

WHAT IS THE EXPERIENCE OF HIGH SCHOOL FOR THOSE WHO STRUGGLE?  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

By

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## Abstract

This study focused on the common, shared experience of struggling in high school, rather than background characteristics of students who struggle. A discovery-oriented approach aimed at describing rather than analyzing the experience of struggle was utilized. A qualitative phenomenological research design was used to investigate and explicate the experience. Seven women who had struggled to complete high school volunteered to describe their experiences in in-depth, audio-taped interviews. Eleven themes were identified that made up the story of struggle. The results support the ideas that struggling in high school is a complex phenomenon, that students who struggle come from diverse backgrounds and that some are highly capable underachievers. This study raised questions about stereotypes of students who struggle. Students can be assisted in times of struggle and their achievement potential can be maximized. Educators must create opportunities for students to develop a sense of belonging within the system as well as to express individuality through autonomously chosen and personally meaningful activities. Participation in extra-curricular arts and sports can facilitate these goals. In the integrated narrative description of struggle the results were tied conceptually to theories of identity development and wellness, self-determination and intrinsic motivation, and engagement.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### *Background and Rationale*

Current estimates suggest that more than 30% of young Canadians do not finish high school. The labour market and life outcomes of high school non-completers are bleak. Non-completers are at a disadvantage regarding employment, income, and life opportunities (HRDC, 1995). Non-completers report increased use of alcohol and drugs, and increased involvement in crime (Price-Waterhouse, 1990). Society also pays the cost of the bleak future of those who do not complete high school (George, Land, & Hickson, 1992) as non-completion effects overall competitiveness in a global economy (Renihan, 1994). While there is debate about the extent of the dropout problem in Canada because of the inconsistent ways in which dropouts are defined and the way rates are calculated, the cost of dropping out is considered quantifiably high (Renihan, 1994). Alternatively, a solid education has been described as liberating and empowering, with the ability to dictate the "quality of our lives" (Renihan, 1994, p. iii).

Research into high school non-completion thus far has been devoted to determining the causes of dropping out, and to identifying students who are at risk for dropping out (Renihan, 1994). Current literature provides ample descriptions of high school students who are considered at-risk for dropping out (Ponsford & Lapada, 1998). Approximately 69% of those who leave school have a background that fits an at-risk profile, including being from single or no-parent homes, from families who do not emphasize the value of education, and from a low socio-economic background (Blythe, 1998).

Rumberger (1987) states that more attention has been focused on educational and

economic consequences of dropping out, less on trying to identify and measure the so-called individual consequences such as effects on psychological health and well-being. Some researchers have described them as having difficulties with learning, self-concept and self-esteem (Blythe, 1998; Karpe, 1988; Sapp & Farrell, 1994). Yet there is some evidence that dropouts are students with poor performance despite at least average ability to achieve (Fitzpatrick, 1984).

Concern has been expressed that focusing on at-risk variables takes the focus and responsibility away from the schools (Whelage, 1989). One alternative is the study of the impact of educational culture, which has been explored to a lesser extent. In recent years, research has begun to emerge that considers involvement and participation in school activities (Gilbert, 1993) with regards to school retention. As well, researchers have begun to stress the importance of exploring students' attitudes toward the curriculum, and the influence of peers, teachers, counsellors, etc. Students who drop out feel alienated from teachers, peers, and curriculum (Karp, 1988).

The profile of a non-completer is inconsistent with stereotypes of dropouts, particularly concerning academic achievement (Blythe, 1998). There is increasing evidence that these students are a heterogeneous group (Franklin & Streeter, 1995; Gilbert, 1993). Some are academically capable, do not fit the identifying characteristics of at-risk students, and yet are under-achieving (Ponsford & Lapadat, 1998). Some leavers do not come from at risk groups and some graduates come from high risk groups, indicating that there is more to dropping out than background variables (Blythe, 1998). Researchers have noted that some underachievers are in fact gifted and creative students (Borthwick, Dow, Levesque, & Banks, 1980). They have also been described as bright,

academically capable students, who are bored (Karp, 1988).

It has been argued that reducing the dropout rate requires a sound understanding of the factors that influence school leaving (HRDC, 1995). A review of the literature indicates that there is a lack of inclusion of student perspectives, and that little is known about how to help students who are experiencing difficulties. The rich and divergent existing data pool on the subject has not been often utilized in the creation of intervention programs (Morris, Pawlovich, & McCall, 1991). This gap between research and programs or practice suggests that the data thus far has not yielded practical information. It has been noted that dropout prevention programs have done little to alter the dropout rate (Radwanski, 1987). This may be related to the fact that the consequences of leaving school early have been more of a research focus than the experience of struggle itself, during high school. A sound understanding on how to help must be based on a clear understanding of the how the problem is experienced.

Rehman described the pool of literature as confusing, stating that what is clear is that factors associated with the problem vary among individuals, and that the final decision of dropping out is in fact a process, an experience that happens over time (Rehman, 1994, p. 11). Since studies have been correlational rather than discovery-oriented, it is not surprising that much is known about the associated variables but little about the process of struggling or dropping out of high school. The meaning and the experience itself, from the perspective of students, has not been examined sufficiently.

The importance of providing for the needs of diverse student populations, has been stressed (Franklin & Streeter, 1995). Understanding and assisting students who may leave school before graduating is necessary in order to ensure equitable access to

education. Researchers have indicated that dropping out is likely a complex process with a strong affective component, and lack of understanding is a bigger problem than any one factor (Bearden, Spencer, & Morocco, 1991). The field has paid little attention to what the high school experience is from the perspective of students. Research that includes the perspectives of students is a necessary pre-requisite to the development of any understanding of their experiences or to the development of programs for students struggling to succeed or complete. Sociological, policy-oriented, and psychological conceptualizations of the problem and related solutions will not be effective until more is known about the experience from the stakeholder's view.

If people who dropout are a heterogeneous group, it is more logical to engage in research that focuses on the common experience or process rather than the identification of members of the group. Illuminating the experience or process is a pre-requisite to understanding the "problem" or developing counselling programs for intervention.

### *Autobiographical Background*

In my own high school years I was exposed to an experience that I believe has not received the professional attention that it deserves. In my years of working in many different fields, including work as a counsellor and researcher, the people I have met and spoken with have repeatedly shared with me anecdotes of their experience of high school. They have shared feelings, thoughts and actions at the time of dropping out or struggling to stay in school. In my experiences as a professional dancer, actor, and writer, I met and spoke with many creative people who shared their stories about struggling in high school. Most of the people I have spoken with had struggled a great deal despite finding later

success in their educations and/or careers. Since I myself dropped out of high school before returning to university as a mature student, I have first-hand experience of this phenomenon. Each time I reflect on my experience of high school, or the experience is re-told to me, I am struck and bewildered by what seems to be a unique phenomenon: the experience of high school for those who struggle to complete.

What I have heard over and over again from people whom I considered interesting, creative or entrepreneurial was that they struggled to stay in, or dropped out of high school. They talked about feeling misunderstood or pushed out, and the difficult road before ultimately achieving identity, self-worth, and success in a chosen area. They talked about moving from school to school, or from one career to another, but eventually finding success on their own terms.

One of these people I know is a wealthy, self-educated entrepreneur. He designs and promotes huge events, has a network of professional friends and associates, and lives happily and comfortably in a beautiful downtown condominium. He has the financial security to dress in fine clothing, and furnish his surroundings with the latest technology and design. He is pleasant, social, attentive, organized, generous and ambitious. He speaks his mind. At one of his dinner/movie parties he once told me how he dropped out of high school. It was a hurtful experience. He felt he did not fit in, and that the lessons were not meaningful. He struggled to find a sense of belonging and to connect to what he was being taught. He found it impractical and unrelated to what he was experiencing in his emotional and mental development, which he described to me as an intense desire to understand, to learn, and a tendency to question things. He felt rejected and pushed out by teachers and administrators who had no time for or interest in him. After he dropped

out, he floated around in a few different jobs, always taking what he could learn but becoming easily bored and frustrated. Eventually he found his niche in self-employment. By anyone's standards, he would be considered bright and successful.

This closely parallels my own experience. In junior high I had auditioned for a high school for the arts as a theatre major, and much to my shock and disappointment, I was put on a waiting list. At thirteen I interpreted the failure to secure a position in the school as the end of my lifelong dreams to be an actor. In the high school I went to, I was bored. I had a hard time concentrating once I understood what was being taught and I wanted to move on. There were also emotional issues, family conflict, and social problems. I had no outlet for my feelings, no skills for coping. I felt I did not fit in and that I was not understood by anyone in the school environment. I would finish my work way ahead of the lesson plan and then be distracted with nothing to do. I thought nobody was noticing. I started to miss some classes. One day I came in to a science class to discover a test was being handed out. I had no idea how to answer a single question. I wrote an elaborate apology to the instructor and fell asleep on the test.

Shortly after my struggle began, a teacher in a gym class took me for a walk, with an aggressive arm over my shoulder. She was unhappy about me not wearing the right coloured socks to class. This woman's name I have forgotten, but I can never let go of the weight of her grip on my shoulder that day. She suggested that I should see the principal about getting an early leave from school. I needed permission, since I was only fifteen. She had taken me away from the circles the other students were running around a damp football field on the cold autumn day to tell me how she thought I was special, like some other students who thrive better in the outside world, in "some job". She had no

idea of my grades, or what I was capable of when she took it upon herself to walk me to the principal's office. I was guided out of their system, to an alternative school, and reassured that since the principal's own son attended, that I would like it. There would be "no structure", so I would be happy. I disappeared at the alternative school, where I learned ceramics, pot smoking in the common room, and how to miss classes, and where indeed, nobody knew or cared if I was coming or going.

I was then admitted for the following year to the school for the arts where I was thrilled to go. There I danced in the hallways when nobody was there. I felt committed, motivated. I had a sense of belonging. Then came some conflict with a tough group of girls over a boy I wasn't even interested in. I was followed down the hall, threatened, thrown into my locker. "Kill her, kill her" chanted a few of the girls in the mob. I was reading something spiritual at the time, and tried to peacefully communicate that I would not fight. I managed to walk out that day and my mom was coincidentally driving by. I got in the car, cried out my story, and never went back. Instead I returned to the alternative school where I did even less work and felt even more invisible.

My feelings at the time were that I was invisible to anyone who could make a difference, so why care about myself. I was living with a significantly older, abusive boyfriend and working midnights in a donut shop. I'd been thrown out of my house for going camping with the boyfriend against my father's wishes. Each night was an eerie and dark, repetitive reality. The same night-workers would come in at the same time, night after night, and I could feel their stares as I turned to pour their coffees. Some might have been wondering what a teenager was doing midnights. Everyone seemed to be watching me but I was still invisible. The jumbo coffees and multiple packs of

smokes could not keep me awake enough for class in the morning. Sometimes I slept in the common room right through my classes. My obsessive boyfriend would follow me to school, and wait outside all day for me to finish my classes. I'd look out the art room window and see him leaning on the roof of his car, looking up, smoking and watching. Nobody else saw him. One day I just walked out of school and didn't go back. It was meaningless, almost surreal compared to my reality. I left convinced that I was not smart, and could not succeed. I disappeared into depression.

Years later, weaving in and out of many jobs in hospitality, retail, the arts, I found an escape in temporary work. While I was curious about many things, I was completely unaware of my abilities. Working as a temporary secretary allowed me to be stimulated by new environments regularly so I would not grow bored with the work. Positioned as a replacement administrative assistant to the head of Music Education at UBC, I remember being flattered by all the positive feedback I received from professors about my abilities and competence. Professors teaching people to be professors; how can they be wrong about me? As much as I questioned myself, I could not deny the power of their perspectives. One day on a long and slow walk to the parking lot, I looked around and decided that I must be as capable as at least the bottom 2% of the thousands of students attending university and decided to find a way to return.

Shortly thereafter, through a series of synchronistic events, I was admitted to college into a university transfer program without upgrading. A few short weeks into my first semester, I was very late for an English class where I had written an essay-based exam the previous class. Since I had not gone past grade 9 in high school, I had never written an exam and didn't really know what an essay was. I was completely paranoid

that the test would reveal that I was, after all, stupid. While I normally sat right up-front and participated actively, I crept into the back and tried to not be noticed. My heart was racing and my mouth was dry as I noticed the instructor Mr. Attridge, whose voice at that point was a distant echo. He was reprimanding students for shabby work, for an inability to let go of linear thought and logical, simple approaches to reading “Lives of Short Duration“, a cubistic tale by David Adams Richards. He read an example of an “A” level essay answer as a testament that it could be understood and articulated well. I listened with clenched teeth, and envy, until the words started to sound vaguely familiar and I realized that they were mine. I clearly remember the shock, the relief mixed with sadness and joy when I got that first paper back. It meant I wasn’t invisible or no-good. I was capable.

Validated and inspired by the experience of competence, by the ability to participate and question (as you can in post-secondary), and by the freedom to study when and how I wanted, I earned straight A’s through most of my undergraduate degree. I never missed a class, and never handed in a late paper. Though I struggled with terrible test anxiety, painful perfectionism and an obsessive fear of being discovered as an impostor, I persevered and graduated with honours and a double major. I earned accolades in graduate school at the Master’s and Ph.D. level. My Master’s thesis explored the question: What Facilitates Completion of High School for Students Who Experience the Risk of Early Leave? The stories of the people I interviewed resounded with images of my experiences, of wanting to learn and being misunderstood, under-rated, excluded, and pushed out. They talked of the struggle for identity, for experiences of competency, of responding to a little positive feedback and encouragement like a

magic pill. But their stories were of completion, and my story did not come full circle until I completed and defended my thesis to a panel of educators. I was not stupid after all.

These life experiences have led me to explore the experience of high school from the students' perspectives. As both a counsellor who has spoken with students, teachers and guidance counsellors on the subject, and an individual who lived the experience, I am in a position to conduct an enlightened exploration of the subject. I believe that it is important to research this experience from the perspective of the student rather than imposing my assumptions and interpretations. I believe it is equally important however, to allow my experience and background to guide my interest and views. I have a first-hand experience of the phenomenon and a practical, real-life curiosity as well as a psychological interest. I have a need to determine and describe what is common about this experience to others. These factors converge in the interest of what the lived experience is of high school for the person who struggles to complete. In line with van Manen's (1984) suggestions about doing phenomenological research, I am interested in investigating this experience as it is lived, rather than as I conceptualize it. Given what has already been researched, and of how little use it has been, it seems imperative that a discovery-oriented approach be utilized.

### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding, using a phenomenological approach (Giorgi, 1997; van Manen, 1984) of the lived experience of high school for students who struggle to complete. The research question that will guide this study is,

What is the experience of high school for those who struggle? By studying high school as experienced by the student who struggles, I hope to facilitate an understanding of the meaning of such an experience for professionals working with these students. My hope is that counsellors, teachers, and family members who work with these students will be better equipped to communicate empathy through an understanding of their unique experience and perspective. This should allow them to work more collaboratively with students regarding goals of educational attainment, satisfaction and transition to the world of work. Counsellors, teachers, family members and students themselves may benefit from a clearer understanding of the essential structure of this experience.

### *Significance*

This topic is considered important because the phenomenon has been explored in so many ways and criterion for describing and identifying students at-risk have been explored extensively, yet little is known about the experience of high school for these so-called at-risk students. As well, little is known about the experience of students who struggle. Since studies have been policy-oriented, sociological, and rarely informed by psychological theory, this study aims to elaborate on the complex process of struggling through high school from a new perspective. Psychological understanding is lacking. Research in that area is positivistic and quantitative, missing the perspective of people who have shared the experience. This study is thus timely and important. It will provide an avenue for the voices of students to be heard in a natural, discovery-oriented manner.

### *Theoretical framework*

Regarding the theoretical framework for the proposed study, eclectic theories are presented in line with phenomenology to reveal the researcher's perspective and potential bias. These theories are chosen and explored for pragmatic purpose as well, as they seem related and useful in forming a conceptual frame for exploring the question. A review of the literature suggests that relevant to the exploration of the dropout issues are adolescent identity development theories, ideas about self-determination and intrinsic motivation, autonomy and attribution theory, and creativity-related concepts. The current research will elaborate the link between these key areas of theory relevant to the topic of exploration and provide an integration of these theories to frame the study.

### *Statement of the problem*

There is concern for the high incidence of dropping out in Canadian schools (Gilbert, 1993). The extensive pool of data that exists identifying risk and the consequences of dropping out, and theorizing about the process of leaving early, has not been utilized in the development of successful programs and offers little to the counsellor or educator working one-on-one with students who are struggling. This phenomenological study will not offer a theory to explain the experience of struggling to complete high school, but instead offer the possibility of shedding light and bringing us closer to the actual experience (van Manen, 1994). It is hoped that the aim of describing rather than analyzing, and exploring rather than verifying will shed new light on an old issue. It is further hoped that an essential story will emerge that will be meaningful to

other students as well as educators and counsellors trying to understand, empathize with, or help students.

This dissertation specifies the nature of the research paradigm chosen, including an overview of phenomenology, data collection and analysis procedures, and the biases and hypothesis that the researcher may hold. Although not typically included in a phenomenological study, this dissertation includes a review of recent research on the dropout phenomenon. It also includes a brief review of theory and research in areas of psychology considered relevant to the issue by the researcher. The purpose of these inclusions is to share with the reader any pre-existing knowledge, biases, or hypothesis that the researcher may hold and to elaborate on the idea of struggle as a process rather than a one-time decision to drop out.

Since the purpose of the study is to illuminate the experience of struggling to complete high school from the perspective of the student, a phenomenon for which little is known, the phenomenological approach is appropriate. The method offers a way to access the difficult phenomenon of human experience (Giorgi, 1997)

### *Question*

The major question is “What is the experience of high school for students who struggle?” A secondary theoretical question is “What practical factors facilitate completion, and are those factors related to psychological theories that will be elaborated here in this dissertation?”

## Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

What do we know about the high school experience for people who struggle to complete? How do young people think, feel and react to the non-normative event of struggling to complete high school or dropping out? What constitutes and facilitates resilience, perseverance and successful passage or adaptation during this time? What do these students find motivating or de-motivating about their school experiences? Are there specific attitudes, beliefs, characteristics, or situational variables that these students find personally meaningful and relevant? What if anything is unique about the experience of high school for students who struggle to complete? How do these variables interact with the primary developmental task of adolescence, namely the development of identity? How does the experience of struggling to complete high school interact with participation and achievement in education or career later in life? I will review recent empirical studies highlighting knowledge that may be relevant to understanding the phenomenon and I will review theoretical literature on the dropout phenomenon. Consistent with a humanistic/existential perspective, cognate areas of theory and research that will be reviewed are related to the concepts of self-development (identity development, self-efficacy, agency) and motivation (engagement, belonging, self-determination and intrinsic motivation). Essentially, these areas fall under the general philosophical ideas of meaning-making and self-actualization.

The body of knowledge will be surveyed widely to elaborate questions and provide possible frameworks for understanding the data of the study, however it should be read with caution. Little of the existing literature stems from a phenomenological perspective and rarely are students' perspectives solicited. The current study seeks

participant meanings of a phenomenon they experience themselves. It is therefore important to consider the literature as a frame of reference, as one possible way to understand an element of an experience, but not as the ultimate truth. The surveyed literature is not provided to develop a priori hypotheses. It is instead included to inform the reader of the theoretical background of the researcher, to explicate potential influence on researchers' analyses. Since the study aims to communicate the essence of a phenomenon rather than to analyze an experience, presenting the research this way helps to bracket the researcher's past knowledge. Finally, the literature is surveyed for the purpose of ensuring that this study is valuable in adding to existing knowledge in the pursuit of making a significant contribution to the field (Merriam, 1998).

### *Correlates of Dropping Out*

A large body of research has been devoted to determining the causes and identifying students who are considered susceptible to early leaving, and a wide range of factors have been associated with dropping out (Gilbert, 1993; Rumberger, 1987). Indeed, there are a number of studies of the high school dropout phenomenon, the largest and most elaborate have been completed by government agencies (Clark, 1997; HRDC, 1995; Karp, 1988; Price-Waterhouse, 1990; Prior Education Consultants, 1990; Radwanski, 1987; Statistics Canada, 1991). Rumberger (1987) attempted to group research into categories of demographic, family-related, peer, school-related, economic, and individual variables, with each category containing a large number of specific factors. Demographic variables often included in these large-scale studies include rural versus urban living. Family background variables that are commonly associated with

early leaving from school include parents' level of education and the status of the family, such as whether or not the family was broken. School-related variables often measured include reported difficulties with certain academic subjects, boredom with curriculum, feeling alienated (Karp, 1988), and participation in extra curricular activities. Individual factors that are commonly examined in terms of their relationship to early leaving include emotional instability, health issues, and low self-esteem (Karp, 1988). There is also a relationship between early leaving and socio-economic status (Morris, Pawlovich, & McCall, 1991), with dropout rates higher for members of racial, ethnic and language minority groups (Rumberger, 1987).

The variables associated with dropping out are inter-related and their relationships are complex. Renihan (1994) in his review of the literature on the dropout phenomenon called it "confusing" (p. 11), and pointed out that causes stem from a complex, interconnected group of factors related to families, school and society. Although it has been noted that dropping out is a process, rather than an event (Renihan, 1994), researcher dollars are still invested heavily in attempts to identify causes by measuring the relationship between early leaving and variables thought to be associated with early leaving.

### *Historical Review of Dropout Research*

In 1991, Employment and Immigration Canada commissioned Statistics Canada to conduct a School Leavers Survey (SLS). Its purpose was to estimate the extent of the dropout problem and develop comparative profiles of secondary school attendees who successfully completed school, versus students still in the education system and those

who left before receiving a diploma. The survey was designed to assess factors associated with early leaving, and aimed to allow analysts to better understand the relationship between leavers and their backgrounds. Students between the ages of 18 and 20 were contacted by phone, and in total 9,460 were interviewed regarding demographic/background variables, school experiences, and post-school experiences. The estimated dropout rate was 18% overall, with the rate for men (22%) higher than the rate for women (14%), and some variability according to geographic location.

Looking at the data from the 1991 commissioned School Leavers Survey, Gilbert (1993) compared school leavers and high school graduates on several variables commonly thought to be associated with dropping out and found that there are significant social and economic costs to early leaving from high school. In terms of background variables, leavers were more likely to come from lower income, single or no-parent homes, and to have parents and friends who did not consider school completion important. They were more likely to be married or have dependent children. Regarding their school experiences, they were more likely to report negative experiences about school and teachers, and they participated less in classes and in extracurricular activities than other students. The study did not identify causes since it was correlational, nor did an identifiable profile for the student at-risk emerge. Instead, the analysis revealed that those who leave are a heterogeneous group, particularly with regard to academic achievement.

Gilbert (1993) points out that although 69% (compared with 33% of graduates) in the School Leavers Survey came from an at-risk background, 31% of leavers did not come from such backgrounds. (He suggests they should be called school leavers rather

than the more pejorative dropout term). A finding significant to the study was that, for leavers, enjoyment of and participation in school was a significant factor in school achievement whereas graduates were able to achieve regardless of enjoyment or participation. These school-related factors were clearly influential in the students' decisions to leave school with 40% of females and 40% of male leavers reporting that problems with school were the most important reasons for withdrawing early. They reported more problems with schoolwork, problems with teachers, and boredom more often than graduates did. With regards to outcomes, leavers faced problems of unemployment, and were more likely than graduates to work in blue collar and service jobs.

A follow-up analysis of the 1991 School Leavers Survey was done in 1995 (HRDC) focusing on the education, training and labour market experiences of youth during the first few years after leaving or graduating from high school. The researchers re-interviewed about two-thirds of the same respondents, by then aged 22 to 24, to explore the school to work transitions of young people beyond high school. School experiences of leavers and graduates were different. Leavers were more likely than graduates to report dissatisfaction with school courses and rules, and problems with their teachers. Leavers did not participate as much in class, and did not participate in extra-curricular activities. They also reported not fitting in. The study confirmed that students who leave school early are all susceptible to cumulative disadvantage. Leavers appear to benefit less from their family backgrounds, school experiences, academic performance, part-time jobs, and social behaviours. Having left school, they are at a further disadvantage regarding employment, income, and life opportunities.

There are many problems with the existing data pool on the topic of struggling in high school. Attempts to profile characteristics of dropouts often fail to show significant differences between graduates and leavers. For example, it has been suggested that early leavers are dissatisfied with curriculum that is not relevant to the real world. However, a critical examination of this description leads to questions when, in one study (Karp, 1988), up to 87% of graduates reported the same complaints.

Some factors used to profile early leavers can be considered misleading when a psychological perspective is considered. For example, in Karp's study (1988) dropouts were described as students who value work over school. There was "unanimous agreement" (p. 21) reported among the focus groups that work was preferred to school. It was then interpreted that work experiences "turns a potential dropout into a drop-out." (p. 21). The dropouts who were surveyed were all under 24 years of age and high levels of job dissatisfaction were reported. A psychological explanation might ask whether these students who dropped out for whatever complex array of factors report that they value work over school for other, less obvious reasons. For example, their responses may have been self-protective. To say that school is better than working would require them to think about returning to a place where they were possibly unsuccessful, and felt alienated or even rejected.

Typically the studies that explore the associated characteristics of dropouts are quantitative, correlational in nature, and are not explicitly tied to relevant or related theories. While many variables have been associated with leaving school early, it has been argued that identification of these variables is akin to talking about symptoms, and does little to aid in identifying underlying causes (Morris, Pawlovich & McCall, 1991).

When students are surveyed, it is often to confirm the relationship between early leaving and disadvantage, or to ask why they left, seemingly in an effort to establish cause through retrospective reports.

### *Program and Policy Evaluations*

Efforts have been made to evaluate dropout interventions strategies, in order to gain insight into what variables may be facilitating successful completion of high school (Morris, Pawlovich & McCall, 1991; Renihan, et. al., 1994). Literature reviews and focus groups have been used to analyze current policies and make recommendations. While it is useful to have experts describe programs that seem to be working, it has been pointed out that the literature that describes effective programs is not always based on empirical evidence (Morris, Pawlovich & McCall, 1991).

In Ontario, in 1987 George Radwanski was appointed to undertake a policy study in education and report the findings to the Ministry of Education. While the scope of the report included investigation and recommendations into the education system overall, the mandate of the study included an emphasis on the issue of dropouts. Radwanski notes in this report that the education system was failing to meet the needs of the time, and not preparing students for the future, even those successful at completing the requirements of a high school education. His subsequent recommendations for dropouts were presented in that context as well, in terms of improving the education system overall. Indeed, he argues that initiatives that do not take into account the overall system of education that causes people to feel "alienated, bored, rejected or unable to cope academically" (p. 66) will not be effective. Radwanski (1987) reported that in addition to a high dropout rate,

there are what he calls "psychological dropouts" (p. 7), those students who "drift aimlessly through the system" completing only the basic requirements, then entering into adult life with insufficient skills, knowledge, and attitudes to function effectively in society.

While the Radwanski (1987) report is a policy-focused document, some of the data that emerged from focus group analysis and subsequent interpretation and recommendations are noteworthy and relevant to a psychological understanding of the struggles some students face to succeed in high school. The report highlights the difficulty in reporting dropout rates, related to various definitions of dropping out, and varying forms of calculating the statistic. Radwanski's estimate was a 33 percent dropout rate.

Radwanski (1987) cautions against stereotyping dropouts based on background characteristics, reporting that dropouts include academically gifted as well as those who are low achievers, and affluent students as well as those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. However, he notes that research supports the link between socio-economic status and likelihood of dropping out, regardless of intellectual ability, and that students from less affluent backgrounds are less likely to be supported and encouraged regarding their school work at home. As well, students from single parent households are more likely to dropout than those from homes with two parents. Rather than interpreting the effect of family structure on academic performance and the decision to drop out, Radwanski notes that these students do not get the individualized attention they need to compensate for these factors. Radwanski (1987) reports the link between academic performance and dropping out, noting that math and English seem to be problematic

subjects for dropouts; however he states that an almost equal proportion of students drop out despite doing quite well in school. This fact further demonstrates the need for schools to respond to students as individuals. It also challenges the assumption that those who leave school early are those who do not do well in school.

The focus group research from Radwanski's (1987) report identified a number of "psychological characteristics" (p. 83) common among those dropping out. Among these characteristics, students were reportedly frustrated by the difficulties finding teachers to help them when they had problems. They ranked education less highly than other students, and saw it as an abstraction, without proven relevance. They needed more reassurance that they were doing their work properly. This was possibly because of prior experiences of improperly understanding a subject or from inferences that they were not capable. Alienation was a crucial characteristic, whereby students felt neglected and not supported by the system or their families. They had low self-esteem related to not being able to grasp a subject at times, and they were particularly grateful and loyal to teachers who gave them attention.

