supportive' their classrooms were "predicted the degree of their motivational resources, as represented by perceived self-determination and perceived competence. These motivational resources, in turn, predict the subsequent formulations of students' intentions to continue versus drop-out of school" (p. 348).

Through the questionnaires, the students were asked questions regarding perceived teacher autonomy support, self-determined motivation, perceived competence,
school performance, and intentions to persist in school (Hardre & Reeve, 2003). What Hardre and Reeve (2003) found, was that their hypothesized model fit the collected data sufficiently. Thus, students who are exposed to classroom environments that encourage self-governing and, therefore, student accountability and ownership, should have more positive perceptions of their own competence and, therefore, be more likely to continue in school.

Summary

In seeking out research that includes a true student voice, a lot of reading materials, such as books, were highlighted. However, searches for scholarly articles that included empirical studies showed evidence of a lack of attention paid to this area. Although Easton (2002) and Loutzenheiser (2002) offer some insight, there is a need for more comprehensive studies on the human response. In addition, there is a need for more Canadian research on this subject. At this point, a lot of initiatives have been implemented into the educational system. However, there does not seem to be an 'action' group evaluating and enforcing such initiatives (in Ontario at least) that includes a student voice. A review of motivational theories would suggest that providing students with the opportunity to take control of their education would lead to increased motivation to succeed in school (Hardre & Reeve, 2003; Nowicki et al., 2004; Woolfolk et al., 2001).
CHAPTER THREE - METHODOLOGY

In reviewing the literature surrounding the chosen topic, it became evident that although there is an increasing focus on the population of secondary school students labeled ‘at-risk’ in Ontario and beyond, there is a severe lack of comprehensive empirical, qualitative, and quantitative research in Canada and, more specifically, Ontario. In addition, although there are currently task forces and working groups assigned to address this issue at a practical level in Ontario, there is marginal evidence that the student voice is represented within them.

Presently, there is a vast amount of research on the criteria which lead to the labeling of ‘at-risk’ and a plethora of suggestions for program implementation. Unfortunately, what has seemingly happened is that in attempting to address the issue, we have constructed a homogenous group that comes with the illusion of an ‘ideal’ solution. Although research has suggested some level of success with certain programs, it is consistently noted that although the problem is not a new one, there has been no real change in the numbers to suggest that any of the programs currently in place in Ontario are having consistently high levels of success.

Primarily, the goal of my research was to review literature on this subject as locally as possible. However, it became obvious that there would be a need to branch out within the rest of the country and into the United States of America if the need for the current study was to be clearly defined. In branching out, it was noted that there are similarities across Canada and the United States with dropouts and students at risk of dropping out. There are similarities in the type of programming that is being implemented
as well. Also, there are similarities in the notion that research needs to be ongoing to address such a multifaceted problem.

This chapter provides a description of the methods and procedure used in conducting this research study. It provides a synopsis of the study by reviewing the chosen methodology and design, site and participant selection, instrumentation, data collection and management, and data recording and analysis. Limitations to the study, methodological assumptions, ethical considerations, and credibility are also discussed.

**Research Methodology and Design**

Short (1991) states that, “Scholarly inquiry differs in function and approach than the more informal type of inquiry that we do in connection with our everyday activities” (p. 3). Short (1991) goes further to say that most often when we have a question we go to people and sources, who we trust to be reliable, in search of an answer, failing to consider that whatever answers we receive have their roots in formal inquiry. Short (1991) says that the purpose of this formal method of inquiry is to find answers to new questions or those that have never been asked or those that may have been asked and answered unsatisfactorily. This applies to my research because I felt that although we have many answers to who is at risk and potential ways in which to help them, the issues are changing all the time and so the answers are always needing updating and reforming. Recognizing that the study concerned a multifaceted problem, I chose to employ qualitative methods. The Canada School Leavers Survey (Government of Canada, 1995) states that,
Qualitative research should continue to investigate the perceptions and motivations of early school leavers. . . We need to know, from a communications standpoint, the arguments, words, symbols and substance of changes required to persuade our target audience of the need to stay in school. (p.121)

This study set out to investigate such “perceptions and motivations”. Specifically, to students who are seemingly at risk because of their current enrollment in an alternative learning environment, this study posed the question, "What are some of the factors that currently lead to school disconnect and how can they be addressed?"

Cohen, Manion, and Morris (2000) state,

Interviews enable the participants – be they interviewers or interviewees – to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view. In these senses the interview is not simply concerned with collecting data about life: it is a part of life itself, its human embeddedness is inescapable. (p. 267)

This statement implies that research is a method that is meant for studies that wish to include a more in-depth look at the human side of the data that are being collected. As the present study set out to enable at-risk students to provide their insights regarding their experiences and perspectives, interviewing seemed the most appropriate choice.

Cannell and Kahn (1968, as cited in Cohen et al., 2000) defined interviewing as a two-person conversation aimed at obtaining information that is relevant to the research being conducted. The students who participated in the current study may have low literacy skills. Because the interview is a verbal exchange, the need to worry about
literacy limitations was low. Interviewing allowed the students to answer more at their own pace than a questionnaire might have.

The interviewing method that I used was a structured, open-ended interview. As previously mentioned, the research reviewed that included a student voice was on the informal side. In an effort to add some formality, I chose to include a script of questions that I followed in a specific order. Structure was also necessary as I was looking to gather comparable data. However, as I was interested in allowing the students the opportunity to answer the questions as in depth as they wished, the questions that I included were open ended. According to Cohen et al. (2000), open ended questions have a variety of advantages, including being flexible, allowing the interviewer to encourage further depth of answering if desired through probes, or to clear up any misunderstandings that an interviewee may have regarding the questions posed. Open ended questions nurture a cooperative environment and help to establish a rapport between the interviewer and interviewee as they encourage more freedom and interaction.

Selection of Site and Participants

Nine Ontario secondary students (four male and five female) who are considered at risk of non-completion of their OSSD were interviewed. The students were all attending an alternative learning centre when the interviews took place. The site was chosen because of its location in what is considered an affluent suburban community. The participants were purposefully selected in that they were all over the age of 18, were attending an alternative learning centre, and were either male or female to help create a sample that was as balanced as possible.
Description of Participants

Although nine students originally committed to participate in the study, one male participant withdrew from the school before the study was completed and, therefore, his data have been removed from the final discussion. The participants who completed the study ranged in age from 18 – 29 years. Three of the participants were male and five were female. The participants had a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds. All of the participants spoke English fluently. Some lived at home with their parents, some lived independently, and at least one was a parent herself. The participants were all at different stages of OSSD completion and expressed varied post secondary aspirations.

Recruitment of Participants

Clearance for this research was obtained through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University before data collection began (See Appendix A). To start the research process, students were informed verbally by their teacher of my intent to request their participation. I went to their school during class time and introduced myself, my work and my goals before explaining to them how they could participate should they wish to do so. I also explained the confidentiality surrounding the research and that the research being done had no bearing on their schooling. This verbal introduction before asking for participation served the purpose of establishing an initial rapport with any and all potential participants. In going to the students and allowing them to see me directly, I believed that I was opening up to an audience that might otherwise be untrusting.

I was surprised that my initial intention to leave a sign-up sheet in the classroom after I left was unneeded. Immediately after my initial introduction, I had eight students agree to participate. I received a phone call later that day from their teacher informing me
that she had been approached by an additional male participant. It was understood that the interviews would take place during class time but was not related to school, would have no bearing on their success in their current courses, and all information that they disclosed to me would remain confidential from their teachers. Because of the potential to have participants drop out of the research study at any time, I elected to include everyone who showed an interest (a total of nine participants). I had a brief meeting with each of them to explain the study in detail and, through their signing of the consent form, confirmed their willingness to participate. Once they had accepted the invitation to participate, I set a date and time for the first interviews to begin.

Data Collection and Recording

Data were collected via individual interviews with each participant. Each interview took place in a private room on site at the school. The first interview, scheduled to take no longer than 1 hour, was designed to encourage discourse on the participants’ backgrounds and current perceptions of school and success. It was believed that this interview would help highlight the many differences that can be found under the ‘at-risk’ label despite standardized criteria. The second interview served as a forum in which the participants were able to either correct or expand on their initial thoughts after having some time to reflect on the questions.

Instrumentation

The participants in this study were asked to participate in two interviewing sessions with the expectation that both would take place on school grounds, during class time, and that neither would exceed an hour in length. During the first session, the participants were individually removed from class at an assigned time. In a private room
within the school, they were asked a variety of open ended questions regarding their past experiences in school, their current feelings toward school, their feelings about educational success, and their motivation for achieving an OSSD. Finally, the participants were asked how much ownership they felt they had been given over their own educational success and what advice they might have for teachers and administrators in the development and delivery of curriculum. The interviewer used prompts to help students expand on any answers that were vague or brief. However, all efforts were made to ensure that neither the questions nor the prompts guide the answers of the interviewees.

The second interview session was used to do follow-up and provide an opportunity for the participants to expand on any answers that were given during the first session. Again, the interview was conducted during class time. The participants were interviewed according to the time that was most convenient for them, in a private room within the school. In some cases, this interview was shorter in that it focused on specific questions that the interviewer wished to retrieve further information on. Although the interview was scripted, the scripts were intended to guide but not restrict the data collected. Personalized interviews of each participant resulted. For example, if, during the first interview, a participant stated that he or she felt that education had no purpose, in the second interview the interviewer asked, “You responded in the first interview that you felt there wasn’t any purpose to education, would you like to expand on that for me.”
Questions Used During the Interview Process

A set of 13 questions was designed to encourage discourse on the students’ current perceptions of education, its role in their lives, and where they believe their views come from. Questions posed during this interview included:

1. What is your view of the purpose of education?
2. Where do you think that your views come from?
3. What are your motives for obtaining an OSSD?
4. What potential obstacles do you foresee in obtaining your OSSD?
5. Do you view the achievement of your OSSD as the ultimate sign of your success in school?
6. What has been your experience within the new curriculum?
7. How responsible do you feel for your own education?
8. Have you ever been asked by a teacher, administrator, etc. to comment on your own educational needs?
9. Did your previous school have alternative programming for students who felt disconnected from their studies?
10. Are you aware of any programming initiatives such as planned mentoring, etc.?
11. What alternative programs have you experienced to date?
12. Have you ever been asked by a teacher, administrator, etc. to develop your own individual education plan?
13. What suggestions would you have for administrators/teachers in developing and delivering curriculum?
The researcher used prompts to encourage students who provided vague or ambiguous answers to expand or clarify their responses. The prompts were generic, such as: “Can you explain why you feel this way?” and “Can you offer an example?”, so that the students could add to their initial response without being guided in a particular direction. If needed, the researcher would repeat or reframe a question to ensure that the student(s) was clear on what was being asked. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

The second interview began with the interviewer getting reacquainted with the interviewee informally. After, the interview involved reflecting on the first interview and providing an opportunity for the participant to expand or clarify on his or her previous answers. To do this, the researcher provided the written transcript of the first interview for both researcher and participant to read through and discuss. This second interview was even more successful than the first as the participants seemed more comfortable in sharing, seemed to appreciate the chance to review and validate their contributions, and, in some cases, offered new, unsolicited thoughts.