With regards to causes of dropping out, Radwanski (1987) notes that it is impossible to determine to what extent retrospective reports by students are accurate versus post-hoc rationalizations; however there is a great deal of consistency between reports on various factors reported by dropouts as motivating their early leave. Consistently, school-related factors are reported as most important, specifically dislike, disinterest, and boredom. Therefore, weak performance is interpreted as more of a symptom of lack of interesting and challenging classroom environment, and the way the system responds to weak performance, rather than lack of ability to achieve.

Alternatively, in terms of reported reasons for leaving, Morris, Pawlovich and McCall (1991) point out that personal reasons given by students can mask a variety of life situations. These life situations range from emotional instability, to family problems. School-related reasons such as dislike or boredom may be indicators of underlying learning or reading problems.

At times, educators are more apt to identify characteristics of students as the cause for early leaving. In one study, teachers ranked individual variables such as emotional issues as important much more often than students as reasons for leaving school (Karp, 1988). It is not clear whether the individualistic variables associated with dropping out, such as low self-esteem, low educational aspirations, etc. are a product of the school or brought to the school (Wehlage, 1986). It has been argued that instead of focusing on personal characteristics, researchers should focus on school factors, such as school culture as it is more amenable to change (Wehlage, 1989). Students need to feel empowered through membership in a caring school community and engagement in order to complete successfully (Wehlage, 1989).

In 1990, the Canadian Education Association and the Innovations Program of Employment and Immigration Canada conducted a project to identify strategies effective at reducing dropout rates. A report was produced based on a review of existing literature, and a national consultation involving organizations from education, business, labour and the community to identify strategies and recommendations. Among recommendations for future research was the use of qualitative methods to investigate the problem of school dropouts. In their report, they also noted the problems with the definition of dropping out, and how those problems complicate the interpretation of statistical data.

They complicate the issue of the extent of the problem and interpretations of the consequences of dropping out. They state that school leaving should be seen as a process of withdrawing, as students leave for a complex variety of reasons. As such, they indicate that the variety of types of leavers require different sets of responses from schools and agencies. They also suggest that although socio-economic status is a key factor in the school dropout problem, commitment and creativity on the part of educators can be effective in resolving the problem.

A Price-Waterhouse (1990) study found students who dropped out to be a heterogeneous group who reported that feeling identified as a problem gave them a sense of being pushed out. Views of students were surveyed reflecting the view that dropping out was not a one-time decision, but a complex process. The process involved feelings of not fitting in, alienation, isolation and gradual withdrawal, ending in a feeling of lack of support, and even a perceived push to leave.

Nearly all young people, not just those who drop out, report experiencing alienation at school. The difference that makes dropouts distinct is that they are considered more "vulnerable and less able to cope" than their peers, likely because of coming from "confidence-eroding" backgrounds (p. 95, Radwanski, 1987). Personal reasons for dropping out include ill health, pregnancy and emotional problems. Radwanski (1987) argues that while school is not directly related to these problems, the onus is on the school to be "responsive and supportive" to help students to cope with their problems without dropping out. He argues that teachers need to convey a sense of caring, and that individualized help needs to be available for both academic and coping with personal problems. This argument seems logical whether disinterest, boredom, emotional

problems or actual learning difficulties are at the root of difficulties achieving completion of high school.

Tidwell (1988) collected qualitative data on school leavers. Dropouts were asked to recommend preventative measures. These students suggested the need for more attention to be paid to students, including assistance with difficulties and greater interaction with teachers. In another study where multiple methods and perspectives including those of student were utilized, similar recommendations were made. It was recommended that greater attention be paid to students' self-esteem needs, greater commitment be made towards extra help for students, and opportunities for experiential learning that is relevant to students' life experiences be provided (Karp, 1988). These factors appear to be consistent with Radwanski's (1987) findings and recommendations. It follows that not only programs, but research as well should pay more attention to students' perspectives, leading to more individualized assistance with difficulties whether they are emotional or learning based.

In an analysis of longitudinal studies of early school leavers, PRIOR (1990) recommended areas for future research. They suggested that most urgent was the question of why certain students stay in school despite the presence of negative factors. It is possible that the lack of understanding of the process or experience itself is related to the gap between research and programs.

In 1994, the Youth Affairs Branch of Human Resources and Development Canada published a report of an assessment of the national Stay in School Initiative (Renihan, 1994). The Stay in School Initiative was described as a Canadian national dropout-prevention strategy of programs and services aimed directly at at-risk youth, including

public awareness, and stakeholder mobilization. Among its aims were improvements in academic performance as well as retention. Consistent with a constructivist paradigm, the assessment used multiple methods, including quantitative and qualitative approaches to gather information from all stakeholder groups in order to get a holistic picture of what was effective and to produce useful recommendations.

In a literature review for the Stay in School assessment, Renihan (1994) summarized that students have dual needs of a sense of belonging and bonding to school including educational engagement and involvement in activities. In the assessment (Renihan, 1994), it was noted that the schools that were successful in increasing academic performance, improving attitudes about learning, and improving self-esteem, had restructured their school environments significantly. When stakeholders were surveyed, the results indicated that students needed to be engaged in school life, and to have some self-determination, including decision-making ability, as well as opportunities to being related and fitting to the real world of work. The interview data suggested the need for schools to be more responsive and more human, and for the voices of students to be heard. Students consistently indicated that they wanted and needed caring and support from professionals and their environment.

Recommendations that emerged from Renihan's (1994) thorough assessment include a call for the expansion of a moral response and the obligation of addressing the needs of so-called at-risk youth. The researchers emphasized that it was responsive, caring adults taking responsibility for the education of at-risk students which was key to successful initiatives. As well, it is suggested that accessibility to education be considered rather than retention as a goal. Overall, the Stay in School Initiative was

assessed to have been highly successful. The report includes expressions of concern over whether moral responsibility will continue to be expanded into the community, since a theme of interdependent action emerged as very important in the success of the initiative. In concluding, it was emphasized that student voices need to be heard.

### *The Gap Between Theory and Research*

Although there have been a few as cited above, most studies on the issue of dropping out are conducted by policy-makers and educators and are drawn from a positivistic paradigm. Dropping out is conceptualized as a stagnant variable, as a decision. Rather than gathering discovery-oriented data from stakeholders on what the experience of struggling is like and what helps, studies approach the problem from an economic, sociological and political perspectives (Rumberger, 1987), aiming to identify and examine the causes and setting up programs for what is considered a social problem.

Rumberger (1987) notes that the social concern is related to a belief that future work requirements will demand more education. However, he also notes that part of the concern is related to an American trend of using high school completion rates to judge and compare schools (Rumberger, 1987). Subsequently, the literature includes countless numbers of large sample, quantitative efforts to identify variables associated with early leaving from school, and to interpret the findings, which are often conceptually and in reality inter-related, as causal. With little theory driving these studies (Holland and Andre, 1987), it is not surprising that little is known about how to facilitate completion or achievement for students who experience the risk of dropping out, or struggle to achieve in high school. The most obvious element of the gap between theory and research is the

often absent psychological perspective. Since dropout rates are the focus and impetus for programs that are often developed without a psychological or developmental understanding of the experience and process, it is not surprising that programs are often not effective. Psychologists acknowledge that causality is difficult to determine, and the relationship between causal factors is often complex. Decisions are motivated, and not considered as a one-time event to be examined in isolation from their context.

Researchers have relied heavily on sociological variables versus psychological explanations to explain why students leave school. As suggested by McNeal (1995), focusing on factors related to behaviour involves a risk of blaming the student when the causes and solutions are not individually based. Yet early leaving from school and the difficulty some students have completing high school may be more clearly understood in terms of psychological theories and processes, which may be more meaningful and useful in planning interventions, particularly at the level of the individual. Some models attempt to integrate psychological theories into efforts at identifying cause or predicting outcome; however a consistent psychological approach has not been developed. Struggling to complete high school or dropping out altogether is a non-normative event. Students who have these experiences can be said to fall in the margins; therefore, it may be helpful for researchers to shift their focus of inquiry from sociological theories to psychological processes to better understand. Considering the possibility that this focus on numbers and policy is a manifestation of a tendency to treat students like numbers, something that may be pushing them out of school, it makes sense to look at psychological theories and programs to help individuals.

Radwanski (1987) argues that something must be done about alienation, and that

the only way to address the issue is to "supplement impersonal relationships with personal ones" (p. 109). Radwanski's (1987) policy report argues that changes should be systemic, versus program-based, addressing the dropout problem alone. Yet he states that at "absolute minimum", alienation among dropouts should be reduced by providing students with "at least one caring adult within the school system" (p. 110). It follows that individual, caring attention should be offered as an intervention as well as in researching the student's experiences.

### *Theories*

Of the factors that have been associated with dropping out, there are so-called individual factors (Rumberger, 1987) that most resemble psychological factors, although they can not be meaningfully separated from their relationship to other factors, such as influence of peers and so-called school-related factors. Individual factors include lower levels of self-esteem and less sense of control over their lives compared to other students (Rumberger, 1987). Finn (1989) states that in every discussion of the dropout phenomenon, it is obvious that many of the factors are interdependent. A psychological approach offers a framework for understanding the interaction of these variables as a process, as an alternative to attempts to build a causal model based on simplified associations between variables.

As Rumberger (1987) points out, the problem of dropping out might be better viewed as a process culminating in a final act of leaving, and many of the associated factors are structural and reveal little about the underlying process. Gilbert (1993) also argues that dropping out is more of a process than a decision made at one time. Finn

(1989) also argued that empirical studies become more and more precise at examining correlates of dropping out and create a plethora of reports describing intervention efforts. However, few are based on any systematic understanding of what Finn considers a developmental process that leads a person to withdraw from school.

### *Participation-Identification*

Finn (1989) outlines two theoretical models for understanding the dropout phenomenon as a developmental process. The first is the *frustration-self esteem* model, which tends to cite school failure as the cause of problem behaviours in students. It suggests that schools do not provide an appropriate instructional or emotional environment for students who perform poorly. It is one that has been used historically to study delinquency. These students are thought to experience rejection by the school, embarrassment, and frustration when they encounter failure. This is considered to lead to low self-esteem, or compromised personal agency beliefs and the “perception of self as ineffective and powerless” (Ford, 1987, 214 qtd. In Finn, 1989), followed by more achievement problems, and ultimately, early leaving. Finn (1989) points out, however, that most of the research on the relationship of self-esteem to problem behaviour is correlational, thus not justifying a directional conclusion that poor performance causes lowered self-esteem.

While not totally distinct from the frustration self-esteem model, Finn (1989) presents another model for understanding the dropout problem. Called the *participation-identification* model, it emphasizes the importance of bonding with the school. It is drawn from several lines of research on school process. The model suggests that students

who participate actively in school achieve better academic results and develop a sense of belonging and attachment to school. The participation and identification produces successful performance outcomes, including graduation. Both models are conceptually related to identity development theories.

Finn (1989) cites evidence from studies of constructs related to identification that used terms such as affiliation, involvement and bonding versus negative terms such as alienation and withdrawal, that consistently demonstrate associations with positive outcomes in school-related goals. A key area of literature in support of the model is the concept of alienation, which Finn (1989) explains was popular in the sociological literature of the 1960s. The term depicts non-involvement and nonattachment, powerlessness, meaninglessness, and self-estrangement among other descriptors. Finn (1989) cites Newmann's (1981) integration of the literature on alienation, that emphasized the need for designing schools to reduce alienation, because involvement and engagement of students is necessary for them to learn.

Regarding participation, Finn (1989) explains that it is distinct from identification, which is an internal state including two parts, belonging and valuing. Participation is an external manifestation of identification. The model thus separates behavioural from emotional dimensions. Participation includes classroom behaviours including attending, memorizing, responding to questions, etc. The association between these classroom behaviours, and academic performance is well supported in the literature. Finn calls this level-one participation. Level two participation includes a more active role for students such as doing more work than is required, demonstrating enthusiasm and asking questions. The third level of participation is related to involvement in extracurricular

activities and sports. Finn (1989) cites a review of the research on participation in extracurricular activities by Hollande and Andre (1987) that concluded that participation is related to, among other outcomes, higher levels of self-esteem, feelings of control over one's life, higher academic ability and grades, and lower delinquency. A fourth level, about participation in school governance has little or no supporting research.

Finn's (1989) participation-identification model suggests that by the time students get to the later years of high school where there are greater opportunities to participate, students who are at risk to withdraw may already be withdrawn due to lacking the necessary encouragement at home. They may be minimally compliant with regards to level one participation, arriving late and turning in assignments late. They may skip classes and have poor grades. At that point they are at risk for school rejection, that may involve suspension, or exclusion from extra-curricular participation. At this point a student in this situation may see dropping out as a small, final step in a chain of events. He suggests that intervention efforts should be directed at increasing and maintaining participation in social, extracurricular, athletic, and student government activities, as they offer routes for students having difficulties to stay in contact with the school environment. Finn (1989) cites a Miller et.al. (1987) ethnographic study of social and academic participation and dropping out that concluded that engagement was one important factor for keeping at risk students in school. Katz (1999) also found evidence that participation led to feelings of engagement and was important in helping students who were struggling to complete high school.

Finn (1989) presents that participation-identification model as a process oriented perspective to help understand dropping out, and to guide further process-oriented

research. The behaviour of participation precedes the psychological feeling of identification with school, leading to sense of belonging and valuing school-related outcomes. It explains total withdrawal, or dropping out, as a process of disengagement over time. Like the frustration-self-esteem model it identifies school failure as an important antecedent of dropping out. However, in the participation-identification model, behaviours and emotions are seen on a continuum with varying degrees of non-participation, of which dropping out is the extreme. While not stated by Finn, a review of the model also suggests that contrary to the frustration-self-esteem model, the participation-identification model enables an assessment of the problem on a developmental continuum, for earlier intervention. As well, since the frustration-self-esteem model begins at failure, interventions based on it would be remedial while interventions based on the participation-identification model could be preventative and constructive.

Few studies have utilized Finn's (1989) model directly; however, several have looked at extracurricular participation and its relationship to achievement and/or retention, variables conceptually associated with the model. Overall, the results of these studies confirm the hypothesis about the relationship between participation and school-related outcomes, although it is not clear that identification is part of the process. The relationship between school goals and identification with school has been studied under other guises such as bonding and alienation in several studies.

The relationship between participation and school goals has been studied more extensively. In a study on student activities associated with achievement, Camp (1990) found that academic achievement was enhanced by student participation in

extracurricular activities and thus raised questions about the rationale behind rules excluding academically marginal students from participation in such activities. In a survey of high school students at three high schools, Brown and Steinberg (1991) found extra-curricular activities enhanced students' school performance. In a recent study of antecedents and moderators of antisocial behaviour, Mahoney (2000) found that extracurricular activity participation was related to lower rates of early dropout as well as less criminal arrests among high-risk children. Renzulli and Park (2000) found that gifted students who dropped out were less likely to have participated in extracurricular activities than gifted completer students. Using a large sample, Marsh (1992) confirmed that extracurricular participation was related to academic goals and concluded that there is support for the hypothesis in which identification with school is enhanced by extracurricular activity.

A longitudinal assessment of the relationship between extracurricular activities and later dropout confirmed the relationship between participation and engagement (Mahoney & Cairns, 1997). Findings indicated that students who were judged to be at-risk in terms of school competence who had participated in extracurricular activities had markedly lower dropout rates than those who did not participate. The relationship between extracurricular involvement and achievement was significant with the students who were at-risk, it was only modest with the students who were deemed competent or highly competent in middle school. Taken together, these results suggest that there is at least some relationship between participation and achievement.

While there is growing evidence on the relationship between extracurricular participation and achievement-related variables, it is not clear what kind of activity is

useful, or what it is about the participation that is effective. Therefore it is not clear that the relationship between participation and school-related goals is about engagement or identification. In some studies, it appears that certain kinds of extracurricular activity is more related to staying in school than others. McNeal (1995) examined the relationship between participation in extracurricular activities (athletics and fine arts) in a large sample and found that athletic participation had a stronger negative relationship with dropping out behaviour than did fine arts, although both were significant. Academic and vocational extra-curricular activities did not have a significant effect.

McNeal (1995) conceptualizes his study on the connection between extra-curricular activities and achievement through “social control-integration theory” (p. 63) as an attempt to explain the relationship between involvement and dropping out. Social control-integration theory basically explains that the strength of a person’s social bonds to various traditional institutions, in this case school, mediates a natural inclination to commit delinquent or other deviant acts (McNeal, 1995, p. 63). With regards specifically to Finn’s (1989) concept of extracurricular participation and dropping out, McNeal (1995) views participation in his study as a “proxy for integration” (p. 65), mediating the likelihood of dropping out. (It is therefore not clear how this conceptualization is distinct or any more useful than Finns’ model.)

In McNeal’s (1995) study, extra-curricular activity was used to measure involvement, which was considered the most salient and relevant part of social control-integration theory, specifically with regards to a student’s social bond to school. McNeal suggested that this integration into the domain of extra-curricular activities is further differentiated according to a “status ladder” (p. 64) whereby involvement in sporting

activities leads to greater prestige than fine arts, followed by academic clubs and vocational club involvement. Results supported a differential model of participation, in that participation in athletics was more significant than the other types of participation (participation in academic or vocational activities did not reduce the likelihood of dropping out).

McNeal (1995) interprets the findings by relating them to ideas about status and prestige. It is noted that athletics is considered to have the highest level of prestige. What is not mentioned is that students who chose to participate in academic clubs and vocational clubs are not likely to be de-motivated or disengaged from the school and therefore participation may not be related to keeping kids in school. Participation in fine arts was also significant in reducing the probability of dropping out and the effect is discussed as somehow related to either status, skill or value acquisition; however, this explanation is vague, at best. Alternative explanations for the effects are offered. McNeal suggests that “psychological” attributes (p. 75) such as desire to be involved in a group or community may lead students to participate in activities. He later states that the effects were “conflicting”, leading to “theoretical complications for social control or integrationist theories”, and suggests that the complexity of the issue “precludes simple theoretical conceptualizations” of the process (p. 76).

So what explains the relationship between extracurricular activities and school-related goals? Is it engagement, identification, or both? Psychological theories may better explain some of these results. Specifically, theories related to self-development, motivation, and meaning. While some psychological theory has been integrated into studies of the dropout phenomenon, a consistent psychological approach has not been

developed. Relevant theories are explored individually below. What follows is a summary to synthesize the theories and previous findings into a heuristic model of the experience of high school for students who struggle. As well, in accordance with the constructivist paradigm that informs this research, the following review represents an effort to elaborate my hypothesis and potential biases prior to beginning the research.

### *Development*

*Social-cognitive theory* (Bandura, 1986) elaborated on models of human behaviour that focused on reward and punishment to argue that people learn from observing others. While modelled and imitated behaviour may be reinforced, behaviours may emerge from having been observed only, therefore not requiring prior trial learning and shaping (Green, 1989).

Bandura (1986) identified a few capabilities in people which may be important in the understanding this study. Beyond the reflexes that infants are born with, people have a capacity to symbolize things in their minds to guide future action. This may include judgements and beliefs. This is how goals are held and may motivate behaviour. As well, people can learn vicariously by watching others. People also have the ability to be self-conscious and reflective, thinking about their own thoughts and choices and thus attributing meaning to their experiences (cited in Green, 1989). People are not just a product of what they are reinforced and punished for. They can symbolize goals in their minds and learn through observation. They can reflect on their own ideas and make meaning. These ideas suggest that people are much more than a blank slate to be written on. This social-cognitive model suggests that anyone attempting to teach to others must

consider and value students' capacity to set or at least influence learning goals and to guide and reflect on their own development.

Social-cognitive theory also recognizes that not all behaviours that are learned are performed, that indeed motivation is behind whether a behaviour is repeated, and that motivation may be "direct, vicarious, or self-produced" (p. 149, Green, 1989). Research provides examples of behaviour that is more or less likely to be modelled, for example by an approving or disapproving adult (Green, 1989). This suggests that approval of others is a motivator that can help reproduce a desired behaviour, and has implications for this study in terms of achievement and perseverance on goals to stay in school. Important is the idea that people do not always behave based on some objective reality, but in terms of how they perceive that reality, how they personally make meaning out of it and internalize the influence.

Bandura's (1986) theory also points out that power and authority have great influence on behaviour (cited in Green, 1989). This supports the idea of a high school student being vulnerable to internalized disapproval (or approval) from teachers and other perceived authority, and that this approval and disapproval once internalized could affect motivation and behavioural choices. Bandura's (1986) idea of *reciprocal determinism* suggests that learning is a result of personal, behavioural and environmental factors that interact. Behaviour includes the cognitive responses someone makes in a situation and environmental factors can be the role played by teachers, parents or peers, for example. Self-beliefs can affect behaviours by interpretation of environmental cues.

One way that behaviour is affected is by *self-efficacy*, one's judgement of ability to perform a task in a specific domain (Bandura, 1997, cited in Brunning, Schraw &

Ronning, 2004). Positive self-efficacy beliefs relate to greater persistence and good performance. These beliefs can differ according to perceptions of task difficulty and by the generality of one's self-efficacy, although self-efficacy tends to be domain-specific. As well they can differ according to strength, whereby weak perceptions of efficacy are more susceptible to disconfirming evidence. Students with higher self-efficacy are more likely to persist (Bruning, Schraw, & Ronning, 2004).

According to Bandura (1986, cited in Bruning, Schraw, & Ronning, 2004) level, generality and strength of self-efficacy can be influenced by four factors. These include information acquired during the performance of a task, as in when one experiences successful performance. The second influence is observation of others, especially when a model is judged to be of a similar ability to the person observing. The third is verbal persuasion, although it is thought to be a less powerful influence. Finally, one's psychological state when performing a task can influence self-perception of efficacy by producing fear-invoking thoughts. In this way coming to school tired or emotionally upset can lower efficacy even though it may be unrelated to actual performance.

The most consistent finding in the research on Bandura's theory is that these self-efficacy beliefs are strongly related to important learning variables such as task engagement and performance, persistence, strategy use, and help-seeking behaviour. Bandura and Wood (1989, cited in Bruning, Schraw, & Ronning, 2004) found that self-efficacy was related to perceived control of one's environment including the belief that one can be in control through one's own skills and resources, and a sense that one's environment can be modified. Those with higher efficacy felt that they had greater control and in turn persisted in the face of performance difficulties and failures.

Interestingly, teachers who are high on personal teaching efficacy are more likely to value student control and autonomy (Hoy & Woolfolk, 1990, cited in Bruning, Schraw, & Ronning, 2004). Unfortunately, research suggests that time and experience spent in the classroom is related to more rigid and disciplinary teaching (Bruning, Schraw, & Ronning, 2004).

Piaget's *cognitive-developmental* model is also of relevance to this study.

Piaget's focus was on the explanation of the origin and development of knowledge in attempts to address questions of how we come to know things. According to Piaget, people are guided by two internal principles that are opposing. One is *assimilation*, which is about preservation of self, and the other is *accommodation*, which is about incorporating new sensations and experiences in the environment into the self.

Assimilation, by incorporating, is the function that makes things personally meaningful while accommodation is about adjusting the self to deal with external situations.

*Equilibration* is a concept to explain a process of change where assimilation and accommodation are brought into balance. How one manages adaptation is related to how one tends to assimilate and accommodate (Green, 1989).

Piaget defined cognitive operations, considered to be mental action patterns that are reversible, including the stages of *sensorimotor*, *preoperational*, *concrete operational*, and *formal operational*. These stages were considered to be stable and organized and occurring in a universal sequence. The first stage, sensorimotor relates to infancy to approximately 2 years. The preoperational stage relates to children ages approximately 2 to 7 years where a child learns semiotic functioning, enabling them to perform mental actions (symbolization, memory) and mental manipulation of objects.

The next stage, concrete operational relates to children approximately 7 to 14 years old and continuing into adulthood. In this stage a person learns to think of and operate on physical reality, that elements of reality are capable of being either physically experienced or imagined in the mind. At this point the ability to hold multiple ideas in the mind at the same time is thought to emerge so that real comparisons are made possible. The operations that children develop at this time enable rational thought.

Most relevant to the subject of this study is the formal operational stage that occurs approximately at 14 years through adulthood. As explained by Green (1989), this stage extends to higher order thoughts such as *hypothetico-deductive reasoning*. Rather than thinking of reasons based on concrete experiences, as in the previous stage, at this stage people are considered capable of thinking of possibilities, allowing for the ability to explain rather than simply contemplate action. At this point people are able to think about their thinking, and this may explain the adolescent tendency to be preoccupied with personal thoughts and to be self-conscious and self-critical (Green, 1989).

Elkind (1974) theorized about how adolescents imagine an always-present critical audience. These ideas also offer some insight into why a high school student might be particularly sensitive or vulnerable to negative feedback about their performance. One could imagine that negative feedback about one's performance or behaviour, particularly if it related to the individual's sense of self, might confirm for a person at this stage of development that a critical audience is indeed always watching. Negative feedback might also contribute to excessive self-criticism. Also relevant is that Piaget's theory explains how development reflects increases in self-control (Green, 1989). It follows that a sense of control might be a motivator for development, or that lack of control might

interfere with adolescent development.

Kohlberg, a cognitive-developmental theorist, focused his work on the development of moral reasoning and thought rather than behaviour. The theory is about how one reasons about justice and fairness. Kohlberg's term for Piaget's equilibration was *cognitive conflict*, that he felt occurred when a person had two possibly contradictory beliefs or when one's beliefs were inconsistent with external information. Such conflict is resolved by the invention of morals and beliefs (Green, 1989). Kohlberg's defines three levels of moral reasoning with six stages. The *pre-conventional level with stage 1* and *stage 2* is about making judgements for personal interest without social considerations. The *conventional level* is about conforming to societal rules in the form of laws including those of families, peer groups and institutions. *Stage 3* of the conventional level is about pleasing others by being good and includes awareness of other people's feelings and expectations over one's personal interests. *Stage 4* of the conventional level is about upholding rules and laws because of respect for those structures and systems. It is about doing your duty and respecting authority for the benefit of society. The final stage, *post-conventional morality* is about being able to reason on justice and fairness that goes beyond both personal authority and needs, and beyond social rules or conforming to authority. *Stage 5* of post-conventional morality level is about being able to follow rules and expectations because one is obliged to, in order to respect the rights of all people. It is about understanding that rules and laws are made to protect people's fundamental rights and at times someone at this stage might think of breaking the law to protect those rights. *Stage 6* is the highest stage of the highest level, or post-conventional morality. It is about being able to reason about justice

based on “self-chosen but not egocentric ethical principles” (p.204), that are about valuing laws and social rules because they rest on ethical principles such as reciprocity and consistency.

It is possible to conceptually tie Kohlberg’s theory to some of the ideas that have been put forth about students who do not complete high school. Stereotypes of high school dropouts resembling ideas about delinquent youth might suggest an immature level of moral reasoning is present. Pre-conventional morality when one defies social rules on the basis of personal interest could be implied, for example. But research contradicts the stereotype and theories about delinquency. The next level of moral reasoning is about conforming to societal rules for various reasons, whether to gain approval of others, or to uphold a sense of duty to those conventions. It is possible to use this model to speculate about moral reasoning in those who struggle in high school.

As described, post-conventional morality is about looking at justice and fairness beyond both personal authority and social rules, and is not about conforming to authority. This is relevant to this study if indeed students who struggle feel that they can not obey rules for the sake of it, that they need to understand and reason about how these rules are fair and just. It is further relevant if students who struggle do not conform to authorities’ expectations for reasons that include a sense of overall justice and fairness. It implies that students who struggle in high school may possibly be demonstrating higher, post-conventional stages of moral reasoning. Conflict around fairness and justice may represent development moving through post-conventional levels. For example, students who struggle may be de-motivated by a mismatch between their need to understand the reasons behind rules and the didactic, top-down way that rules and norms for behavior

are taught to them.

Given that Kohlberg has altered his views somewhat in recent years since very few reach the final stage of post-conventional morality (Green, 1989), the idea that students who struggle in high school are struggling based on being in at least stage 5 of Kohlberg's model of moral reasoning is radical. It is not the aim of this study to test theories, but instead to share information and ideas with the reader that I had going into this study. Nor is the topic of this study moral reasoning in adolescents who struggle in high school. The question is simply being raised as to whether data that emerged in previous studies as well as this one are conceptually related to ideas put forth by Kohlberg about levels of moral reasoning. Most important and relevant is the idea put forth that cognitive conflict enables development of such reasoning.