Data Management

Once each participant had completed his/her first interview, the researcher began the transcription process. Lapadat and Lindsay (1999, as cited in Tilley, 2003), discuss the value of researchers being personally involved in the transcription process when they write, “Transcription facilitates the close attention and interpretive thinking that is needed to make sense of the data” (p. 751). In an effort to keep the transcripts as accurate and meaningful as possible, I opted to transcribe each of them myself. Because turning verbal discourse into a written script of the interview naturally removed a lot of the context
surrounding the answers, I aimed to include as many relevant contextual cues as possible. This included, but was not limited to, noticeable changes in voice, nervous laughter, lengthy pauses, etc. as well as any nonverbal methods of communication that the interviewee utilized (smiling, scowling, etc.) that were worthy of mention. When the transcript of the first interview was complete, I read and reread each one which enabled me to consider what I wanted to know more about and, in turn, develop new questions for the next time I met with the participant.

During the second interview, I used the transcription to review the initial conversation with each participant. I asked any new questions as they came up in relation to the original text. For the most part, responses to these questions were written down, by the researcher, directly onto the original transcript so they remained in context. As this was the last meeting that I had with each participant, I asked each of them to review his/her transcript to insure that it was accurate.

I reviewed all of the data from the first interview and the second interviews separately and then as a continuation from one to the other. Data analysis was guided by the researcher’s desire to present as accurate and real a picture of the participants involved while maintaining a level of formality that lent credibility to the study. To do this, I employed steps outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994, as cited in Griffie, 2005). These were as follows:

Step 1: Listen to the tapes and transcribe the data.

As mentioned, it was important to the researcher to remain close to the data collected. I was responsible for the transcription process. Reflecting on the actual
interview aided in my decision making process when determining what hedge words, etc. should be included in the transcripts.

Step 2: Familiarize yourself with the text by reading and rereading it.

Subsequent to the first interviews, I transcribed the data and reviewed them to look for any ambiguities in the participants' original responses as well as to develop a few follow up questions for each participant. During the second interview, I read through each individual's transcript with the corresponding participant to confirm the accuracy of the transcription and to ask for clarification of any vague ideas while asking some new questions. The new information was added directly to the transcript and then read for clarification with the participant still present. After, each transcription was reviewed again several times to get a sense of any initial similarities and contrasts in the data.

Step 3: Coding.

Coding began informally while reviewing the transcriptions for key words. As I read through each transcription, I would highlight words that I felt were important or words that seemed to be repeated often. From this highlighting, I developed six themes to use in coding the transcriptions. The themes were: obstacles, empowerment, goals, views about success, opinions on school, and power of the teacher. Some of the responses fell into multiple themes and the coding reflected that.

Step 4: Write a summary of the coded data.

Once the coding process was completed, I turned the coded information for each participant into a 3-column graphic organizer (See Appendix B) with the theme in one column, the participants' words in the middle column, and my personal comments in the final column. I inputted a summary of the coded data from the first interview in black and
added my comments in black as well. Then, I went over the data from the second interviews and inputted them in blue along with any new comments I had, also in blue. In this way the data could be analysed as separate interviews and as a whole.

The column that held my personal comments included my reflections on the participants’ body language worthy of note, my interpretations of any way in which they responded that I felt might effect the validity of their response (e.g., I got the impression that one participant was trying to please me with his responses, an impression that I thought was important to discuss), any points to potentially develop, and my reflections on myself as a researcher.

Step 5: Write an interpretation.

The right column became my starting point for interpretation. As I got to the summaries for participants 7 and 8, I was able to identify many connections between what the participants were saying and I made note of that. Also, if there was a response that seemed particularly different from the rest, I noted it. Finally, I used the right column to generate more questions for myself to use for interpretation upon further reviews.

Next, I developed a flow chart showing layers in the conversation analysis (See Appendix C). From the six original themes I was able to come up with three broad focus areas: worldview, school effects, and self-image. These were used to help focus the data on the main objective of this study: to provide insight into some of the factors that currently lead to school disconnect, and consider how they might be addressed. In presenting the data, I first examined each of the six themes using a matrix to show the individual responses of the participants with regard to key points, followed by a brief interpretation of the theme as a whole. For each of the focus areas, I felt it was important
to present the data on each participant individually to provide as much insight as possible as to who they are.

Methodological Assumptions

The goal of the researcher was two-fold. First, I aimed to collect data that reinforced the notion that the issue of ‘at-risk’ students is a human one and, therefore, incredibly multidimensional. In doing so, I wanted to further examine the at-risk population and write a piece of literature that would help others to better understand this population. Secondly, I hoped to collect feedback from the participants regarding some of the initiatives that are already being implemented in some areas and ideas from them regarding future initiatives.

One assumption that I had entering this study was that although the participants would have different stories to share, all of them would have some past negative experiences in the regular system that steered them towards non-completion. It was assumed that interviewing the participants would enable me to delve into their experiences and ideas sufficiently to describe the perceptions of each participant on school and success.

Limitations

There are some limitations associated with this methodology. Two of the criticisms most often noted in using this research method are validity and reliability (Cohen et al., 2000). These criticisms exist because interviewing is rooted in the human experience, allowing for bias of the interviewer and the interviewee to disrupt the data. For instance, the data collected are based on the accuracy of the recollections of the participants as well as the extent to which they feel comfortable answering. In some
instances, the students might not have been able to offer complete answers as they might have been unsure or simply making a hypothesis about something that they had yet to experience. There is a bias in the way that I, as the interviewer, received the information and interpreted the data.

In an effort to increase validity and reliability, the interviewing process that I chose was a structured one. Although I used prompts, any summaries, introductions, or information given to the participants were prepared in advance. The open-ended questions were designed to not lead the answers of the participants. The use of a tape recorder helped to maintain accurate recall of the dialogue that took place. Finally, the second interview offered a second chance to clarify any vague or ambiguous answers given previously. During the second interview, I was more apt to write comments down on the initial transcript. Every time this was done, I read out what was written for each participant to either accept or reject.

Time constraints placed on the interviewing process were limiting. The interviews took place during class time so, in order to ensure that the participants’ work did not suffer, timelines were abided by. At times, specifically around the participants’ mid morning break and lunch dismissal, I would notice a natural distraction from the participants. This may have resulted in questions being answered more vaguely because the participant was preoccupied. Scheduling also fits under a time constraint limitation because the two interviews needed to be scheduled within a reasonable time frame to ensure that the second interview was as meaningful and relevant as possible.

Initially, I set out to maintain a rigid schedule in order to minimize disruptions to class work and the interview process. However, because of the nature of the environment,
a formal schedule was not ideal and I quickly found what was optimal was scheduling to be available at the site for a few hours at a time and fitting in students as they were ready to see me. As the interviews did not take the hour that I initially thought they would, meeting with up to four participants within the 3.5 hour class was possible.

The study as a whole maintains limitations. It is important to note that whatever data collected throughout this process were limited to a small group of participants and cannot automatically be applied to other at-risk students. However, this study is based on the idea that at-risk students do not represent a homogeneous group, so to generalize the findings would be contradictory to the goals of the researcher.

Establishing Credibility

Griffee (2005) suggests that there are always going to be questions concerning the validity of an interview based methodology. However, he offers suggestions that a researcher can employ to help establish credibility. One of the strategies that I chose to utilize was completing two interviews with each participant, giving each participant the opportunity to accept or reject the transcriptions. Participants’ acceptance of the transcripts illustrates consistency between what they intended to say and what I interpreted from the conversation in creating the transcriptions. Another strategy was developing a standard interview script for use in the first interview with all of the participants.

Griffee (2005) suggests that reinterviewing participants offers validity to this methodology. For this study, reinterviewing was an excellent opportunity to confirm that I had captured a reasonably accurate depiction of the personalities and ideas present during each interview as well as add depth and clarification to some of the more
ambiguous ideas that were presented in my first meeting with each participant. Reinterviewing at a later date provided the participants time to reflect on the questions and their ideas as well as become comfortable with the researcher.

Ethical Considerations

Students were told that participation in this study was voluntary, had no bearing on their academic success, and that they could withdraw at any time without consequence. Also, there was a risk of the participants’ teacher and other students in the school being aware of their participation in the study. Participants were informed that the interviews would be audio taped and transcribed by the primary researcher and that the interviews and data collected would be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of all identifiers. Each participant was provided a feedback letter upon completion of the study that included resources for them should sharing any of their experiences lead to renewed feelings of frustration or upset. None of the participants suggested that they were in need of this follow up.

All written records and digital voice recordings were kept in the sole possession of the primary researcher. One participant was withdrawn from school before the second interview which resulted in his not completing the study. Consequently, I voluntarily destroyed transcriptions from his interview before the analysis process. All other records will be kept locked in a filing cabinet for one year after the study completion, at which time they will be destroyed as well.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to give a voice to a small population of students considered at risk and provide insight into the central questions, “What are some of the factors that currently lead to school disconnect?” and “How can these factors be addressed?”

This was a qualitative study that used interviewing to collect data from eight participants (3 male, 5 female) currently attending an alternative learning environment, after removing themselves or being removed from the regular secondary school system, in an effort to complete their OSSD. These participants, ranging in age from 19-29, participated in two audio taped interviews with the researcher, where they were asked 13 open ended questions concerning their school experiences, opinions on school, and goals concerning education. The interviews were transcribed by me. During the transcription process, key words were identified and used to start organizing the data. From this organization, several themes emerged. The data were then coded thematically, summarized, and interpreted.

This chapter serves to present the results that emerged from my investigation. It presents the data in two ways: first, according to the themes that emerged in the data analysis process: goals, obstacles, empowerment, views about success, opinions of school, and the power of the teacher; and second, addressing three broad focus areas: worldview, school effects, and self-image. The focus areas evolved after analyzing the data according to specific themes that emerged through the data analysis process. The themes and focus areas are linked to each other in that they overlap and impact one another.
Themes Used for Data Analysis

*Goals*

Table 1 highlights similarities and differences between participant responses as they relate to the theme of “goals”. A dot under the participant number indicates the mention of the goal listed in the left margin. Interviews with the participants indicated that all but one (Paula) were determined to complete their OSSD, three of the participants discussing getting good grades as an important aspect of that achievement. During my interviews with the participants I found that only one (Mandy) did not express a strong interest in continuing her education at the postsecondary level. Where some of the participants interviewed had already considered programming at the postsecondary level and had definite career goals in mind, others were uncertain, but felt that their future included attending college and/or university. All of the participants mentioned that they understood an advanced education to mean more positive options for them in their future, to be happy, satisfied, and in a position to support themselves well. These goals have motivated most of the participants to work harder in their classes in order to maintain a desirable average for their college applications, and to choose courses that are applicable to what they want to do instead of “easy courses” just to get finished. However, two participants, although they discussed post secondary goals, were still struggling “just to get through”. Madeline mentioned friends of hers whose desires for college entry motivated them to take courses that they thought were easy in order to get a higher average without actually challenging themselves.
Table 1

*Participant Responses as they Relate to the Theme of “Goals”*

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Obstacles

Table 2 shows similarities and differences in the participant responses as they relate to the theme of "obstacles". The participants listed a variety of obstacles, either that they were currently experiencing or had experienced at some point throughout their educational careers, leading them away from the mainstream high school system. Many of the obstacles came from sources outside of the school, where others came from within the school. For example, moving was mentioned by three of the participants as a hindrance to their learning. For Chloe, it was the act of moving a lot that took its toll on her education. For Mandy and Pedro, it was an interprovincial move that left them short credits. In addition, Anthony and Madeline both listed obstacles related to social networks – the need to socialize and be with friends that superseded their need to be in school. William and Mandy's social distractions were different in that they related more to the social environment they were immersed in. For instance, Mandy mentioned growing up in a bad neighbourhood, while William discussed being grouped with children who came from broken families and being affected by that.

The participants listed personal traits that impacted their connectedness to school. Many of the participants identified themselves as having one of or both a learning and/or behavioural disorder. For instance, Anthony and William suffered from ADHD while Paula discussed her experiences as a dyslexic. Paula's comments such as, "I'm dyslexic, so not only did I have to go to regular classes, but I also had to go to Special Ed. class . . . it just got overwhelming" and, "English classes (are a potential obstacle) . . . because my spelling, my grammar, everything else like that isn't up to par" highlight her struggle due to this learning disability.
Table 2

**Participant Responses as they Relate to the Theme of “Obstacles”**

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*Participant:*
Four of the participants also described behavioural issues; William mentioned anger management and conflict resolution problems. He said, as early as kindergarten, “they used to send me into the coat closet because I used to misbehave a lot.” Mandy discussed a lack of discipline that led to her being labeled. She stated, “Because I had behavioural problems, I was thought to be stupid.” Katerina spoke of having a hard time with attendance because of her depression, an obstacle that she has had for a long time. Furthermore, although not formally identified, Madeline complained of an inability to focus on one thing for any length of time which inhibited her learning.

The participants mentioned many other roadblocks to OSSD completion as well. Pedro and Anthony both obtained full time jobs that garnered a desirable wage that helped persuade them to leave school and made it hard for them to want to return to school. Although Mandy’s pregnancy at an early age might not have directly hindered her progress, the effects of it did: she was asked to withdraw from her regular school and, subsequently, was placed into an alternative environment with other teenaged mothers where she found it impossible to focus on her learning. She described this experience:

I got pregnant when I was 17. I got kicked out of school. I went back to school for teenaged mothers, but I was unable to do it because I had a newborn baby and we were expected to bring our babies to class with us, and do our school work and take care of the children, and other people’s children, while they were doing something else. So, on average, I had three kids to take care of at all times while doing my school work.
Mandy was still finding child care to be an obstacle to her OSSD completion as her daughter was often sick and she needed to stay home to be with her. Absences provided an obstacle for Pedro, Katerina, Paula, and Madeline as well.

Furthermore, if having a goal to move on to postsecondary education, or to obtain a job that requires the minimum OSSD completion can serve as motivation for a student to continue, then not having such a goal could naturally be seen as an obstacle. Mandy is one example of this, as is Madeline. Madeline mentioned that it was in grade 7 when a guidance counselor said to her that she would have problems throughout her entire academic career because she was not afraid of what the future held for her if she did not finish school.

William and Anthony discussed social drug use as a hindrance. William admitted that his drug use evolved into an addiction that overtook his ability to be successful in school. He said,

I don’t know how much you understand about addiction but my whole story is about that, the last 2 years I have been recovering from that, and that’s why I left school – because drugs take away all my motivation to do everything . . .

William also mentioned that his associations with kids who had a fragile support system at best (children of alcoholic parents, children who lived on the streets, etc.) were an obstacle to him because they imposed lifestyle expectations on him.

Certain aspects of the school environment provided hurdles for the participants as well. The participants mentioned the fast pace of the new curriculum, the amount of time to complete a credit, and the lack of alternative programming on site available to them as major school related obstacles. Although six of the participants knew of and had tried a
few programs such as independent learning, resource, and credit recovery, many of them felt that their options were limited, especially while at their original high school.

Also, Pedro and Anthony both discussed what can be addressed as arbitrary forms of discipline as an element that led to their eventually leaving school. This discipline included feelings of prejudgment or stereotyping, and harsher punishments because of affiliations. Madeline and Paula discussed missing school because they wanted to avoid conflicts with teachers over work, being late or absent, etc.

Finally, three of the participants mentioned the inability of teachers to meet their needs as a definite obstacle to their connection to school. This was not a personal comment against specific teachers, it was a discussion about the lack of genuine understanding or awareness on the teachers’ part. For example, Paula suggested that despite telling teachers about her learning disability, they failed to modify their programming effectively for her, and so it remained that she struggled and felt uncomfortable. Paula said, “I felt like they looked down on me and if I couldn’t get it, it couldn’t be their fault.” At the conclusion of William’s second interview, he brought up the issue of substance abuse in schools and the lack of attention paid to it. This was something that he said he had been thinking about since our first interview and felt it was important to note – he did not blame teachers for not addressing it directly or not being able to help him when he became addicted, but he mentioned that that inability helped breed more substance abuse within the school system. William stated,

I don’t know (what teachers could do), it’s hard to say ... I mean if someone who is going to (do drugs) is going to get it. I mean the biggest thing is that it’s outside of school and schools can’t do anything about it. But if you’re supposed to
be shaping a person’s mind and out of doing something then . . .

William also mentioned anti drug campaigns such as D.A.R.E. and claimed them to be completely ineffective. Without being able to truly empathize, he said, teachers and the school system as a whole would be left vulnerable to this potential factor in student disconnect.

**Empowerment**

Table 3 illustrates the similarities and differences in participant responses as they relate to the theme of empowerment. Although all of the participants mentioned currently feeling responsible for their own education, they did not feel that way when enrolled in their original high schools. In fact, Paula and Madeline mentioned specifically feeling as though they did not have any control over their fate within the regular system, except to choose to drop out of it. This lack of control or feeling of no control led them to resist schooling.

I asked the participants if they had ever been asked to comment on their own educational needs and/or help develop their own individual education plan. The majority of the participants stated that they had not ever been asked, especially to have a role in developing their own strategy for completing their OSSD goals. Madeline and William said that they had been asked about the issues that they were having with school and how they felt about them – but both stated that they did not feel able at that time to adequately answer the questions posed. Mandy stated that her attendance in the current environment was part of her own, personally developed plan, but it was one that she had worked out
Table 3

Participant Responses as they Relate to the Theme of "Empowerment"

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<th>Participant:</th>
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with an Ontario Works employee – and only recently, 10 years after her original graduation date should have been.

In addition, although all of the participants said they currently felt empowered, I noted that none of them felt truly cognizant about the variety of alternatives they might seek out, especially those that might have been viable options before removing themselves from their high school. Some of the participants even mentioned that the only alternative offered to them was attending the school they were currently enrolled in.

*Views about Success*

When asked about their feelings regarding success in school, the participants had varying opinions. Table 4 illustrates the similarities and differences in the participant responses as they relate to the theme of views about success. For four, getting their OSSD was a sign of success, although there was not a lot of emphasis on doing well in the credits needed to achieve one. For three, grades were an important motivator, not just getting good grades, but earning them and learning something in the process. Some of the participants discussed the value of their OSSD in terms of feeling successful only because it meant that they had finally conquered the challenge after many years of struggling to do so. Two participants stated that an OSSD only meant success because it meant that they would be able to move on to college and their eventual career.

All of the participants mentioned that to them, success meant being able to support themselves and have options and career choices. Although this notion was working as a motivator, some of the students stated that they felt success was a construct imposed on them by the media, teachers, and parents. Madeline mentioned that
Table 4

*Participant Responses as they Relate to the Theme of “Views about Success”*

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<th>Participant:</th>
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she did not think very many people would want to go to school if they weren’t told that they had to do so to be successful. With regards to obtaining an OSSD, Madeline said, “I don’t think too many people do it just as a personal thing. I think that mostly it is a society thing.” Statements such as these suggest that even if some of the participants do complete their OSSD goals, they will not necessarily feel fulfilled, because striving for it was something that they felt they were supposed to do, not that they wanted to do.

Opinions of School

The data pertaining to this theme were analysed in two ways: first, I looked at what the participants perceived the purpose of education to be. Then, I looked at their ideas regarding school based on their actual experiences, whether it left them with a positive or negative impression of teachers and curriculum. Table 5 shows the similarities and differences in participant responses as they relate to the theme of opinions of school. All of the participants mentioned that school was a requirement in order to be able to have a chance at a job that pays well and is satisfying. However, to most of the participants, this knowledge meant that they held school as more of a roadblock in doing what they really wanted to do. This outlook on school was influenced by many factors.

Some of the factors were related directly to the school and teachers. For example, some of the participants stated that they had not had very good teachers or the classes were not applicable or interesting for them. Some participants addressed the class sizes being too big, and the workload being too great. Paula discussed the “empty promises” that high school offered her with regard to aiding her in being successful.

However, there were also factors that related to school life not directly linked to the goings-on in the classroom. For example, many of the participants mentioned not
### Table 5

*Participant Responses as they Relate to the Theme of “Opinions of School”*

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<td>Quality of life</td>
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feeling as though they had a lot of say in their path, or a support system once they started to feel disconnected that could offer them alternative options. William mentioned the student subculture, specifically one related to substance abuse that the school, although aware, was, in his opinion, ill equipped to deal with. Mandy, having been a teenaged mother, felt that the high school system was unforgiving of students who find themselves pregnant, a time when they are vulnerable and in need of guidance.

*Power of the Teacher*

Table 6 highlights the essence of the content found in the participants’ responses as they pertained to the theme of “power of the teacher”. Every one of the participants interviewed mentioned something that reinforced the power of the teacher in a student’s life. Although for four of the participants this meant a negative impact, most recognized that they had had at least one teacher who had had a positive influence on them. The unfortunate thing, according to all of the participants, was that there were not enough of the “good teachers.”

Some of the negative things that the participants mentioned included teachers making assumptions about them based on their familial relationships, the way that they dressed, or the people they hung out with. Other participants mentioned feeling that teachers were overbearing and conflictive, or did not seem to care enough. According to the participants, too many teachers overlooked the individuals in the class and looked only at the group. Without personalizing the curriculum, they lost many students’ attention.
Table 6

*Participant Responses as they Relate to the Theme of “Power of the Teacher”*

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<td>Attitude toward Student/ Curriculum</td>
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Participant:

Teacher '12
On this note, the participants all stated that it was noticeable when a teacher cared about his or her students and the subject matter that he or she was teaching. Participants mentioned that a caring teacher mingled with students to develop a rapport with them, asked them questions about instruction and assignments, and paid attention to the feedback. This type of teacher recognized the individuals in the class and would address them as such, making allowances or adjustments if necessary and not sticking to a specific formula. Three of the participants also discussed the ability of a teacher to help keep them on track by learning about their goals and holding them accountable to them. In this way, the teachers showed them that they were paying attention and genuinely wanted their students to succeed.

**Broad Focus Areas**

While the data were analysed according to the themes, three more broad areas developed that seemed to connect the data to each participant more holistically. The broad focus areas that evolved: worldview, school effects, and self-image, are linked to and affected by the themes. To emphasize the individuality of each participant, the data as they relate to these focus areas are presented by participant.

*Worldview*

Despite their enrolment in an alternative learning environment located in an affluent community, the participants brought a variety of worldviews to the table. Some of the participants had been raised in the area, while others had been raised out of town, even out of province. Two admittedly grew up in a good area with many perks, while three mentioned feeling as though they did not have equal opportunities growing up in a bad area. All of the participants agreed that they perceived their achievement of an OSSD
to be a key to a higher level of economic success. For instance, Pedro described the benefits of having his OSSD in terms of employment opportunities when he said,

For me, education is something that I need to get ahead in life . . . I feel that if I get a degree or at least my diploma, I feel that I will have something to fall back on, it opens doors, cause right now without it, I dropped out of high school, went to get a bunch of jobs, worked a couple of jobs, but not anything I wanted to be doing, but without my high sch – without my grade 12, a lot of people, just, you know, (I was) turned away.