### *Identity Development*

Theories of identity include quantitative and qualitative models, and are plentiful. The qualitative, or developmental orientations of identity attempt to explain how there are different stages of organization of identity, with specific features that change form over time, each building on the previous, incorporating and transcending what has come earlier (Kroger, 1995). As highlighted by Kroger (1995), when identity is viewed as developmental, there are implications for "social response" (p. 8). Such an orientation assumes that developmental progress or arrest is responsive to context, specifically intervention. For this reason, developmental theories of identity have been included here.

As pointed out by Kroger (1995), while most developmental theories of identity use different terminology, most provide descriptions of

"...the internal balancing and rebalancing of boundaries between self and other produce more differentiated subjective experiences of identity at various life stages. Adolescence encompasses one phase of heightened activity for most in this intra-psychic juggling act" (pp. 8-9).

One of the most well-known theorists of identity development, Erikson (1968), posited that the self of childhood is derived from identification with significant, important others. In adolescence, this self gives way to a new self by transcending the foundations laid out in childhood. Erikson viewed childhood as a time when introjection of other people's characteristics dominates. Adolescence is a time for selecting some and rejecting other identifications, according to interests, values, and abilities, when true identity formation occurs (Kroger, 1995). According to Erikson, identity is an expression of mental vitality (1968, p.95, cited in Meeus, et. al., p.428). While not stressing social context, Erikson also saw relationships as important in this process as they interact and provide context for the self to find meaning and form. What is distinct, and relevant to the present research, is that in the adolescent stage others become important not only as sources of identification but also as sources of recognition of the new self (Kroger, 1995). The ego's struggle for identity is a normal experience that involves necessary crises between the individual and society (Green, 1989).

Marcia (1966) provided an elaboration of Erikson's views on identity formation theory. The *identity status model* describes transitions in identity, and describes four distinct identity statuses each relating to the quantity of exploration and commitment an

individual has experienced. *Identity diffusion* describes a stage of unexplored alternatives and an absence of commitment to a specific task of development. *Foreclosure* describes a stage of commitment without exploration. *Moratorium* describes a state of being in active exploration when a commitment has not yet been made or clarified. *Identity achievement* describes a state of completion of active exploration when a commitment to an identity has been achieved. Empirical studies have moderated the original position of Marcia, as it does not provide a theory of development, but rather a system for describing transitions. Nevertheless, studies support the developmental pattern of an increase in achievement and moratorium, and a decrease in foreclosure and diffusion with age. Both Erikson and Marcia's original theories suggest a relationship between achievement of identity and mental well-being (Meeus, Iedema, Helsen, & Vollebergh, 1999).

Kegan's *constructivist-developmental* approach views identity as a lifelong process of making meaning, through a *self-other balancing process* which is embedded in relation to the environment one lives in. It is derived from research based on object relations' and cognitive-developmental models (Kroger, 1995). In Kegan's model there are five stages of development, or *orders of consciousness*. According to Kegan, "normative adolescence encompasses a time of increased movement in the balancing and rebalancing of subject and object." (p. 11, Kroger, 1995). While Kegan does not specify age ranges for specific stages, stage three and four, which deal with relationships to others and to institutions are considered relevant to middle and late adolescent development (Kroger, 1995).

In the balancing process, that which is regarded as the self is formed then lost and re-structured. That which is seen as object, or other, also transforms as the relationship or

balance between the self and other progresses. The needs and interests that were once part of the subject/identity become distanced as the object in a new balance between subject-object. This progress allows the adolescent to begin to reflect on his/her own interests and needs and coordinate these with other people's interests and needs. In mid-adolescence the self of interpersonal relationships is still embedded, so that one is one's relationships, rather than having them. In this third stage of growth or order of consciousness, as the self is embedded in its relationships, one is considered "very vulnerable to attitudes within the immediate social context", and can not separate from the need for approval by others (Kroger, 1995).

According to Kegan's perspective, it is later in adolescence that another change occurs once the relationships also become objects (something one has rather than is). At this point, self is embedded instead in institutional roles such as work and the larger societal context. In this fourth stage or order of consciousness once the identity has differentiated from its interpersonal relationships, the threat changes to threats to personal autonomy. As the self is considered to find meaning from the organization or context, one begins to move from being one's interests, career, values, religion, etc. to having these things. Since the self is finding meaning from the institution, one is vulnerable to being invalidated by the institution. Development is considered to be under threat if the institution does not recognize the adolescent. Transition to the next stage of development, the fifth order or inter-individual balance is marked by an increased amount of questioning of and differentiating from that which motivated the affiliations to the institutions that the self had identified with. (Kroger, 1995). In this sense, the struggle to affiliate with a high school environment, or resistance/rejection of it, and the need for

education to be relevant could be said to be normative. It may even represent a more advanced level of identity development.

Kegan (1994), in his book, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*, examines the fit between the demands of Western culture and adolescents and adults developmental capabilities to meet those demands. He argues that there is a mismatch between the demands that society makes with school and work, for example, and people's developmental ability to respond. Most of these demands include the expectation that an individual be at the 4th stage of development while only a small percentage of society is thought to be there. For example, adolescents are "expected to take the needs and interests of others into account", to "think in connotative and denotative ways" and to "provide definitions rather than just examples" (p. 171). These demands are akin to a interpersonal/third order of consciousness (the ability to have relationships versus to be one's relationships); however, few adolescents have achieved this stage (Kroger, 1995). While this model is fairly new, there is growing empirical support for it, and the construct has been validated in a longitudinal study by Kegan and colleagues (Kegan, 1994). The implications of this theory for the struggle to complete high school are clear. Schools need to take into consideration an adolescence dependence on their social context to provide support of the development of the self, including validation of competence and support of autonomy.

There is empirical support that identity develops progressively during adolescence. However, rather than progressing through diffusion, foreclosure, and moratorium to well-being through identity development, research results suggest that moratorium is the status with the lowest level of psychological wellness. Strong

exploration combined with low commitment characterizes an identity crisis. However, moratorium has low longitudinal stability, and as such it can be conceptualized as a transition status. At the same time, the low commitment with low levels of exploration that characterises foreclosure is less damaging. For the statuses of foreclosure and achievement, with high levels of commitment, the level of exploration has apparently no significant influence on well-being. Achievement of identity, and less so, foreclosure can be considered more desirable ends to development than diffusion and moratorium. Both achievement and foreclosure seem to be adaptive. Closure can be reached without a transitional crisis stage of moratorium (Meeus, Iedema, Helsen, & Vollebergh, 1999).

The literature surveyed above demonstrate that achievement of identity, even the unexplored foreclosed identity is related to wellness in adolescence. Clarity of identity is as valuable for some adolescence as authenticity may be for others. The theoretical question relative to counsellors emerges as to whether it is possible to facilitate and/or chose foreclosure rather than active exploration in a time of difficulty? If so, than perhaps anchoring of identity or introjection of interests and values through group membership or affiliation may provide some protection from the psychological challenge of identity development, however temporary. Conceptually, this makes sense.

Identity status research also explores questions about different domains of identity, such as societal and relational. In a work that reviewed research and tested theoretical assumptions, Meeus et.al. (1999) concluded that the number of moratoriums decreases for relational identity while remaining the same longitudinally for societal identity. For societal identity, compared to relational in adolescence, development is less strong, closure more often marks the end point (versus achievement) and moratoriums

last longer. In the interpretation of these results the researchers suggest that characteristics of the institutions represented in societal identity are significant. Schools and workplaces impose moratorium and its related crisis. Adolescence can not exert influence on their position in schools, and often end up in closure rather than achievement. This imposed moratorium suggests that school experiences do not allow for sufficient exploration and development of identity. These results and implications will be discussed further below in the integration section of this chapter.

#### *Locus of Control/Attribution Theory*

In attribution theory, the idea is that an outcome is judged as favourable or unfavourable, and that cognitive interpretations, the attributional response, are made and mediate behaviour. This is similar to self-efficacy judgements, but they pertain to cognitive judgements about future events, whereas attributions are about past events. (Graham, 1991, cited in Bruning, Schraw, & Ronning, 2004). Attributional responses vary according to ideas about stability, controllability and locus of control. Stability is about cause being attributed to something stable, like ability, versus something changeable, like attitude or experience. Controllability is about something that causes success being controllable, like effort, versus uncontrollable, like luck or task difficulty. Locus of control is another dimension of attributions (Weiner, 1985, 1986, cited in Bruning, Schraw, & Ronning, 2004).

Bean and Eaton (2000) suggest that Weiner's (1986) model of attribution is useful in understanding academic performance. Locus of control is a category of attribution

theory. A person who has internal locus of control recognizes that his or her own attributes and abilities are responsible for outcomes. Those with external locus of control attribute outcomes for factors outside their own control. If individuals believe that they have control over outcomes of situations, they are thought to be more motivated to respond to situations. There is some evidence that locus of control accounts for differences in achievement in high school students (McLean, 1997). In looking at a number of studies on locus of control and Dowd (1989) concludes that in general, internal locus of control may be associated with creativity. In addition, teachers that promote more favourable attributions responses are likely to promote intrinsic motivation and a sense of autonomy (Bruning, Schraw, & Ronning, 2004). The theory explains some of the process of how a student at risk academically might persist in the face of adversity, specifically, if they are helped to experience a sense of control. The framework focuses on an individual characteristic of having or not having internal locus of control.

### *Self-Efficacy and Agency*

Bandura's (1986, 1997) model of self-efficacy is useful in looking at student achievement and persistence. The theory holds that people acquire a perception of their abilities to perform certain tasks and deal with particular situations based on their past experiences and observation. Self-efficacy is an individual's own perception of their ability to carry out a necessary action in order to reach a particular goal. As the individual recognizes his/her competence and begins to feel confident, they will demonstrate greater persistence, achievement and personal goals. A student who is at

risk for academic failure is more likely to invest the necessary energy to achieve academic goals if he/she watches others succeed and believes that he/she can succeed as well (Bean & Eaton, 2000). Lent, Brown, and Larkin (1987) found that self-efficacy for academic performance was a predictor of both academic performance and persistence. A strong sense of self-efficacy with regard to the events and situations of campus life enable a student to gain confidence in his/her ability to survive and adapt and persist to graduation.

How does one develop a sense of self-efficacy if it is lacking? Research has identified multiple influences on self-efficacy. Self-efficacy has been associated with task engagement, persistence and previous successful performance (Brunning, Schraw, & Ronning, 2004). Noteworthy is that one's psychological state such as level of arousal can impact efficacy. For example, strong emotional arousal can reduce efficacy by invoking fearful thinking that induces anxiety (Bandura, 1986, cited in Brunning, Schraw, & Ronning, 2004). Bandura and Wood (1989) found that perceived control of environment and belief in one's own self-control through use of skills and resources relates to higher efficacy (cited in Brunning, Schraw, & Ronning, 2004).

Some theorists view the self as an agent, active in its own development, in addition to having a propensity toward organization. Development is dependent on activity, thus involving agency (Ryan, 1993). The self is at the centre of initiation and engagement with the environment. It is an agent that integrates experience and is also the structure in which new propensities and values are integrated (Ryan, 1991, cited in Ryan, 1993). Agency, according to Ryan (1993) is more than Bandura's (1989) social-cognitive concept of self-efficacy, which Ryan equates with the belief "that one can

successfully perform an action and thus obtain an outcome” (p. 17). Ryan suggests that in Bandura’s social-cognitive model an “obedient but competent slave” could be “self-efficacious” (p. 17) if he simply could reason that he could complete an action to avoid punishment. True agency requires more than ability or efficacy, as the “true agent feels volitional in action, viewing action as having an internal locus of causality” (p.17). The agent must feel his or her actions are authentic and autonomous. In this way, Ryan’s notion of agency gets at the question of “why” someone might perform an action.

The issue of autonomy is central to Ryan’s notion of agency (1993). It has been suggested that one of the tasks of adolescence is reaching for autonomy (Robin & Foster, 1989). When activity proceeds from this organizing structure, the self, and is consistent with it, it is considered autonomous. Whether or not activities are experienced as stemming from this core self is “of great psychological significance” (p. 5) to a person. Activities that are self-regulated are experienced as vital, and coherent (Ryan, 1993). Good quality relationships, such as those that represent secure attachment facilitate autonomy. Research that looks at conditions that foster perceived autonomy and competence demonstrates that feedback supporting self-determination is most useful.

### *Engagement*

The concept of psychological engagement has been defined differently and examined in different forms. The concept of vital engagement is an attempt to draw together these forms into one category of positive experience, one where a person is in a meaningful and involving relationship with the world that rather than being a moment where one feels absorbed, it is sustained over time (Nakamura, 2001). Vital engagement

is not only a subjective interest, but also the sustained relationship with aspects of the world, including people and causes, for example. It is characterized by “both felt meaning (subjective significance) and experiences of enjoyed absorption (flow)...the person feels connected to an aspect of the world“ (p. 8, Nakamura, 2001). In that sense it denotes a relationship between self and social context. Vital engagement is further defined as participation in the world that is “intense and positive” (p. 8, Nakamura, 2001). Socialization is a factor that influences vital engagement by modelling the pursuit of enjoyable and meaningful activity. Mentors, teachers, books and other cultural objects are also considered influential. It is theorized that absorption can lead to felt significance, and felt significance can lead to absorbing relationship. In this sense an individual’s own experience is a pathway to being absorbed or experiencing felt significance. Whatever way it is experienced, motivation must emerge and not be dictated (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 1999, cited in Nakamura, 2001). Engagement in classes has been found to be related to later educational choice and educational achievement (Shernoff & Hoogstra, 2001). As well, there is evidence that academic resilience is related to student engagement for students at risk. (Finn & Rock, 1997)

### *Motivational Model of Engagement*

Psychological theories hold that behaviour is motivated by particular needs. The motivational model of engagement suggests that a person’s thoughts and emotions while performing a particular action are more important in determining subsequent engagement than the outcome of the action itself (Connell & Wellborn, 1991, cited in Miserandino, 1996). Specifically, competence, autonomy, and relatedness are basic psychological

needs considered motivators for engagement (Deci & Ryan, 1985). It has been argued that these motivators may be more important in the understanding of learning and subsequent engagement than ability. When the needs are thwarted, individuals are expected to have negative affect and disengage from whatever they are involved in, regardless of the outcome (Miserandino, 1996). This motivational model of engagement provides a frame for partial understanding of the relationship between participation and achievement of school-related goals.