Moreover, William stated that to him, the purpose of education, quite simply, was, “to prepare us to become part of a successful economy.” Anthony also described the options an OSSD would provide him with when he said, “I always felt like I was going to do construction, now I feel as though if I can get this out of the way . . . I can have a career that I can actually enjoy.” In contrast, the participants differed in the level that this perception affected them.

The range of ages of the participants also impacted the disparities in their perceptions. For example, at least one of the participants still put socializing and recreational drug use as a priority, while another focussed on being a single mother of a child prone to illness. Even though the situations of these two participants were different, they both fell into the standard criteria attributed to potentially at-risk students according to the literature reviewed. However, some of the other students did not.

One of the most interesting notes I made in looking at the worldview of the participants was that they all suggested that they currently felt personally responsible for their level of success, whether it be high or low. The following paragraphs help illustrate
more characteristics of the participants, how they interpreted the world and where some of their views came from.

*Pedro*. Pedro is a 19-year-old who described himself as determined to complete his OSSD in an effort to “get ahead in life”. He mentioned that his opinions of school came from his family and friends who had had mixed experiences with academics, some being successful and some not. He stated that a major factor in motivating him was his desire to prove his friends, who have suggested he will not succeed, wrong. He attributed his initial issues with school to moving from Alberta and finding that a lot of his credits could not be used towards his OSSD completion. He worked before returning to the alternative learning environment, where he admitted to hitting many roadblocks getting hired full time because he did not have his high school diploma. He did not mention any known learning disabilities and his overall outlook was optimistic despite not being sure of his next steps after high school.

*Katerina*. Katerina, 23, noted that she suffers from a variety of mental health issues, namely, depression. She stated that it was hard for her to get out of bed many mornings and that was disruptive in every aspect of her life, including school. Having brain surgery was a major setback for her with academics because afterwards, she was removed from her regular school to attend a school for children with acquired brain injury. Her parents have always encouraged her schooling and being able to support herself. For her, doing well includes getting good grades and moving on to college.

*Anthony*. At 21 years of age Anthony is very social and considers this aspect of his personality an impediment to his successful completion of school. In addition, he mentioned his recreational drug use and learning disability (ADD) to be potential
obstacles to achieving his OSSD. He stated that his parents were not highly educated but have put a lot of pressure on him to do better for himself. He has goals for a career in fashion and is adamant that he does not want to “be stuck being a labourer” his whole life. In his interviews, he discussed instances in his school career where he felt judged and how that impacted his perception of the classroom, teacher, and school in general. He said, “I would say, not for all teachers, but for some, not to place judgment on people, because I have felt that . . . I came here just trying to learn, and I’ve had teachers place judgment on me . . . then I don’t care anymore.”

*Mandy.* Mandy, 29, got pregnant at an early age, 17, which resulted in her removal from the regular high school system. She described her life at this time and prior as being one where she did not have a lot of money, did not go to very good schools, and did not have the opportunities to live up to her potential. Her school life began in New Brunswick where she had a lot of behavioural problems. Consequently, she was placed in a program for children with learning disabilities. This placement had a major impact on her views as she feels that from the ages 11-13 she was thrown aside and unable to learn anything, which was incredibly frustrating to her. Mandy described this experience,

Because I had behavioural problems, I was thought to be stupid. I didn’t . . . I went in the class and I was ahead of them . . . you know they’d be doing stupid things like learning letters and I’d be reading full novels. My teacher got to the point where he’d say, “just go read”. Every day, I was told, all day, “just go read.”

Today, despite feeling confident in her intelligence, Mandy admitted that she was not motivated when it came to school. Her daughter takes priority, and, being a child prone to illness, this means that Mandy has to miss school to be home. Although she feels that
education equates to a better life, she is not interested in getting high grades – she only wants the “piece of paper” that is the Ontario Secondary School Diploma.

*Chloe.* Chloe, 21, stated that her problems in school really started when she was moving around a lot. She came from a small town where she felt her options were limited and, when she fell behind in school, she did not want to continue as she was always cognizant of how her age compared with those around her. She believes that she made mistakes in the past and wants to fix them, which include obtaining her OSSD. Getting her diploma will mean expanding her options in terms of employment.

*William.* At 21, William returned to school to finish his diploma after a 2-year journey of recovery from drug addiction that left him unmotivated. He stated that although the drugs were part of his reason for leaving school, his plethora of school related problems began way before his drug use; as far back as daycare he can remember having issues with his behaviour, he specifically mentioned anger. He said that he was kicked out of many daycares and preschools and eventually placed in situations with children whose “parents were alcoholics” and “street kids who had no homes.” His perceptions of the world were strongly influenced by these placements as he developed a sense of a “way of life” associated with having no home, no one to rely on. Now, he has a strong desire to be a part of a “successful economy” which includes achieving his OSSD and moving on to a post secondary education.

*Paula.* Paula was the youngest participant, and, at 18, was still having a hard time recognizing the value in education for her. She had been identified as having dyslexia which resulted, in her opinion, in her having a lot of people “breathing down her neck” but unable to actually help her. Her goals include becoming an addictions worker. She
realizes that this path includes a college level education and is excited for that next step, but is severely daunted by the need to finish high school. Her outlook on high school and what it can offer her is pessimistic and she stated that to achieve her OSSD she is just “going through the motions.”

**Madeline.** Madeline, 23, had returned to the alternative learning environment for a second time after a brief period in a post secondary learning environment that left her feeling unprepared. She equated school with getting a good job but stated that she felt that this was an opinion imposed on her by society and the media as she did not feel a personal need to go to school besides having been told that she needed to. She suggested that her issues with school stemmed from lacking fear of what consequences non-completion might bring, as well as her desire to avoid conflict and inability to help others without giving them 100% of herself. She was currently having issues with her schooling because she had taken time off to help her boyfriend endure a family hardship.

**School Effects**

Interviews with the participants served to corroborate ideas presented in the literature regarding school effects and their positive and negative impacts on student retention. For example, one of the students mentioned feeling as though he was disciplined more harshly than his friends as a result of his family’s reputation. Many of the students mentioned examples of how they felt teachers had let them down. Two of the students discussed a complete lack of motivation towards high school due to an inability to realize its practical application in their lives. A few of the participants had experienced withdrawal from school as a result of attendance issues. An additional school effect not listed in the literature but that impacted the success of two of the participants was the
inconsistencies between provinces in credit accumulation. Moving from outside the province into Ontario created setbacks for two of the students that they were still trying to recover from.

It was interesting to note that one of the biggest issues that was common amongst the students interviewed was a lack of awareness about clear alternative options they might have had available to them within their regular school. Even enrolled in the alternative learning environment, most still seemed unsure of resources available to them. It was also clear that at least the majority of the participants attended schools which lacked consistency in meeting student success objectives. Anthony provided an example of how even his current placement fell short of encouraging success for all.

*Pedro.* When questioned about issues related directly to the school system, Pedro had a lot of positive experiences to relate. In general, he felt as though he had had understanding teachers who were interested in knowing his goals and helping him achieve them. However, he also discussed some events that led to his eventually leaving school. The first issue he raised came when he moved from Alberta. He said that not only was the school system set up differently, many of his credits did not translate, serving as a set back in his OSSD completion. Secondly, he mentioned feeling as though he was punished according to the reputation that family members who had gone to the school before him had earned. This meant harsher punishments, including longer suspensions.

*Katerina.* Katerina’s responses suggested that she started to disconnect herself from school when, after having brain surgery, she was placed in a school for acquired brain injury that she felt was “ridiculous”. She said that the work did not challenge her enough so she enrolled in an independent school. She did not last long there, leaving for
reasons that she stated she could not remember. Her next step was attempting independent learning classes but she felt as though the subject matter did not apply to her and she had a hard time getting the work done. Eventually, she enrolled in an alternative academic upgrading program but was removed because she accumulated too many absences.

Anthony. Anthony said that his biggest complaint about the school system was, and remains, his feeling as though he is constantly being judged by his teachers. He stated that he has had some teachers who showed him they cared about his success while others have been outright rude to him or made comments because of the way he was dressed or the people he hung out with. He reiterated one incident specifically at his current learning environment where the teacher explicitly told the students that he expected very little from them because he knew that that was all they were capable of. Comments like that, according to Anthony, have led him to get angry and frustrated and either not try in a class or withdraw altogether.

Mandy. Mandy began feeling disconnected from school when she was placed in a class for students with learning disabilities because she was having behavioural issues. She said that she did not feel challenged; in fact, she felt ignored. Her teacher being unable to meet her needs led to a complete disengagement during her adolescence. In addition, when asked about her past experiences with school, Mandy said simply, “I lived in a bad area, schools weren’t the greatest.”

Another set back for Mandy was a move from New Brunswick to Ontario which set her back two years academically because the credits did not match up and the requirements for a high school diploma were different between the provinces. Although
at this point she was frustrated and lacking motivation, she didn’t leave the mainstream system until she was told she could not remain at the school because she became pregnant.

Her alternative once she had the baby was to go to a school for young mothers. Here, a new set of issues added to her feelings of disconnect from school. She said that the school was set up so that the mothers brought their children and part of their responsibilities was to look after their own child as well as two other children in shifts. Mandy found this incredibly distracting and did not finish her schooling.

Chloe. When asked about her schooling experiences, Chloe mentioned mostly her dissatisfaction with the amount of options available to her going to school in a small town. While enrolled in the mainstream system, she said that the atmosphere was not fulfilling – she did not always get the hands on attention that she felt she needed, unless she was removed from regular classes to go to a resource class. Moving around a lot only exacerbated her feelings of defeat and when she did not see many alternatives to finishing high school in the regular system, she opted not to go to school at all any longer. Chloe said, “I was from a small town and...this opportunity wasn’t available there. It was either go back to regular high school, and I wasn’t going to do that, or (nothing).”

William. William’s behavioural issues led to him having conflicts with teachers at a very young age. He said that even in preschool, teachers did not know how to deal with him and discussed a specific example where one teacher resorted to having him stand in the “cloakroom all day” just so that he was not disrupting the class.

In addition, William’s ADHD means that he has a hard time focusing in class, especially, as he stated, in the dominant classroom environment that caters to an auditory
learner when he needs to be doing things hands-on. As a result of his struggles in the classroom, he remembers being told that he was dumb and being railroaded into basic level courses. William discussed this and its impact on him when he said, “I like learning, but I ran away from school – either I was put in a class for (basic) education . . . I gave up because I was told that I was dumb and (school) was hard for me to do.”

Paula. Many of the school effects that Paula attributed to her eventually leaving school are related to the handling of her learning disability. She mentioned feeling as though people were either hovering over her or unable to accommodate her needs. Specifically, she discussed incidents where she conflicted with teachers because she tried to talk to them about needing modifications during in class note taking and the teachers did not respond. Paula’s responses regarding her experiences in the regular high school system showed an incredible level of frustration at the school’s inadequacy in helping her. She described overworked teachers and overcrowded classrooms as well as teachers and administrators who seemed inflexible and uncaring. When she was asked about where her views from school come from, Paula, without hesitation, responded, “Regular high school. I definitely hated it . . . every last second of it. The teachers weren’t all that good (understanding) and then you have people breathing down your neck . . . it just, it got overwhelming and I decided to leave.”