### *Self-Determination and Intrinsic Motivation*

Self-determination theory describes development through a dialectical process between the self and the social context that can either foster or inhibit growth by supporting or thwarting the basic needs for competency, autonomy, and relatedness (Miserandino, 1996). The need to be effective in one's interactions is the need for competency. The need to have choice in matters of initiating, maintaining, and regulating activity is considered the need for autonomy. The need to feel secure in one's connections to others and the need to feel worthy of love and respect is the need for relatedness (Connell & Wellborn, 1991, cited in Miserandino, 1996). Environments that facilitate feelings of self-determination, satisfy needs for competency, autonomy and relatedness and should therefore result in positive affect and engagement for the individual (Miserandino, 1996).

The need for autonomy and competency are thought to underlie intrinsic motivation. Effects of reward or praise depend on how they are perceived with regard to self-determination and competence, so that rewards that are interpreted as controllers of

behaviour undermine motivation, while events that are perceived as supportive of competence enhance motivation (Deci, Koestner, and Ryan, 1999). In this model, social agents do not influence students' motivation directly. Instead their influence is mediated by students' perceptions of competence and autonomy (Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997).

Miserandino (1996) found that perceived competence and autonomy predict self-reported actions and emotions related to the construct of engagement. Students who doubted their abilities had more negative affect, and reported being bored as well as avoiding and faking schoolwork. In support of self-determination theory, students who perceived that they were internally motivated towards schoolwork reported more involvement, persistence, participation, and curiosity in school activities. Perceived autonomous children also had higher grades, and perceived autonomy was significant in predicting grades one term afterwards. In a study that directly tested the motivational model of dropping out, Vallerand, Fortier and Guay (1997) found consistent support for the theory, that autonomy-supportive behaviours influencing students' perceptions of competence and autonomy influences levels of self-determined motivation, intentions to drop out of high school, and later drop out behaviour.

In a meta-analytic review of the effects of rewards on intrinsic motivation, Deci, Ryan, and Koestner (1999) concluded that extrinsic rewards undermine intrinsic motivation on many tasks, primarily by forestalling self-regulation. They argue that the alienation, detachment, and disengagement that describe social institutions could be partly ameliorated by encouraging higher levels of intrinsic motivation and self-determination.

Overall, conditions that afford choice (Zuckerman, Porac, Lathin, Smith, & Deci, 1978) and environments that are autonomy supportive (Koestner, Ryan, Bernieri, & Holt, 1984) enhance intrinsic motivation. Indeed self-determination has been associated with a number of educational outcomes (see Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997). Autonomy is related to the motive to achieve success and to satisfaction in school (Cock & Halvari, 1999) as well as increased achievement (Black & Deci, 2000). Interestingly, this theory has applications cross culturally as well. In a comparison of parent and teacher autonomy supportiveness in Russian and U.S. adolescents, Chirkov and Ryan (2001) found common effects on greater academic motivation, further confirming the proposition of self-determination theory.

Intrinsic motivation seems to also be related to creative activity (Dowd, 1989). Amabile (1987) suggested that an ideal environment conducive to creative productivity is one in which there is no pressure or competition, as well as one where negative external evaluation is not a threat, and intrinsic motivation is cultivated (Amabile, 1990). Conditions that lead to the perception of being controlled or pressured inhibit development and intrinsic motivation (Ryan, 1993). Furthermore, autonomy-supportive parenting is related to internalization of parental values, as well as adjustment and achievement in the extra familial domain of school (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989, cited in Ryan, 1993).

It is important to note that autonomy support is congruent with relatedness. Autonomy supportive behaviours are thought to facilitate healthy attachment, and relationships that are secure and facilitating support autonomy by acknowledging and responding to a child's "core self and encouraging a perceived internal locus of causality

for action” (p. 37, Ryan, 1993). Ryan argues that it is social contexts that support autonomy, expressions of competence, and relatedness that ultimately lead to an individual’s “sense of unity and coherence” (p. 48). In such contexts, individuals are most likely to integrate desired values and to develop healthy relationships in the course of their development. Strategies that focus on satisfying psychological needs, related to active engagement, are advocated as an alternative to behavioural control (Deci, Koestner, and Ryan, 1999). The implications of these theories and findings are clear in demonstrating that schools must promote good relations between teachers and students, based on facilitation of competency experiences, and promotion and support of autonomy.

### *Integration and Summary*

Models to explain behaviour are complex and inadequate, and not the aim of this research. Instead, I will summarize and synthesize several theories and findings to shed light on my assumptions and hypothesis, and provide a frame for the study. It is hoped that a heuristic model will emerge, informing on the experience of high school for some capable students who struggle to achieve or complete.

First, what can be assumed overall is that dropping out is a complex process. As such, it involves affect, behaviour, cognition and contextual factors. A review of relevant theories from psychology help to explain that behaviour is motivated and to demonstrate how certain factors associated with early leaving are theoretically and conceptually related. Preventative or remedial measures can only be adequately designed when they are informed by psychology and qualitative, stakeholder informed research that embraces

an integration of behaviour, affect, cognition and context.

The theories presented are complicated. A thorough explanation of how each variable related to the experience of high school is related to the other is not the aim of this study. Some of the links between the theories presented can begin to suggest a simplified model of the psychological processes possibly involved. A psychological model of the experience indicates that past experience, behaviours, and beliefs affect the way an individual interacts with their environment.

An integrated perspective on the dropout process wherein an individual interacts with a social context is necessary (Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997). Most empirical studies focus on correlates of dropping out with little theory driving the research (Holland & Andre, 1987), and without an understanding of the process of school withdrawal (Finn, 1989). The most obvious element of the gap between theory and research is the absence of a psychological perspective. A discovery-oriented, psychological theory-informed, qualitative approach to the issue is necessary. A psychological perspective allows for an examination of a common experience without identification of an individual as a member of a particular group, culture, or society. Students who do not complete high school are a heterogeneous group and therefore they should not be stereotyped (Radwanski, 1987; Price-Waterhouse, 1990). Being identified as a group makes them feel pushed out (Price-Waterhouse, 1990). In addition, identification of correlates is like talking about symptoms, and does not help identify causes (Morris, Pawlovich & McCall, 1991). Focusing on personal determinants of dropping oversimplifies a complex process (Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997). There are, however, some consistencies in reports of student experiences of school in a few studies that have interviewed students after they

left.

The concept of dropping out as a complex process (Canadian Education Association, 1990; Gilbert, 1993) is gaining acceptance. Regarding the process, students who have dropped out express dissatisfaction with school culture and teachers (HRDC, 1995), problems with schoolwork and boredom (Gilbert, 1993). They feel alienated and neglected (Radwanski, 1987). It is not surprising then, that they do not participate in class or extra-curricular activities (HRDC, 1995). Students who struggle in school have suggested that more attention, assistance, and interaction with teachers would help (Tidwell, 1988). Educators must respond to students' need for belonging and bonding to the school through engagement and involvement in activities. Willingness to restructure schools, specifically to facilitate competency, decision making and self-determination is a pre-requisite to increased academic performance, improved attitudes about learning, and higher self-esteem for students (Renihan, 1994).

These calls for responsiveness to individual needs and support to facilitate engagement need to be further elaborated and operationalized. Psychological theories can be utilized to transform these recommendations into practical approaches, to at least understand the experience from students' perspectives, and ideally, to facilitate useful interventions. For the purpose of the current exploration, they are provided and integrated to present one possible framework for understanding the existing, sometimes atheoretical, research findings.

There is evidence for a relationship between participation and school-related goals (Marsh, 1992). However, there are emotional dimensions to identification and engagement that are about more than the behavioural aspect of participation.

Identification involves a sense of belonging and valuing (Finn, 1989). Can one have a sense of belonging and valuing, and identify with a context without a clear and articulated sense of self?

There is relationship between mental health and the development of identity, regardless of whether that identity is explored or foreclosed, yet school experiences do not allow for sufficient exploration and development of identity (Meeus, Iedema, Helsen, & Vollebergh, 1999). In mid adolescence, the self is embedded in relationships and adolescents are vulnerable to attitudes in the social context, needing approval of others (Kroger, 1995). It makes sense that encouraging participation and affiliation through membership in a group, or aiding in the exploration of an interest would be useful strategies to facilitate identity clarification, which in turn might allow for sense of belonging and valuing. The key to these recommendations is the idea of encouragement, responsive aid, and facilitation.

Theories of engagement aid in further explaining the relationship between participation and school-related goals. Engagement, which is related to achievement (Shernoff & Hoogstra, 2001), requires a meaningful relationship with a social context that is positive and sustained over time (Nakamura, 2001). It has been said that one of the major tasks of adolescence is to reach for autonomy (Robin & Foster, 1989). Indeed, competence, autonomy, and relatedness are basic psychological needs considered motivators for engagement (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The self is the agent at the centre of engagement with the environment, and this self needs to feel that actions are autonomous, meaning stemming from its core (Ryan, 1991; Ryan, 1993). Social contexts can either foster or inhibit growth by supporting or thwarting the basic needs for competency,

autonomy, and relatedness, thus supporting engagement (Miserandino, 1996). Self-determination has been associated with a number of educational outcomes (see Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997), including success and satisfaction in school (Black & Deci, 2000; Cock & Halvari, 1999). It follows that high school students need opportunities to develop the self through experiences of autonomy, competency and healthy relationships that facilitate engagement.

Support with school-related difficulties, and opportunities to explore interests are practical approaches to facilitate competency. Autonomy support and opportunities for self-determination in learning tasks are also conceivable. What about relatedness? How are meaningful relationships created between teachers and students? There is some argument that schools are failing to provide for emotional needs of students who are struggling with emotional issues (Finn, 1989). How can schools respond to the emotional needs of students for individualized attention, validation, without radical changes in schools structure? The onus is on educators to be caring and supportive and respond to their individual needs for both academic help and coping with whatever personal problems they have (Radwanski, 1987). How can engagement be facilitated? Students need to feel empowered through membership in a caring school community and engagement in order to complete successfully (Wehlage, 1989). Schools successful in improving academic performance, attitudes about learning, and self-esteem, restructure their school environments significantly (Renihan, 1994).

This study, in arising from humanistic and constructivist paradigms, and in framing itself in a psychological perspective offers a discovery oriented approach to an issue that has been well-explored but about which little is known. It provides a format

for exploring the issue of the struggle to complete high school that is neither atheoretical, nor does it impose theory. Rather, it is informed by it. In focusing on a common process rather than aiming to identify characteristics associated with what has been called a problem, or looking for causes of the so-called problem, it treats the subject and its stakeholders with respect. This exploration of what the experience of high school is for students who struggle to complete steps back from analysis and conjecture and instead aims to validate by answering the call of students to be responsive to their voices and needs to be heard. It therefore contributes an authentic description of the experience of high school for some students who struggled at that time.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### *Method Selection*

Method choice relates to the intended use of the data, and the nature of the question being asked (Colaizzi, 1978). Questions asked are only secondary to the basic belief system or worldview that guides the researcher (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Since the purpose of this study was to illuminate the essence of the high school experience from the perspective of people who struggled, a phenomenon for which still little is known, the phenomenological approach is appropriate. The method offers a way to access the difficult phenomenon of human experience (Giorgi, 1997). When psychological meanings are sought over objective facts, descriptions of situations from participants are an appropriate base of a research study (Giorgi, 1983). An elaboration of the guiding worldview and its relationship to the method selection and question is provided in the following segment.

### *Philosophical Research Paradigm - Constructivism*

It has been argued that psychology, in its efforts to be scientific and academic has attempted to associate itself with natural science, treating consciousness as something to be examined as a reality or phenomenon in the same way other physical entities are studied in natural sciences. The problem with this attempt is that often phenomenon under investigation become less relevant and meaningful issues that are experienced in people's lives are not adequately investigated (Karlsson, 1993).

The methodological approach of phenomenology fits within a constructivist paradigm, which posits that reality is relative and socially constructed. The question of

truth or consensus is not as relevant as how informed and sophisticated constructions are for those involved in the research investigation (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). A constructivist perspective enables a sense of humility towards others' experiences, which facilitates learning for the researcher. It sees the research relationship on more egalitarian terms, so findings are considered co-created. The distinction between what is the nature of knowledge – or what is real, and what is the relationship between the knower and what would be known disappear (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The emphasis is on the sophistication and elaboration of co-constructed truth or meaning between the researcher and participants or co-investigators.

A constructivist position is well suited to my training in counselling psychology since my practice is humanistic, and grounded in a phenomenological approach to counselling. I have what Rogers (1985) described as a naturalistic science orientation to research, congruent with my counselling style and assumptions about the world and my relationship to clients. Within this perspective, a counsellor does not value his/her views over the client, or consider themselves to know something about the client that the client does not know. Client's meanings are reflected back to them. The counsellor uses evocative and sophisticated language, often in the form of metaphors, to help identify and communicate the essence of a client's experiences while maintaining a sense of humility, and checking with the client on the accuracy of the meaning-reflections. I value the counselling process itself, and agree with Rogers that it has a useful role in qualitative studies.

The research question itself arose from the worldview as outlined above. In many aspects of my life and character, I am continually searching for the deeper meanings, and

struggling to find a way to then communicate these meanings to others in a way that stays as true as possible to both the original phenomenon, and my own process of meaning-making. This is consistent with the philosophy of phenomenology (van Manen, 1997). The question and the choice of methodology are congruent with my development and education as a counsellor, educator, and writer of creative non-fiction and poetry.

### *Research Design - Phenomenology*

Phenomenological research asks what an experience is really like. It seeks to understand lived situations, and also a person's response to these situations (Creswell, 1998). It is the study of the world as it is immediately experienced, rather than how it is interpreted, or theorized about (van Manen, 1984). Giorgi (1997) points out that since human science is concerned more about how objects are perceived and what they mean to people versus objects that are concrete, that have a "real" (p. 2) presense as discernable by physical sciences. Phenomenology focuses on description rather than explanation and on meaning rather than observable facts (Karlsson, 1993). As well, phenomenology values personal experiences of the researcher, reflecting the view that one's experience can be the experience of others. This is not to say that the techniques used are primarily for seeking subjective experience of a particular person or category of persons. It has a more profound goal of searching for the nature of a phenomenon, a shared human experience (van Manen, 1984).

Giorgi (1997) described phenomenological method as a "rigorous descriptive approach" (p.3). Rather than making assumptions about the world, phenomenological method attempts to take a step back. It requires the researcher to state their assumptions,

suspending preconceptions to fully understand the participants' experience and hold back from imposing a priori hypothesis (Creswell, 1998). It attempts to examine phenomenon as a presence, bracketing past knowledge in the search for the most invariant meaning of something, and finding a way to describe it, or re-present it that evokes the original essence of the phenomenon.

Giorgi (1983) explains that in phenomenology descriptions are a valid and legitimate source of data and the method, it is argued, attend to demands of both "scientific rigor" and "psychological reality" (p. 6). Since experience is relational in that it is always about something that transcends it - so objects of psychological analysis are themselves inherently relational. Rigor is accomplished because the method studies how things appear to consciousness, how they are experienced. Descriptions in phenomenology depict things as they are given to experience, thereby including the relational aspect rather than trying to control and eliminate it in an impossible and artificial manner. In this way, phenomenologists argue that their method is a rigorous one. Giorgi describes the method as the "rigorous pursuit of the clarification of meaning" (p. 8).

van Manen (1984) describes phenomenological research as looking for the nature of a phenomenon, for that which makes something what it essentially is and without which it could not be said to be what it is. A metaphor of poetry is used to explain the activity of doing phenomenological research (van Manen, 1984; van Manen, 1997). Like the poet, the phenomenological researcher must find a way to capture and represent in writing the essence of a human experience. Therefore, procedures that symbolize rather than speaking about the world are necessary in this approach. Doing phenomenological

research and writing involves turning to something of serious interest to the researcher, investigating it as it is experienced and lived rather than how it is conceptualized, reflecting on its essential themes and then using the art of writing and re-writing to communicate. (van Manen, 1984). In this approach what is to be captured and shared is a holistic construct, based on a cognitive and affective experience which exists in consciousness, a lived experience (McPhail, 1995).

Giorgi (1997) states that all qualitative methods go through the basic steps of collection of verbal data, reading, breaking data into parts, organization and expression of data from a disciplinary perspective, and synthesis or summary for the purposes of communication to the scholarly community. Phenomenology, by reducing, searching for essences and describing, also meets these steps.

Like van Manen's description above (1984), to Giorgi (1997), phenomenology does not attempt to analyze an individual concrete experience, but rather to explore, identify and communicate the essence, or most invariant meaning for a context. The most invariant meaning is the one that is the most fundamental, without which a phenomenon could not present itself as it is. This meaning is identified by what Giorgi calls free imaginative variation, a method for discovering essences. This method is the process of exploring the identity of a phenomenon, which emerges with each example that is given as a possible instance of the phenomenon. Converging possibilities contribute to an emergent awareness of the features that cannot be removed, and are therefore essential.

Giorgi (1997) further distinguished between philosophical phenomenological method and human scientific phenomenological method with an explanation of

modifications needed to make an analysis more scientific. He outlines five basic steps involved that were followed in this study. More elaborate procedures as described by Collaizi (1978) were followed in the analysis and in the formation of thematic categories. These steps and procedures are explained in greater detail later in this chapter in the section on research procedures.

It has been argued that reliability and validity are rooted in a positivist perspective and should be viewed distinctly in qualitative research (Golafshani, 2003; Giorgi, 2002). For example, quantitative research regards the world as made up of measurable and observable facts (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992, cited in Golafshani, 2003) where predetermined responses to categories are used (Patton, 2001, cited in Golafshani, 2003). Rather than emphasizing measurement and analysis of causal relationships (Denzin & Loncoln, 1998, cited in Golafshani, 2003) and prediction of behaviour, qualitative research aims to illuminate, understand, and extrapolate results to similar situations (Hoepfl, 1997, cited in Golafshani, 2003). In qualitative research it is assumed that meaning is embedded in the experiences and is mediated through the perspective of the researcher (Merriam, 1998), where “understanding is an end in itself” and not an attempt “to predict” (Patton, 1985, p.1, cited in Merriam, 1998). Qualitative research results in a distinct type of knowledge.

Healy and Pery (2000, cited in Golafshani, 2003) argued that the quality of a study should be judged by criterion related to its own paradigm’s terms. In qualitative research, one does not speak about reliability since the aim is not usually to create results that are replicable over repeated observations. In a constructivist paradigm, it is believed that knowledge is constructed and therefore ever-changeable depending on circumstances

and perspectives. Definitions of validity also emerge from the positivist paradigm, with the aim to test if the means of the measurement are accurate and whether the measure is measuring what it intended to measure, and may not be relevant to qualitative research (Golafshani, 2003).

Going beyond the issue of validity as it relates to qualitative research, Giorgi (2002) argued that the concept in the more received view of science is not as credible as it seems. He explained that the philosophy of science on which qualitative studies and particularly phenomenology are based do not see subjectivity as inherently distorting or something that can ever truly be eliminated from a study. In this perspective objects under observation are not distorted by the act of knowing them. Validity is thus not about controlling for subjectivity. Validity takes a unique form in this philosophy of science. Particular conditions must be present to ensure that humans gain valid knowledge. One of these conditions relates to dealing directly with subjectivity and utilizing it with what is called intuition, a technical term referring to being “present to consciousness” (p. 9, Giorgi, 2002). What matters is how present a subject is to an event, and how effective a researcher is at seeking out examples that are as faithful as possible to the experience being researched.

Despite these arguments, it is widely accepted that qualitative researchers still must demonstrate the credibility and trustworthiness of their studies (Golafshani, 2003). Overall, validation issues and procedures in phenomenology are similar to those in other qualitative methods in their aim to demonstrate credibility and trustworthiness. They include bracketing, investigator triangulation, and reflexivity and transparency through process notes and journaling. Explanations of these specific procedures are outlined in

the following segments. Bracketing is placed ahead of the section on research procedures, followed by the other methods for validation including an elaboration of investigator triangulation and reflexivity.

### *Bracketing Procedure*

Bracketing in phenomenology is suggested as a way of explicating assumptions and pre-existing knowledge or experience about a phenomenon. It is an attempt to set aside beliefs by stating them outright (van Manen, 1984). One does not then become empty of past knowledge, but tries to render it not influential, so that a phenomenon can present itself in its full form, and the researcher can be fully present in the situation he/she encounters (Giorgi, 1997). This is part of the so-called reduction process, or stepping back, referred to earlier. Bracketing helps us to refrain from translating an experience (van Manen, 1984) by making transparent our frame of reference that would otherwise affect the ability to identify and present something closer to its natural form.

I hold beliefs that I can only attempt to set aside when interviewing or reviewing text in the search for meaning. The reader must have this in mind when considering the text and its trustworthiness based on examples I provide from participant interviews, and the fact that I made every attempt to be as elaborate as possible about my pre-understandings. I reflected on and critically explored my pre-understandings before stating them in the dissertation. To increase rigor, I include autobiographical as well as theoretical self-disclosures.

On a personal level, I am aware that I have been influenced by the one-to-one counselling I have done with adolescents and adults, and with people working in artistic

fields. In these experiences, I observed an openness to experience, inter and intra-personal sensitivity or heightened awareness, the need to make experiences meaningful and significant in self-development and a complicated identity development process/or end result of the search for meaning. I believe these characteristics influence what appears to the outsider as emotional and behavioural conflict, and to the educator or educational institution as problematic. Indeed, it may interfere with group process or group goals, in that it parallels the individuation process. I hold a belief that creative people, as defined by self-selection into artistic activity involvement, are over-represented in the numbers of students who struggle in high school and those who are identified as being at-risk for dropping out.

In my one-to-one experiences prior to doing this research, students who struggled to complete high school, or who dropped out, particularly those who consider themselves as having been capable of success, described their high school experiences as empty and meaningless. They typically complained about the lack of personal control or choices they were given at the time. They report being de-motivated and feeling uncertain about their role in life and confused about their futures. They benefited from involvement in creative extra-curricular activities, which sometimes helped them to keep coming to school when they were ready to drop out. They spoke of the challenge of attending day to day when the outside world seemed to be teaching much more practical lessons about life. They tended to describe their experience with an unusually high level of awareness of affect, and cognitive self-reflection. This came across as a psychological maturity, although it was not clear whether this preceded their difficulties or was a result of their non-normative experiences. Many spoke about a process of self-discovery that involved

many transitions before discovering a satisfying role or self-concept. Their career and educational decision-making process was marked by many twists in the road, such as changing jobs, geographical re-locations, changing majors, etc. before finding success and satisfaction.

These experiences have been described to me in complex ways, integrating interpersonal, developmental and context variables. The adults that reflected on their experiences did not seem to express regret in their retrospective descriptions. While they elaborated their struggle and identified the conflict they experienced at the time, they seem to have been able to make sense of it later in life. It is as though time had validated their way of experiencing. As though they had finally discovered a pattern that, while at one time marginalized them, later liberated them. Dropout as it is termed seemed thus to me to be an over-simplified description of a complex experience that is an interaction of many factors. It is an interpretation that does not do justice to the component parts of the experience of struggling to fit in or complete high school, or in general, facing an obstacle and overcoming it.

In my literature review, I chose to represent theories from psychology that I felt collectively might offer a model of understanding of the experience of these students. The research method was thus also considered appropriate for the question and assumptions as bracketed here.

### *Research Procedure*

#### *Recruitment of Participants*

It was decided that professional networking through colleagues would be the most

appropriate and a recruitment poster was designed (Appendix A). Since I was looking for a phenomenological and subjective experience, I required participants to self-select based on the description on the recruitment poster with regards to having struggled to complete high school.

The sample procedure utilized has been called “purposeful” (Merriam, 1998). The strategy is nonprobabilistic since qualitative research does not aim to generalize the way statistical research might. Instead, this strategy is based on the assumption that the researcher aims to discover and gain insight into something, which justifies selecting a sample from which the most can be learned. The type of purposeful sampling I chose to follow was that of a unique sample, where atypical phenomena justify selecting special cases. In this process, the investigator first determines what criteria are essential, and why they are essential to answer the research question (Merriam, 1998), before selecting their ideal sample.

I determined that the participant must confirm that they struggled to complete high school, whether or not they ultimately graduated. This factor establishes the individual as a member of a unique or atypical group. I chose to allow participants to identify themselves and self-select, since it is their perceptions and lived experience of a phenomenon I was after, and since they must have agreed to be available for one in-person and a follow-up conversation for a total of two hours. Finally, because the methodology relies on disclosure of interview material, from a relatively unstructured interview, they had to agree to talk openly, with little questioning, about their experience in their own words and therefore this criterion was included in the recruitment poster.

A sample number was proposed originally, with the approximate number of

participants to be six people. This number was pre-selected as an average of comparable phenomenological study sample sizes. As stated by Merriam (1998) sample selection in qualitative research depends on the research question, the data and the analysis and is never clear cut at the outset of the study.

The recruitment poster was circulated among colleagues working with clients in counselling and other settings. These professionals were also encouraged to circulate the notice among personal associates. Participants contacted the researcher through her office at the Counselling and Student Development Centre at the University of Calgary with the permission of the ethics department at that university (Appendix E).

Since this study used purposeful sampling, data gathering was terminated when information was maximized. This was determined after the 7<sup>th</sup> participant, when no new evidence was being generated by interviews, and the informant's descriptions began to converge. At this point of saturation, redundancy was reached. The self-selected participants were all female. All who expressed an interest in being interviewed completed the interviews but one, a male professor in a Fine Arts Department of a Canadian university who was interested in sharing his experience but could not find the time to make an appointment. The participants ranged in age from the early 20's to late 60's.

### *Data Collection*

According to Giorgi (1997), the first step is collection of verbal data. Interviews may be used but broad and open-ended questions are required to allow participants to extensively express their viewpoints. In line with phenomenological data collection, two

interviews were planned, the initial being an open-ended discussion guided by an interview schedule (Appendix C). A second meeting was planned to check that the initial analysis involving the identification of meaning units was appropriate, according to the experiences of participants. Prior to the second meeting they were given a copy of the transcripts. They were to review the transcripts and bring up any concerns or changes at this second meeting regarding the interview and the initial analysis of meaning units.

Smith's (1995) guidelines for interviewing in qualitative research were followed in planning the meetings. According to these guidelines, the interview schedule was to be used as a guide, rather than as a dictated position of what questions to ask in what order. The establishing of rapport was to take precedence. A phenomenological position is taken in trying to enter the shoes of the participant, but one must remember to enter the world of the participant from the disciplinary lens of a researcher. The participants could introduce new issues or change the direction of the discussion when they wanted to. Questions were included in the schedule based on what I felt was important, related to my interests and assumptions.

It was planned that I would enter into a collaborative relationship (rather than neutral) with the people recruited for the study, using minimal probes and reflections where necessary to elicit information, but generally refraining from guiding the participants. Self-disclosure was not to be used and reactions to interview content was to be kept to a minimum in order to draw more accurately from the participants' own experience and to minimize influence of the researcher. Interviews were to be audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

An initial interview was completed with each participant taking an open-ended

discussion format, guided by an interview schedule (see Appendix C). Six of the interviews were conducted in my counselling office at the Counselling and Student Development Centre at the University of Calgary, with permission from their ethics department (Appendix E). One of the interviews was conducted in an arranged administrative office at York University in Toronto.

Overall, rapport took precedence and was achieved through tone of genuine caring and empathic reflection at the beginning of the interview disclosure. I maintained a phenomenological position in trying to enter the shoes of the participant, yet remembered my desire to enter their world from the disciplinary lens of the researcher. I was able to draw on my counselling ability to develop rapport and trust with the participants as I felt that these variables are essential in gaining authentic descriptions of their experiences.

Each interview was taped and transcribed verbatim. The interview schedule served as a guide but I remained open to emergent ideas and experiences, noting them down for possible revisions to the interview schedule. No revisions were made, and rarely did the researcher have to bring up subjects for interviewees to cover.

In constructing the interview schedule as per Smith's (1995) suggestions, I determined the overall issue based on the research question. I thought about a broad range of themes and questions, putting them in the most appropriate sequence. I did not need to bring up many of the themes, as the participants seemed to touch on them on their own. My background (counselling) enabled the participants to become relaxed and comfortable before speaking about more complex or difficult aspects of their experience. I monitored the participants' responses and reactions to the questions, to ensure I was

being sensitive to emotional issues that might have arisen. A few times participants became emotional in remembering past struggles. I used empathic, validating and normalizing statements to put them at ease and to re-orient them to the research interview. This did not seem to be a challenge as the participants were open, verbal, and seemed comfortable for the most part.