Paula also mentioned some issues regarding curriculum and the structure of the school system. For example, she mentioned that she was always feeling rushed in terms of the time allotted to synthesize information. In contrast, she also spoke about how long it took to achieve a credit and how easy it was to lose interest halfway through a course.
Madeline. Madeline also mentioned the time that it takes to complete individual credits as a major factor in her becoming disillusioned with school. In addition, she found that the new curriculum was confusing, especially the categorical method of breaking down learning expectations and assessment. She felt unable to understand her marks and too much in the hands of teachers and administrators. She said, “I [do] think they should obliterate that categorizing thing, I mean, I guess I don’t really know too much about the reasoning behind it, like if it is more beneficial to us... it’s just not an easy thing to grasp.”

Madeline’s issues in the classroom led to her missing a lot of classes and not completing credits successfully. By the end of grade 11, she was approached by her vice principal with an ultimatum, either she successfully complete two credits before the commencement of the next school year, or she not return. Madeline said that her response to this demand was to not even try, she simply set her mind to the fact that she would not be going back. Also, she felt as though she did not have a lot of satisfactory options available to her on-site at her high school. She did not have a lot of people that she could confide in and mentioned specifically how much the teacher of a class impacted her success in the course.

Self-Image

When interviewed, it became evident that the participants had a lot of pride and each one was very forthcoming about his or her role in succeeding or failing at accomplishing OSSD goals. Some students discussed an association between grades and pride, while others confessed that grades were unimportant; all held themselves accountable for the end result. Positively or negatively, self-image played a role in each
of the students' lives. In some cases, the participants' self-image was and is an obstacle to their success, but at other times, it is their desire to retain a positive self-image that motivates them to continue.

*Pedro.* Pedro admitted that while attending high school in the mainstream setting, he very often would lay blame on his mother for his missing school. Now, he says, he is feeling confident in his ability to succeed; whether he does or does not, he knows that he is in control of his own fate. He said that starting the alternative program was daunting at first, he felt overwhelmed at the amount of work to be completed in a short time and failed his first few courses. Once he got his first few credits, it boosted his confidence and drove him to do more. Pedro's friends seem to be a big influence on his self-image. In his initial high school, when he had not accumulated enough credits to graduate with his friends, the promise that he could attend with them if he completed a certain amount of credits resulted in his earning those credits. Now, he links part of his drive to wanting to prove to his friends that he can do it, because they often tease him, saying he cannot.

*Katerina.* For Katerina, depression is an issue that contributes to her disconnect from school. Brain surgery resulted in her initial removal from the mainstream system and seemingly impacted her self-image. She stated that she felt her placement there was "ridiculous" as most of the other students were learning primary concepts that she had already mastered. When she went back to the regular system, attendance was an issue.

At this point, grades are very important to her. She wants her OSSD, but she wants to do well by it. A driving force is accomplishing her goals before another younger sibling completes his. She mentioned the feelings she experienced when two of her younger siblings completed their OSSD and one moved onto university while she was
still struggling to finish hers. Now, she is hungry to finish high school and holds herself responsible to do this.

Anthony. Anthony’s learning disability helped provide him with a self-image that led him to believe he could never do anything except construction. He said that this self-image limited his motivation in school as he never thought that he would go anywhere with it. His current self-image hinders and helps him in school. For example, it seems very important to Anthony to look good, be stylish, and maintain a social status. This was evident when he said, “. . . drug abuse and partying and like, people around me – distract me . . . so those would be my issues (with completing school).” In contrast, as he has been working his way through school in the alternative learning centre, he has developed more self-confidence. He stated that he no longer feels bound to work in construction and seeing more opportunities for himself is driving him to finish his OSSD goals.

Mandy. Growing up was frustrating for Mandy because people always assumed she was dumb. Although she stated that she was always aware of her intelligence levels, she said that being held back or placed inappropriately with remedial students took its toll on her. During her pre-adolescent years (grades 6-8), Mandy found this situation particularly hard. She said at this stage she exhibited behavioural problems which were misread as learning disabilities. When she became pregnant in high school, her level of frustration with the mainstream educational system grew as she was asked to leave school. At this point, she is still struggling every day with the school system – she wants to get her OSSD because it will help her self-image – she said that she will “finally feel as though she did something”. However, years of dissatisfaction have left her unwilling
to give it 100%. She stated that she feels as though any education she has is self-taught; she cannot get motivated in the classroom environment.

*Chloe.* For Chloe, moving around a lot initiated her disconnect from school. When she started to fall behind, she was too embarrassed to continue in the regular high school system. She saw herself as too old to be going to high school and so refused to attend even though it meant not completing her OSSD. Once she discovered her current learning environment, she said that she realized the importance of finishing and that has led her to be successful. She views completing her OSSD as an important step because it will enable her to feel as though she has fixed some of her past mistakes.

*William.* William said that he suffered in school from the very beginning and talked about experiences getting kicked out of various preschools. Being told that he was dumb led William to believe that he could not do well in school and so, despite the fact that he liked learning, he ran away from academia. He was put into Basic level courses and grouped with students who he described as being from broken families - he mentioned that he adapted a way of thinking about himself and the world that reflected the ideals of kids with one or no reliable parents, with little money and little support. He also discussed suffering from addiction – a disease that took away all of his motivation to do anything that could improve his self-worth. He said,

> My whole story is about (addiction), the last two years I have been recovering from that and that is why I left school because drugs take away all of my motivation to do everything and I just – it was easier, I went off on my own path.

Now that he has worked on rehabilitating himself, William feels absolutely
responsible for his own success. Returning to school, he said, was “like facing (his) demons.”

*Paula.* Paula’s dyslexia has contributed to her disconnect from school in a variety of ways. First, it disabled her ability to do well in many courses, most notably, English. Second, it left her feeling frustrated and judged in her academic life. Her story is laced with upset regarding the mainstream high school system. She mentioned that she never felt like she was in control of her future, or that anyone truly cared about her. When they “pretended to care” she said, she felt as though she was being treated like a child - people were always “just breathing down (her) neck”. Specifically, Paula said,

... like the special ed. class that I was in ... it’s just, they say it’s oh so great and you know, we’ll help you with this and we’ll give you extra time on your tests ... we’ll help you, but you go there and ... since they’re either so overcro - you know, there are just so many students in there ... they’re so overworked or they just honestly, they just don’t care. You just get swept under the rug.

As a result, she would not tell teachers about her learning disability and the situation continued to spiral until she left.

Although Paula has set goals for herself (she would like to be an addictions counselor) and knows that she must complete her OSSD before moving on to college, she remains hesitant about the value of a high school education. When pressed, she confessed that that is partly because she feels as though it is still far out of reach for her. She is much more confident about her path in college, where she believes she will be treated like an adult and, consequently, more empowered to do well.
Madeline. Madeline described her issues with school in saying that she never felt as though she was truly in control of her academics until her current enrolment in the alternative learning environment. Also, she said that she believes that the act of wanting to go to school is not even hers, or anyone else’s, but instead it is imposed on us by society and the media. She said,

I think that society tells us that sort of the right thing to do is go to school and get a job so I think that a lot of kids associate school with getting a good job . . . I don’t think that too many people do it as just a personal thing, I think that it’s mostly a society thing.

Madeline stated that she has never been afraid of the consequences of not finishing her OSSD, whatever they may be, and that perhaps this is how she ended up where she is.

Even now, she feels as though her role is elsewhere. She puts other people’s needs ahead of her own and this has led her to continually have attendance issues and, subsequently, credit failures. She does want to go to college and is determined to complete her OSSD but confessed that it will never mean as much as it should because she would always know that she could have done better, that her success could have been more.

Summary

Through interviewing eight participants currently enrolled in an alternative learning environment and working towards achieving their OSSD, this study presents the voices of a small population of the Ontario secondary school population who find themselves at risk of non-completion. In doing so, it showcases the human side of a complicated problem that too often seems to be addressed in a formulaic manner.
During the data analysis process, the data were categorized into themes: goals, obstacles, empowerment, views about success, opinions of school, and the power of the teacher. At this point, the data were presented cumulatively in order to highlight similarities. However, all of the responses, whether they fit into a seeming trend or not, were included.

While analysing the data, three broad focus areas that offered connections among the themes emerged: worldview, school effects, and self-image. These focus areas highlighted major influences on the at-risk participants interviewed regarding the factors that have influenced their disconnect from school. Data related to worldview reflected both the similarities and differences among the participants. In doing so, the data reinforced some of the literature's criteria regarding who is at-risk, as well as bringing to light the possibility of variances and, thus, suggesting that we cannot look to standardized criteria alone when considering these students.

School effects had an impact on all of the participants’ decisions to leave, despite differences in worldview. Participants cited issues, such as inconsistent discipline, unsatisfactory scaffolding on behalf of teachers and the school system, feeling judged, and left unaware of options to turn to, as their biggest complaints about the regular school system. While these school effects impacted the participants differently and to varying degrees, in the end, they were still noted as being part of the reason the participants left.

Inextricably linked to worldview and school effects is self-image. In interviewing the participants, the data collected showed students who were able to reflect on their experiences and how they impacted them, students who felt empowered to accept the consequences of the decisions that they had made in the past, and students who had a lot
of self-pride. Each of the broad focus areas presented the data of each participant individually in order to emphasize the person behind the at-risk label.

Questioning the participants about their goals resulted in gaining insight about their desires to move on to postsecondary education and how, for most of the participants, this meant they were more motivated in the classroom. It also brought into question whether or not these participants always had these goals or if they had developed them while attending their current institution. Some of the participants’ responses indicated that certain incidents in school had led them to feel as though the goals they sought should be limited.

Incidents in school was one of the obstacles the interviewees mentioned in completing their OSSD goals. These included forms of discipline, conflicts with teachers, and a lack of motivation towards the curriculum. There were obstacles outside of school as well. For example, participants mentioned drug use, pregnancy, and other social factors that led them away from the school system. Most of the participants felt empowered to make decisions to overcome these obstacles or be overcome by them. However, it was noted that most of the participants interviewed were neither cognizant of all of their options nor had they been approached in the regular school system to comment on their own needs and guide their own learning.

The participants had differing opinions on what success meant to them. For some, an OSSD was enough, whether it was accompanied by good grades or not. For others, good grades were a necessity in feeling as though they had truly achieved something. Many of the students, however, felt that their views on success had been imposed by outside sources, such as the media, teachers, family, and friends. Whether the participants
felt that their OSSD was a sign of success or not, all agreed that a high school diploma was necessary to open up their potential opportunities and to be able to support themselves sufficiently in the future. For most, though, this served only to add to their opinion that high school was just a roadblock standing in the way of what they really wanted.

The participants complained about unequal forms of discipline and teachers or other school components ill-equipped to meet their needs. In noting the negatives, the participants were also quick to point out things that affected them positively about school as well. All of the participants mentioned that a caring teacher was so important and that they could tell when they were in a class run by a teacher who cared. Where a teacher had a power to judge, conflict with, and potentially drive a student to leave their class, he or she also had the power to persuade a student to stay simply by the way he or she addressed the students and structured the class.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Through engaging in discourse with students considered at risk in Ontario’s secondary schools, this study aimed to answer the central questions, “What are some of the factors that currently lead to school disconnect?” and “How can these factors be addressed?” Despite attention being paid to this issue, dropout rates of between 24 and 26% seem to be predominant across the provinces and throughout the United States (Druian & Butler, 2001; Sorbara, 2007). Moreover, according to the Government of Canada (1995), almost 67% of the students who are leaving school have a grade 10 level of education or less and are 17 years of age or younger. Changes to the education system have not generated any evidence of an increase in student retention.

There are some ideas about why we have been unable to fix this problem, including, what Block et al. (1995) suggest is a little by little approach to implementation that results in short lasting positive results, if any. In addition, I believe that the problem, in being a human one, is multifaceted and, therefore, virtually impossible to correct using standardized, generalized practices. Although the literature reviewed presented a variety of ideas regarding who the at-risk students are and how we can attempt to help them, some of the weaknesses noted in the literature available to examine included a limited amount of Canadian based studies, and a very small number of studies or program initiatives that have looked to the student voice for answers. Moreover, the studies found that did include a student voice were mostly informal reflections on the students’ experiences. Therefore, this study aimed to add to the literature a formal, qualitative study providing insight into what factors lead students to drop out, as well as what we can do to try and increase student success.
Chapter One established context for the study by discussing the background to the problem, Chapter Two reviewed current literature on the subject, while Chapter Three discussed, in depth, the chosen methodology for carrying out the study, and Chapter Four presented the results emerging from the investigation. Chapter Five discusses the results in terms of how they relate to the current literature, but more specifically, in how they relate to the second part of the central question — how we can begin to address the issues that lead to student disconnect. This chapter also addresses implications of the research for practice, future research, and theory.

In order to meet my objectives, the study was a qualitative one, using audio taped interviews as the venue for data collection. Eight participants took part in two interview sessions designed to gather information concerning their experiences in school, feelings about OSSD completion, and suggestions regarding curriculum development and delivery. In the first interview, each of the participants was asked 13 open-ended questions. Their answers were tape recorded and transcribed by the interviewer. The transcripts from these interviews were then reviewed individually with the participants during a second interview to ensure validity as well as offer the participants an opportunity to adjust or expand on their initial responses. At this time, I also asked any additional questions felt necessary to clarify certain responses based on a review of each participant’s first interview script.

Data analysis began with the transcription process where I became familiarized with the data. The next step was to code the data, first by going through and identifying key words, and then using the key words to code themes. The coded transcripts were summarized by organizing the information for each participant into a 3-column graphic
organizer that presented important information by themes, as well as my anecdotal records regarding the data and/or any contextual clues I felt needed to be included. Finally, I used the graphic organizer to develop my interpretation of the data collected. The next section discusses the findings in relation to the literature. It is organized first according to the themes: goals, obstacles, empowerment, views about success, opinions of school, and power of the teacher. Subsequently, it is organized according to the three broad focus areas of worldview, school effects, and self-image.

Discussion of Themes in Relation to the Literature

Goals

While looking to discover what led the participants to suffer disconnect from academics, I thought it was important to get an idea about what their goals were with school and beyond. Based on literature, such as that of The Expert Panel on Students At Risk in Ontario (Ontario Government, 2003), which states that students considered at risk include those who are performing significantly below provincial standard and are disengaged, with attendance issues, an assumption might be that a potential dropout has no desire to engage in a career that demands post secondary education, or does not equate schooling with additional opportunities. Whatever the reasons for the students’ disengagement from school, be they related to demographic, socioeconomic, or institutional factors as suggested by Brown (1995), Croninger and Lee (2001), and Druian and Butler (2001), understanding a student’s goals and how they may shift is important in understanding how they engage or disengage themselves with school work. This parallels Hutchinson et al.’s (2004) findings that students with learning difficulties who returned to school to complete their OSSD demonstrated a “stronger sense of
purpose" and a more mature outlook on long term goal setting which influenced their decision to return. In fact, Hutchinson et al. (2004) suggest that the ability to set goals and strive for them was one of the primary influences on the students' decisions to stay or leave.

Although the goals identified by the participants may seem reflective in that the participants are older than typical high school students, have experienced more, and removed themselves already from the mainstream system, it is worth noting that it may be that the participants always had these goals but did not feel as though they were attainable in their regular high school, resulting in feelings of disconnect. For instance, William claimed that despite enjoying learning, being told he was dumb led him to believe that he could not be successful in that way. Also, Anthony mentioned feeling as though he could not do anything other than construction. Now that the participants are older, perhaps they have evolved to understand they want better and feel that they are ready to go back to school in order to achieve it.

Regardless, it can be concluded that the participants' goals, whether they be towards school or not, impact the level of commitment that the participant shows towards school. Mandy, the only participant who did not mention wanting to continue after her OSSD completion, also mentioned never being "motivated like that" in the classroom.

Obstacles

The participants mentioned many roadblocks to completing their OSSD. Cohen (1999) states, "The young are facing everything from increased pressure to achieve academically . . . from violence and premature sexual and drug related experimentation" (p. 6). Many of the impediments to the learning of these participants were outside factors,
such as environment and learning disabilities. Some were fingers pointing directly at the school system and the teachers within it. For example, many participants offered negative anecdotes about teachers or school experiences where they felt let down or unsatisfied which, at times, led to their failure of a course, and, in the case of Paula, an outlook on school that was incredibly negative.

Many of the responses of the participants, in comparison with the literature reviewed, were quite similar to established notions and would be easy enough to identify. Mandy’s teenage pregnancy, William’s and Anthony’s drug abuse, as well as the range of conflicts and issues the participants expressed regarding school are all examples of the social, emotional, socioeconomic, situational, and institutional factors discussed by Brown (1995), Cohen (1999), Croninger and Lee (2001), Downing and Harrison (1990), Druian and Butler (2001), Government of Canada (1995), Ontario Government (2003), and Raham (2003).

An important note that I made, when interviewing the participants about how these obstacles eventually led to their withdrawal from school, was that none of them were really clear on any alternatives before making the final decision to leave. Madeline mentioned not having anyone to really speak to about her choice to withdraw and she, Chloe, and Katerina all mentioned that being unaware of what their options were once they left led to them being out of school for longer than necessary. Regardless of where the obstacles lie in a student’s life, they are there, and the more the teacher working with the student is aware of them, the more likely they are to be able to help the student. Similar ideas have been noted by Brown (1995), Croninger and Lee (2001), Downing and

Empowerment

When beginning this study, from my experience in the classroom, I already had a strong belief that student empowerment is important for success. This idea was supported in Nowicki et al.'s (2004) study of the Effective Learning Program that found that students who had an internal locus of control were more likely to succeed. Deci et al. (1991) corroborate this when they write that model school systems are those that are successful in encouraging a sense of desire within their students to learn and be involved with their learning. In fact, many studies, such as those by Hardre and Reeve (2003), Loutzenheiser (2002), and Easton (2002) uphold the importance of students feeling accountable for their own educational path.

All of the participants in this study suggested that they were 100% responsible for their own education. However, Pedro discussed his time in the regular high school system where he chose to blame people, like his mother or teachers, for his absences or failures. Paula, Mandy, and Madeline all had stories that implied that when they felt their need to be in control of their own fate was not being met, they grabbed control in the only way they knew how – by choosing to leave their current school placement. When discussing her future academic goals, Paula mentioned that what she was looking forward to most about college was being treated like an adult and having the chance to make her own decisions without hassle from teachers or other people that she felt were “hovering over her.”
The participants’ stories also addressed empowerment from the angle of how it felt to be in a class in which the teachers motivated them to do their best and challenge themselves. Anthony’s anecdote about the teacher who told him he did not expect much ended with him remaining in the class, but apathetic to the goings-on there and his achievement. Moreover, although some of the participants stated that they had been asked by a teacher or guidance counselor at one point or another to list their goals, and in the case of Madeline and William, try to identify issues that they were having in school, only Pedro suggested that his identifying personal aims received follow through and feedback by his teachers. Along this line, Mandy had many positive things to say about Ontario Works, where she said someone sat down with her and talked about her strengths and aspirations while suggesting options for her to follow in meeting her goals. This was not an experience that she had ever felt while in the mainstream high school system.

Deci et al. (1991) write that encouraging self-regulation starts by investigating the motivation of the student so that we can relate to him or her in such a way that promotes intrinsic motivation in achieving his or her own academic goals. Part of this investigation is acknowledging student feelings and offering choice in activities.

Views about Success

When reviewing the literature, one of the most noticeable ambiguities was the issue of success. In most of the literature, such as the Government of Canada (1995) School Leavers Survey, success was equated with the achievement of an OSSD. Very few of the articles reviewed mentioned a successful learning process. For this reason, I felt that it was important to try to learn more about what the participants related to success in their own lives. All but Paula stated that they viewed obtaining their OSSD as
an indicator of success. Madeline and Katerina mentioned their desire to do it well, meaning taking pertinent courses and doing well in them. William mentioned enjoying the learning process and getting good grades also. However, the rest of the participants seemed to view their OSSD more in terms of a must have in order to move on to where they really wanted to be; Paula and Mandy admitted that this process was a time where they were simply “going through the motions.”

What was prominent in the participants’ responses, was the equating of success with eventual economic prosperity and the working in a job that was pleasurable. Most of the participants were overlooking the learning process as a relevant and enjoyable step. I believe that this finding has implications for practice in that it reflects a current system that employs extrinsic motivators and implies that those involved in education need to ensure that the benefits of learning, besides economic reward, are more obvious to the students.

Opinions of School

The participants’ ideas on what success is can be linked to their opinions of school. The data pertaining to this theme were analysed in two ways: first, I looked at what the participants perceived the purpose of education to be. Then, I looked at their ideas regarding school based on their actual experiences, whether it left them with a positive or negative impression of teachers and curriculum. What I found was that the participants had almost a standard response to the purpose of education: that it is used to provide them with better opportunities for employment and life upon completion. Again, I could not help but realize that this response did not highlight a lot of value in the actual betterment of the participants’ selves. Also, Madeline and William both stated that this
opinion was nurtured by outside sources: the media, parents, teachers, society, and not something that they had determined on their own. Whether this is a case of oversimplifying or not, I felt it was worthy of mention, as its implications, as will be discussed, are large and worth addressing.

*Power of the Teacher*

Much research has shown the importance of the teacher in the lives of his or her students (Durian & Butler, 2001; Dalia, 1991). For example, Hutchinson et al. (2004), looked at possible factors that led to a group of students with recognized learning disabilities stay in school and a group of students with learning difficulties to leave school. For the students that stayed in school, teachers were cited as a pull factor. In contrast, for the students who left school before completing their OSSD, teachers were described as a push factor.

When the participants in this study recounted positive and negative experiences, many of the times their anecdotes included a specific teacher, and how he or she affected them. As a teacher myself, this theme was important to me to review for my personal practices, but also because I have always believed in the common philosophy that a teacher can be the deciding factor in whether or not the student enjoys school and education. Speaking to the participants and having a chance to really listen to their candid remarks as a researcher was an important learning experience for me. Positive stories made me hopeful and inspired; negative stories saddened and frustrated me. In both instances, my understanding of how great an impact a teacher can have on a student was validated.
The responses of the participants brought to light their feeling that there were not enough of what they would qualify to be “good teachers.” This “good teacher” classification was reserved for those who developed a rapport with their students, got to know them, genuinely listened to the students, providing feedback as evidence, showed them that they believed in their ability to succeed, and worked to help students achieve success. I became very aware of how sensitive the participants were to these qualities in a teacher during this area of discourse with them. For example, at one point Paula mentioned having teachers who asked about her goals and needs in a way that gave her the impression that they were not really interested, so she responded very flippantly with outlandish ideas; the teachers’ careless feedback confirmed her initial suspicions and this, she said, was more frustrating than if the teacher had not bothered to ask at all. Hence, I concluded that it is an absolute must for teachers to believe what they are doing, and every interaction that they have with their students must be genuine, because the participants were acutely aware of feigned interest and a lack of follow through.

Broad Focus Areas

Three broad focus areas emerged from the data: worldview, school effects, and self-image. These focus areas were used to present information on the individual participants and influences on their path that eventually led them away from the traditional school system.

Worldview

Worldview was used to show how each participant interpreted the world and his/her interactions. An individual’s worldview is the lens through which he or she interprets the world and the events that happen to him or her. To provide insight into the
worldview of the participants and the influences on those worldviews, I asked them questions about their experiences in school, their goals, and their views about success. I felt that it was important to focus on this element of each participant because in the literature reviewed, many standardized criteria regarding at-risk identifiers were suggested. For example, in the research reviewed, it was noted that one of the problems with the current at-risk issue is the binary constructions that leave little room for the human side. As a researcher, I felt that one of the trends in the literature was to paint a picture of the at-risk student as one who had or was dealing with the associations of a low socioeconomic status. Having worked with at-risk students who fit a much different profile, I felt that it was important to highlight this difference in my research.

One of the problems that I found with these criteria was that they were too simplistic, and for the most part, obvious. They failed to include the student who had a random traumatic event or the student who, despite all of the opportunities, encouragement, etc., did not see the value in school. Although many of the participants that I interviewed would potentially have been identified by using such criteria, there was one who would never have been identified if all we did was rely on these textbook definitions. This is an important realization because it reminds us that all students are potentially at risk and should be treated as such. Although Czikzentmihalyi (1994) would suggest that innate in all of us is the desire to learn, this innate desire does not necessarily mean that we all want to be in school, learning formally and within the constraints and guidelines provided for us.

While considering the data collected through interviewing the participants, I found that many of the answers provided by the participants gave insight into their
worldview, and what factors, negative or positive, have helped cultivate it. I felt that this was an important theme to discuss, as a person’s worldview impacts his or her level of reaction, or resiliency and, therefore, is an important potential factor in disconnect from school. Traditionally, the achievement of an OSSD takes place during the tumultuous age of adolescence. Judgements made during that time are hyperbolized, whether they are made by the adolescent or interpreted by them to be about them, and the impact of these judgements can be enduring (Woolfolk et al., 2001).

In discussing emotional intelligence, Gibbs (1995) suggests that emotional intelligence plays a big role in the level of student success; such intelligence includes the skill of self-reflection and understanding of his or her feelings as well as being empathic towards the feelings of others. Gibbs writes that a child with a low level of emotional intelligence is likely to be isolated, resulting in anger or depression. Gibbs (1995) further states, “students who are depressed or angry cannot learn. Children who have trouble being accepted by their classmates are 2-8 times more likely to dropout” (p. 114). This presents an idea of the at-risk learner as being someone who potentially has a negative worldview. Furthermore, Nowicki at al (2004) suggest that students who are at risk tend to have an external locus of control and poor relationships at school. As a result, it might be assumed that the at-risk student felt as though he or she had no control over his or her success and, therefore, was not necessarily responsible for failures, etc.

Based on the data, I found that all of the participants interviewed held themselves largely accountable for their successes and failures and felt in control of their academic endeavours. Having the impression that they were not in control did disrupt many of the participants’ process but, upon reflection, they all admitted that the final decisions to do
the work or not, to leave school or not, belonged to them and the consequences belonged to them as well. In fact, Mandy and Paula, when discussing their high school experiences, suggested their annoyance with not being treated as adult-like as they would have appreciated.

Madeline was the most obvious example of a student who might be overlooked as a potential dropout if we only used to textbook definitions for identification of our at-risk students. Soft, but well spoken, she admitted that her biggest obstacle in completing her OSSD was her own lack of fear of the consequences of non completion. From her interviews it became obvious that she had many opportunities and been encouraged to do well by others, but that her own personal perception of what was important in life did not necessarily include obtaining an OSSD. While she had found an interest in certain courses, she would still drop everything to be at a friend’s side day and night, even if not always needed.

School Effects

Where it was the intent of this researcher to discover more about some of the actual persons considered at risk, in attempting to find some answers to what factors currently lead to school disconnect, I also wanted to follow the advice of Druian and Butler (2001) who suggested that we do not just look to discover more about the at-risk population, but also at the type and quality of learning that is going on in the school system as well. This idea inspired the second broad focus area: school effects.

Dalia (1991) stated that the most common complaints about school made by high school dropouts include a dislike for teachers and arbitrary forms of discipline. Epp and Epp (2001) determined that the system currently in place in Ontario schools is such that it
actually encourages early student leaving. Epp and Epp (2001) suggested that current school policies, in not recognizing the persona of the student, hand out ironic, expulsion type consequences for attendance issues. Morris et al. (1992) related a lack of interest in school to low retention rates. Furthermore, according to Druian and Butler (2001), research shows that effective schools, or schools where every student was meeting the primary objectives, had three contributing factors to their success: a system of leadership where everyone in the school recognized the school as a place for learning and stayed focused on that goal; a climate supported by the idea that everyone truly believed that all students could learn; and classroom management that included a variety of instructional methods, clear objectives, and consistent monitoring of the student progress in meeting those objectives.

In speaking to the participants, it became clear that at least the majority of them attended schools which lacked this consistency. Anthony provided an example of how even his current placement fell short of encouraging success for all. What seemed the most unfortunate thing to me was that his story involving the outspoken teacher who reminded the students that he did not expect much from them was an example of teacher behaviour that I have witnessed myself and know to be painfully true. Moreover, as a teacher in an alternative learning environment, I found sitting in staff meetings and engaging in day to day interactions with a colleague or colleagues who resemble the one described by Anthony can be incredibly frustrating, and impacting to the staff morale.

Block et al. (1995) discussed the integration of programs in such a way that results in little understanding and little or no change. Although on a different level, just as frustrating to the participants it seemed, were teachers who made the same sort of
piecemeal attempts to help but still came short of doing so because of time constraints, understanding, effort, or any other number of reasons. Paula mentioned empty promises from overworked teachers or teachers who just did not care. Although her teachers might have had good intentions in their work with her, a severe lack of follow through left her feeling neglected.

Self-Image

The third focus area, inextricably linked to worldview and school effects, is self-image. The way that a person perceives his or her interactions will determine how he or she takes in an event, positive or negative, and whether he or she will internalize it and become potentially damaged by it. Gibbs (1995) would suggest that students most likely to drop out of school are either depressed or angry. Druian and Butler (2001) write that detachment or disengagement from school can be caused by alienation of students through academic achievement (or lack of), peer relationships, or even by the teacher, a sentiment that is echoed by Croninger and Lee (2001). These notions leave the impression that there is a typical self-image set that one can use to identify the student at risk of non-completion.

If we oversimplify, the self-image that we might attribute to those who have been alienated or are lacking in emotional intelligence might be that they have low self-worth, are not empowered, feel as though they have been given a hard deal, are perhaps apathetic or hostile to keep a division between themselves and the outside world, at least the one which includes academia. The participants involved in this study provided a very different reality.
All of the participants in this study were open and well-natured from my very first meeting with them while doing recruitment. They seemed happy to share and expressed an interest in my work and how it might be used to better the education system. More importantly, they all appeared to appreciate the opportunity to discuss their experiences and opinions on the school system.

Furthermore, through their responses, it became evident that the participants had a lot of pride which was part of the ownership that they took over the achievement of their OSSD goals. Three participants discussed an association between grades and pride, while others confessed that grades were unimportant; all held themselves accountable for the end result. Positively or negatively, self-image undoubtedly played a role in each of the participants’ lives and continues to do so. As with worldview, it is affected by family, friends, the media, teachers, etc. In some cases, the participants’ self-image was and is an obstacle to their success, but at other times, it is their desire to retain a positive self-image that motivates them to continue.

Implications for Practice

Morris et al. (1992) write,

There is a strong belief among researchers that it is the strength of teachers’ sense of professional accountability that is the fundamental strength in effective schools. An overriding belief . . . is that whatever the technical feature of schools and programs, schools without basic commitment will remain ineffective. (p. 75)

Whether it is this level of commitment, or what Lasky et al. (2001) suggested is confusion in implementation practices that is leading to teacher ineffectiveness, interpreting the conversations with the participants in this study confirmed for me that there are many
changes in practice that need to happen. Although there is evidence of some effective schooling techniques and many mini success stories, what seems to be missing most is consistency.

As Easton (2002) writes, teachers who have high expectations of their students and are willing to help them meet those goals is also important. Suggesting that we need caring, dynamic, and responsive teachers, although correct, is not new. Such suggestions, at this point, are too generalized and simplistic. What is needed, is a plan of action that can be implemented in a way that is clear and complete.

At the beginning of this study, I stated my belief that one of the biggest struggles we will always have with the issue of at-risk students is that it is a human issue, and inasmuch, it is ever changing. Therefore, whatever strategies we attempt to implement must be able to change and adapt to new personalities and new needs. It is a lofty expectation, however, reflecting on this research, I feel as though there are definite changes that can be made in an effort to experience at least a greater level of success in Ontario than we are currently.

For instance, it is my belief, as a researcher and a practitioner, that the students should be able to have a sense of ownership over their education, especially once they reach the high school level. Self-determination theory supports this idea. With regard to school, deCharms (1976, as cited in Woolfolk et al. 2000) observed that when students feel as though they have little power over their own governance, they become passive, effecting many things, including their academics. Deci et al. (1991) write,

To the extent that social contexts do not allow satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs for competency, relatedness, and autonomy, they will
diminish motivation, impair the natural developmental process, and lead to alienation and poorer performance. (p.9)

In contrast, providing students with opportunities to become empowered has positive effects. Allowing students to have a sense of ownership lets them know that we believe them to be responsible and accountable and that we trust their decision making skills, thereby nurturing in them the qualities that they need to have to be well rounded and capable, independent adults. Therefore, I feel that an easy way to affect change would be to have students involved in strategy sessions with staff and other students where they offer the voice of their peers and have the chance to make suggestions that can be, at the very least, deliberated. This would promote self-regulation which, as Deci and Ryan (1996) write, would lead to students completing activities fully and volitionally even if they didn’t always find them interesting.

Also, Brown’s (1995) study on planned mentoring programs highlighted obstacles to its success: not enough structure, goals that are too simplified, and pairs that did not necessarily blend well. Having students involved in implementing some sort of a mentoring program, with clear objectives and expectations, where, starting in grade 11 they begin mentoring a grade 9 student, and will continue to do so until their graduation might offer enough continuity to be more successful and establish greater community within the school as well. By the time the mentor is ready to graduate, the protégé is ready to become a mentor to a new grade 9 student and the cycle will continue. With each new partnership, the goals and expectations will become more solidified because the program will naturally evolve and become an understood rite of passage for all students.
Such a program would presumably be proactive in reducing the risk of student disconnection from school. It would, hopefully, nurture a sense of family, leadership, and partnership within the school. No student, regardless of academic achievement, would be omitted from the program; the needs in each partnership would be addressed upon its creation. Another issue with student completion is disengagement. Mentoring might be used for the teachers to help combat this issue. Senior student mentors could act as peer tutors, helping the younger student to see value in a course that they are struggling with. The mentoring student could also potentially benefit by gaining a greater understanding of concepts through attempting to communicate them to someone else.

Teachers are responsible for playing many roles in a student’s life and are often held accountable for student success and failures whether they contributed directly or not. This is a reality. What is also a reality is that it is impossible for a teacher, with a full course load and approximately 90 or so students under their wing every semester, to accomplish everything they set out to, regardless of their level of commitment. It could be suggested that they themselves might make use of a mentor. I would propose the creation of a position that does not involve teaching students directly, yet stays very much connected to the classroom to take on the mentoring role.

If a teacher was hired to be a liaison, consultant, and mentor, to a number of teachers, within a school, and that was his/her primary responsibility, he/she might be able to effect change and ensure a more successful implementation of other initiatives in the process. Their role would include meeting with each teacher that they were responsible for, sitting in on a class or more a week with those teachers, so that they never lose sight of the classroom reality and can offer insightful, reflective suggestions.
In addition, they would help be responsible for attending professional development sessions and staying on top of new initiatives so that they could help make sure the teachers understood how the initiatives could be implemented properly, effectively, and with as little frustration as possible. This position would have the protégé teachers as the students, but could also involve the high school level student through surveying or open-ended reflective feedback.

Needless to say, the creation of a new program such as this would require financial investment, at the very least, to cover the salary costs of the mentor teachers. However, the Ontario government “... established a plan for student success that provided predictable multi-year funding, ensuring that school boards have sufficient resources to lower class sizes, hire more teachers ... and reach out to more at risk students” (Sorbara, 2007, p. 46).

To date, such funding has been spent on investing new initiatives, such as the Student Success Strategy which includes Student Success Teams in the high schools, and the NTIP mentoring program for first year teachers. Thus, the foundation is there. A new position such as this would offer the opportunity to strengthen communication among schools and within schools, filtering the work of the Student Success Team to all teachers and students.

Furthermore, I feel that outside of and within the classroom we need to refocus our attention to what knowledge offers us beside economic wealth. As a society, we have become so fixated on issues of finance and material things that we seem to use that as our main reasoning for students to stay in school and learn. Although the economic effects of student withdrawal from school are important to be cognizant of, we should also
remember how education should be viewed as a nurturing experience for the whole person – that it enriches us and enables us to make important decisions, be safe and responsible citizens. The ‘School Organization Committee’ (2000) suggested that a “... very different school culture was developing in which Ontario students are suffering a significant loss to the educational experience ...” (p. 2). Perhaps concentrating our efforts on the whole student and not just the final economic ramifications, we might be able to revitalize the school culture. Although in reality money is always a factor influencing decisions, the bottom line should never be the central focus of any educational facility.

Without offering such major changes, this study garnered some suggestions for practice that are viable to every teacher without major implementation woes. For example, all of the participants suggested that it was imperative that they felt their teacher cared about what was going on in the classroom. Making a point of getting to know each student’s name within a reasonable period of time, as well as one or two things about him or her, would presumably make a positive first impression that could make all the difference throughout the entirety of the course. Incorporating one or two opportunities for teacher student conferencing throughout the term would help encourage that familiarity. This could be curriculum based, focused on the culminating activity for example. Regardless of its original intentions, if utilized correctly, the strengthening of the teacher/student relationship would be unavoidable. One of the many potential benefits of this strengthening would be the development of trust of the students for the teachers, allowing the students to be more open, and likely, more resilient when handling disruptions in their life and learning processes.
Finally, avoiding the use of labeling with students in and outside of the classroom would help to serve them better. The term at risk when put into context, “Jane is at risk of non-completion of the course”, is different than leaving Jane simply with the label of at risk or high risk student. One applies to a specific area of Jane, the other seems to overwhelm her self. Along this line, a student at risk in one class may not be in another, and a straight ‘A’ student might find him or herself suddenly at risk due to a traumatic event. Therefore, we must always be careful to not generalize too much. Each student is an individual, and within themselves has many facets.

Implications for Research

In addressing the background to the issue of at-risk students in secondary schools, I mentioned that a study of students considered at risk of non completion of their OSSD would help us in deciding where to direct our attention in attempting to make positive change. Having completed the research, I would first suggest that more studies of teachers could be conducted in order to achieve the same end.

In seeking out research to review, I noted that there was a shortage of Canadian based studies, especially empirical ones. Any empirical study that examines students at risk or allows teachers to examine and evaluate training procedures, reflect on their own implementation strategies and be invited to be actively engaged in discourse would also be beneficial. In addition, with the introduction of any new program, including those that I have suggested, should be accompanied by the commencement of a longitudinal study whereby we always have an opportunity to evaluate its impacts and modify as necessary.
Implications for Theory

With regard to education, theory without applicability is remiss. Any and all studies that help to develop educational theory must remain directly linked to the classroom (whatever that embodies) and the learning that goes on within it. Theories must be practical, lived, and dynamic in order to be important to the field. Short (1991) writes,

When we have questions for which we need answers, we turn to persons or sources that have the answers we need. We may assume that they are correct and trustworthy answers, try to understand them as best we can, and proceed to use them. So much of what we learn in school and life involves this kind of informal inquiry that we may fail to realize that much of the knowledge we draw upon has its genesis in more formal scholarly inquiry. It is the function of this more formal kind of inquiry to provide reliable answers to new questions as they arise, questions that have never before been asked, or if they have been asked, have never been answered satisfactorily. (p. 3)

With regard to theories on the at-risk population, there will always be new questions, because there will always be new students. As the nature of the students change, so must the way that we work with them. In order to be able to provide reliable answers, we should then be looking to the students and asking them. I feel that the most important reminder that all of us who aim to make change must remember, is that ‘at-risk’ should not be a general statement, and an at-risk student will not always be easily identified. As a result, it is necessary to rethink our definition of at risk. Suggesting that poor grades or attendance rates identify a student at risk is an obvious place to start. It is
important to realize though that the straight ‘A’ student is also at risk, because he or she might be just as vulnerable to those unforeseen events that might leave them feeling isolated and disconnected and eventually abandoning school.

Furthermore, data from the participants validated their need to feel empowered in school and out. This idea falls under self-determination theory, which states that we need to feel that we have choices in our lives and are in a position to act on those choices. Reinforcing this theory and its direct links to classroom, school, and curriculum management would be beneficial.

Conclusion

Despite a lack of awareness surrounding the issue of at risk students in Ontario’s secondary school system, and many changes in curriculum and ideologies over the years, there has not been any indication that student retention has shown consistent improvement. The implications of a high drop out rate affect all facets of the dynamic of a society. As a teacher who had experience working with students who were considered at risk, I developed a personal interest in strategies for encouraging a greater level of student success. Therefore, when given the opportunity to conduct my own research as part of my master’s degree requirements, I opted to focus on this area and set out to study, through discourse with students, possible answers to the questions “What factors currently lead to student disconnect?” and “How can these issues be addressed?”

In the proposal phase of this study, upon reflection of the biases that I was bringing to the piece, I realized a few things: that I believed in the capacity of every student to learn and be successful in their own right; that I believed that more could be done in terms of helping them reach their goals; that I felt that there was not one clear
solution, but many areas for improvement which were probably simple and easy to implement; finally, that in order to find answers to my questions, it was important to look to the students and engage in discourse with them.

My goal, by presenting some of the variations to the current ideas, was to raise awareness, that students who are at risk do not represent a homogeneous group. As a result, I hoped to gain greater insight and provide others with a better understanding of the realities of those whom they are supposed to serve in an effort to do better. In reviewing some of the current literature on the subject, I found that standard criteria seemed to be developed regarding who at risk students are. As a teacher who believes in a holistic approach to education, I thought that this was a dangerous reality, in that it was too simplistic.

Eight students enrolled in an alternative learning environment (three male, five female) participated in this study. Through their responses to 13 open ended questions regarding their experiences with school, they shared stories that helped shed light on who they are, what they have gone through, how it has affected them, and what they would like to see for themselves and the education system. Although data supported a lot of ideas presented in the literature reviewed, any variances were highlighted as they remind us that believing that textbook definitions and static theories will not work in correcting any of the issues concerning working with a human population.

The factors that currently lead students to feel disconnected from school are many. They include, but are not limited to: pregnancy, substance abuse, a lack of interest in the curriculum, learning disabilities, behaviour and emotional issues, conflicts with teachers, inconsistent implementation of policies and discipline practices, and social
pressures. What can we do to address them? We can make ourselves available to the students and open ourselves up to hear what they have to say. When we ask for their input, we can listen and take it into account. We can use their experiences to help us shape the way we structure our classroom and instructional methods. We can encourage them to feel empowered to make change and be accountable for their decisions. Finally, we can be role models by committing ourselves to be lifelong learners and supporting others in the field to do the same so that our methods are ever changing, just like our students.
References


Appendix A

Brock Research Board Letter

DATE: December 20, 2006
FROM: Linda Rose-Krasnor, Chair
Research Ethics Board (REB)
TO: Mary-Louise Vanderlee, Education
Tracy MACDONALD
FILE: 06-085 MACDONALD
TITLE: Where is the Value in Education for Me?: Experiences and perspectives of Ontario Secondary School Students at risk of non-completion of their Ontario Secondary School Diploma

The Brock University Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above research proposal.

DECISION: Accepted as clarified.

This project has received ethics clearance for the period of December 20, 2006 to June 30, 2007 subject to full REB ratification at the Research Ethics Board's next scheduled meeting. The clearance period may be extended upon request. The study may now proceed.

Please note that the Research Ethics Board (REB) requires that you adhere to the protocol as last reviewed and cleared by the REB. During the course of research no deviations from, or changes to, the protocol, recruitment, or consent form may be initiated without prior written clearance from the REB. The Board must provide clearance for any modifications before they can be implemented. If you wish to modify your research project, please refer to http://www.brocku.ca/researchservices/forms to complete the appropriate form Revision or Modification to an Ongoing Application.

Adverse or unexpected events must be reported to the REB as soon as possible with an indication of how these events affect, in the view of the Principal Investigator, the safety of the participants and the continuation of the protocol.

If research participants are in the care of a health facility, at a school, or other institution or community organization, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that the ethical guidelines and clearance of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of any research protocols.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement requires that ongoing research be monitored. A Final Report is required for all projects upon completion of the project. Researchers with projects lasting more than one year are required to submit a Continuing Review Report annually. The Office of Research Services will contact you when this form Continuing Review/Final Report is required.

Please quote your REB file number on all future correspondences.

LRK/bb
Appendix B

Three column graphic organizer used in data analysis

Data Analysis- Participant # - Pseudonym
Gender, Age

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<th>Theme</th>
<th>Participant’s Words</th>
<th>Researcher’s Comments</th>
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<td>Goals</td>
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<td>Opinions on school</td>
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<td>Power of the Teacher</td>
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Appendix C

Flow chart showing layers in the conversation analysis

Data Collection
(Digitally recorded interviews)

Transcription
(Researcher transcribed, informal coding using key words)

Development of Themes:

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<th>Obstacles</th>
<th>Empowerment</th>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Views about Success</th>
<th>Opinions of School</th>
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(Formal coding by theme)

Review of Thematic Information
(Making connections between themes – evolution of three broad focus areas)

Three Broad Focus Areas

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Worldview</th>
<th>School Effects</th>
<th>Self-Image</th>
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(Individual participant analysis according to each area)