Although most of the participants were verbal and disclosing and needed little to continue their stories, one participant was less open and seemed to have a hard time remembering or coming up with details. Once that was empathically reflected to her, and a short disclosure was made about some of the general issues that were brought up by other participants, this participant was more at ease and more rich in her descriptions. Overall, minimal probes were used and including this participant described here, most were forthcoming. The researcher, in line with the protocol, made every effort not to guide the participants. There was no change in the focus of the interviews with excessive self-disclosure, or shared short anecdotes to initiate rapport building. However, these tools were used after the interview to debrief with participants. The stance towards the interviewee was collegial, whereas the response to the interview content was neutral until after the interview was over.

A second meeting was planned to check that the initial analysis involving the identification of meaning units was appropriate, according to their experiences. All of the participants chose to review the transcripts on their own prior to our discussion. None of the seven participants had any concerns or changes about this step in the process. Several of the participants seemed eager to meet, and demonstrated an interest in re-visiting the topic, which at the time I was hesitant to do, given the protocol of the chosen

methodology. Out of respect for the participants, I allowed them to share their perspectives if they emerged in the conversations, but I reflected minimally to discourage elaboration of post-hoc analysis on their own original stories they shared.

During these second meetings, some participants commented on the research process. Three of the seven indicated that reading their transcripts was an embarrassing experience. They felt they had been tangential or excessive in their disclosure. I reassured them that we never speak as we read and write, and that they were not alone in that feeling. I also assured them that they had shared valuable material. Two of the participants wanted to talk about their present struggles as they relate to past experiences they had shared with me. I worked to clarify and maintain my role as a researcher since my role as counsellor at the university might have been encouraging additional, non-research-related disclosure. One participant, who was a university student, asked if she could see me as a counsellor. I carefully explained the reasons that would not be beneficial to her related to the role I had when I met her, and my purpose with her as a researcher, clarifying the ethics. She understood and accepted referrals to other resources in the Centre, as well as in the community. I shared those resources with other participants who indicated in their interview overtly or otherwise that they were still being affected by factors related to their high school experience.

### *Data Analysis*

Regarding the analysis of the data, Giorgi (1997) indicates that the process should be reflexive and made explicit. For this reason, process notes that I wrote while carrying out the procedures and analysing the data were journalled and will be shared in this

chapter in the section on trustworthiness procedures. In this way, a credibility procedure was interwoven with the data analysis. Giorgi's steps for phenomenological analysis were followed, along with more elaborate procedures for thematic analysis as outlined by Colaizzi (1978) and van Manen (1984).

The first step of the process of data analysis following the data collection is a holistic read through before analysis begins to retain a global sense of the data. At that time, no themes or categories are to be formed. All the data were read through several times before analysis began. I chose to transcribe them myself to consolidate my memory of their content. While the forming of the themes did not occur at that time, I began to feel that categories would emerge without much effort on my part to explicate them. I journalled this response, but did refrain from elaborating on specific categories at that time.

The second step involves going through the text to identify parts known as meaning units. This part of the process pre-supposes that one will be sensitive to the phenomenon being investigated, according to his/her discipline, marking parts to revisit for clarification. The meaning units are not thought to exist in the text itself but are constituted by the view of the researcher who uses, in this case, psychological criterion to discriminate the units. At this point, they remain in their original text form. Important in this step is to adopt a discovery oriented attitude rather than looking for evidence for the presence or absence of a specific pre-determined criterion as in a positivistic empirical paradigm. These are parts of anecdotes that have a certain meaning that is to be clarified later. The meaning units emerge from a slower reading, and were to be marked in the text as places to revisit.

In the third step, data is organized into disciplinary language. Meaning units are probed and examined, then re-described to make their value to the discipline more explicit. This requires “free imaginative variation” (Giorgi, 1997, p.7) where a participant’s everyday language, which is considered pre-scientific and pre-theoretical, is transformed in writing. I chose to keep the participants’ language as intact as possible, with some editing for conciseness and clarity, and labelled each meaning unit with a theme statement in disciplinary language. This decision was made to remain faithful to the original data in order to maximize the utility of the investigator triangulation check for trustworthiness (following section). It is recommended that in this stage, researchers do not intentionally impose a disciplinary perspective, but researchers can not differentiate themselves from their theoretical orientation, or their purpose for the study. Thorough record keeping about this process was kept as I reflected on the analysis. The units were examined, probed, and described to make the thematic value more explicit.

Expressing the structure of a phenomenon requires a similar transformation of meaning units to determine which are essential and which are not. The raw data were continually used to check the rendering for appropriateness to the question. The method as outlined by Giorgi (1997) advises the researcher to attempt to derive a synthesis for all participants’ but never to force a single structure if one is not emerging. He compares this synthesis to a measure of central tendency in statistics, as an expression of how a phenomenon converges. One reads the text several times looking for phrases that seem essential or revealing about the experience and underlines or highlights, or alternatively looks at every sentence to examine what it reveals about the question being asked. At this point, themes may be expressed in language transformed for more evocative or

descriptive meaning. One must also determine which essential themes will be chosen to describe the phenomenon based on where the descriptions for divergent sources converge. Themes are dropped, added and reformulated. This process can involve participants in a collaborative effort to evaluate the themes, however as argued by Giorgi (1997), that procedure is better suited to philosophical phenomenology. For that reason it was not used in this study. Giorgi (1983) explains that discovering meanings required reflection from a psychological perspective and for the purpose of research it is a process best left to the researcher.

Giorgi (1997) did not elaborate much more on specific procedures for expression of the data into a thematic structure. In describing the practice of phenomenological writing, van Manen (1984) describes themes. One does not attempt to form concepts or categorical statements but instead develops thematic statements. He explains that a single statement does not fully express an experience. A theme in phenomenology is more like a description that alludes to an aspect of a phenomenon. Van Manen (1990) further explains that phenomenological themes are experiential structures but not categorical statements as they are not able to truly capture lived experience. They are simply a means to get at something that we are trying to address and in doing so, they help organize and control the research and writing. They serve as a tool to focus the meaning of a lived experience. They come about out of a desire to make sense and of having an essential openness to the experience. A theme is a “process of insightful invention, discovery, disclosure”(p. 88). A theme is further an “interpretive product” (p. 88) and is always to be considered a reduction of meaning from the original experience.

In terms of determining these essential themes, van Manen (1984) suggests that

the initial thematic statements be reflected on in dialogic conversations with the participants. Van Manen (1990) also reflects hermeneutic ideas related to more philosophical explorations of meaning. Again, since the purpose is not a philosophical examination but a psychological investigation, returning to the participants was not part of the procedure. For this reason, I turned to Colaizzi (1978) for procedural direction on forming essential themes.

First, each meaning unit that I determined was essential to the subject was given its own thematic label in disciplinary language. The text was placed on an index card and the thematic label was attached. I did this prior to beginning the analysis of thematic categories. Colaizzi (1978) outlined procedures but also indicated that they may be modified depending on the approach of the researcher and the phenomenon being studied. Colaizzi suggest allowing the data to speak for itself while clustering themes based on the formulated meanings, the disciplinary label or descriptions assigned to the meaning segments. In this step of the process, the researcher attempts to allow for themes to emerge that are common to all of the participants' protocols, "leaping from what is given in the meanings to themes given with them" (p. 59). One then refers these clusters back to the original protocols to validate them by checking to see if there was anything left out or adding in that does not correspond to the original data. It is incumbent on the researcher to "refuse the temptations of ignoring data or themes which don't fit, or of prematurely generating a theory which would merely conceptually abstractly eliminate the discordance of his findings thus far" (p. 61).

In formulating these aggregate thematic categories, I went back to the original transcripts as well as the collection of units, which I neatly filed into a recipe box to be

able to move them around. I checked and re-checked several times to ensure each unit belonged meaningfully in the group it was clustered into. In this process, the number of thematic categories expanded once, and was condensed twice, until a final eleven seemed to capture the meanings as they were clustered together. In addition, I created a “Before and After” category with units that described experiences prior to struggling, and later in life, after the struggle. I felt it would be valuable in contextualizing the struggle in the final story. As well, it allowed me to stay close to the original data in writing the narrative. There was little confusion, despite having not yet labelled and described the thematic categories themselves.

Providing a name and description for the categories also came after immersing myself in the data several times more. I named each thematic category and provided a descriptive key to that category before beginning the process of writing an essential unified narrative. The names for the categories consolidated their contents, incorporated my understandings, and were sensitive to the literature in my discipline. Prior to writing the narrative, the procedures for reliability and validity were followed as outlined in later section of this chapter.

### *Data Presentation*

In discussing the process of writing a phenomenology, van Manen (1984) provides several alternatives. I chose to write the results in a format he describes as analytical. This analytical writing is considered a deeper approach than simple thematic presentation. It may start with a common situation to show how, for example, the experience is ill understood or how accepted notions of the experience do not reveal an

understanding of the phenomenon. One can reflectively demonstrate how themes emerge from considering the descriptions. van Manen (1990) argues that anecdotes are valuable in such writing for a number of reasons, including that they “force us to search out the relations between living and thinking, between situation and reflection” (p. 119).

Anecdotes teach, and they show how life and theory are connected. An anecdotal narrative calls attention, leads one to reflect, involves one personally in the search for meaning, transforms and challenges the reader’s own interpretive sense-making ability.

In the results chapter, the keys to the thematic categories are provided in disciplinary language. A common narrative is then be presented, written in an analytic thematic structure to describe the experience of high school from the perspective of those who struggle. Anecdotes are provided for each thematic category, selected for their evocative quality, as well as their ability to represent the core meaning structure of their respective category. As per van Manen (1990), varying anecdotes may be used to represent the aspect of the phenomenon that varies. The narrative is based on the stories of the participants and the researcher’s understandings formed from an analysis of the meaning units, thematic interpretation and categories. The story will serve as a deep description of the experience of high school as it is lived by those who struggle to complete. A summary integrates the thematic categories.

This integrated narrative presentation of themes attempts to represent the essence of the experience, related to the research question and purpose of the study. The themes should help to illuminate the invariant elements of the experience. The discussion of results involves a return to the literature to determine whether they confirmed existing knowledge, and to see if any new information was provided. At this point the pre-

understandings based on my personal experiences and on experiences of talking to people about high school are re-visited. Conclusions will not be drawn. Instead, a discussion related to the exploration, identification and communication of the essence of the experience is written integrating the literature surveyed. The reader will determine what can be said or known from the phenomenology in terms of a more sophisticated understanding of the lived experience. The aim is not to conclude, but to reduce, synthesize and symbolize.

### *Trustworthiness/Validation Procedures*

Investigator triangulation was used. The research process was reflexive and journal writing was used extensively to provide an audit trail of the research process. Selected entries and emergent thoughts are shared in the section following the results of investigator triangulation on reflexivity. Thoughts on bracketing and its utility are also shared in that section.

### *Investigator Triangulation*

Investigator triangulation is a typical test for reliability and validity of findings in qualitative research (Golafshani, 2003). Two tests involving investigator triangulation were used in this study. In the first test, two counselling professionals with experience in qualitative research were asked to participate. They were asked to verify and validate the data analysis by reviewing two original transcripts, the themes that were identified in the meaning units, and the categories, as well as the interpretive descriptions that they became a part of. They were to answer the questions

- a) In what ways to you think the transcripts, the themes of the lived experience and the categories were connected to each other?
- b) In what ways to you think they were not connected?
- c) What struck you about the transcripts that may have been left out? and
- d) Any thoughts, questions, or suggestions?

This triangulation process ensures that the logic of inquiry is followed and kept explicit. Checking with others in this manner ensures that the participants' shared stories are not overly influenced by the researcher's interpretations.

Dr. J.J. Miles, Clinical Psychologist at the University of Calgary Counselling and Student Development Centre, and Cheryl LeSergent, a Ph.D. student in Counselling Psychology at the University of Calgary, Alberta, volunteered to assist in verifying and validating my research process. They reviewed segments of two original transcripts, and the themes that were identified in the meaning units, as well as the categories and their interpretive descriptions that they became a part of. They were asked in ways they thought the transcripts, the themes of the lived experience and the categories were connected to each other. To answer the first question, both indicated that there was clarity in the linking of the original transcript material with the themes and categories.

They answered a second question asking in what ways the transcripts, themes and categories were not connected. Dr. J.J. Miles indicated that he would have preferred more specific categories that provided emotional interpretations rather than descriptive content. He acknowledged that his preference reflected his work as a clinician and tendency to

interpret emotionality and intent that an individual might be “attempting to communicate”. He confirmed that the categories did reflect the content of each segment that he was given. Cheryl LeSergent confirmed that she felt they were linked and not lacking connection in any way.

The third question asking what struck them that might have been left out provoked some interesting responses. Dr. J.J. Miles indicated that he assumed the individuals came from “emotionally chaotic backgrounds” and that the emotion could have been addressed more in the interviews; however, he acknowledged the limitations of the methodology that aims not to interpret but to describe and to investigate rather than to help. Cheryl LeSergent commented on what she saw as a theme of a “lack of support from anything linked to the school system itself” and that the stories reflect a difference from the societal norm that “everyone likes school and all students succeed”.

Finally, they were asked to add any thoughts, questions or suggestions. Dr. J.J. Miles did not offer a final comment. Cheryl LeSergent wrote the following:

“Shirley, does your research portray the fact that schools really do not suit the average individual and that the patriarchal thinking linked to the so-called ‘school-system’ must be rooted out and gotten rid of? (Just a thought!!) I also see that the themes and categories have transformed the lived experience into scientific data without destroying the richness of the story. The researcher has made meaning from the student’s meaning of their school experience – this is the wonderful experience of qualitative research.”

### *Post-hoc Investigator Triangulation*

Once the initial analysis was underway, this additional test using triangulated investigators was designed to examine both the process and product of the research for consistency (Hoepfl, 1997, cited in Golafshani, 2003). The aim of this analysis was to examine the raw data against reduction products and process notes to verify the consistency (Campbell, 1996, cited in Golafshani, 2003). Two additional counselling professionals were asked to review a selection of meaning units and file them in their categories.

Caroline Neill, Ph.D. Candidate in Counselling Psychology and Counselling Doctoral Intern at the University of Calgary Counselling and Student Development Centre, and Dr. Vivian Lalande, Counselling Psychologist and Researcher reviewed 12% (23/189) of the meaning units and were asked to file them in the categories to check for agreement. They were provided with the units that had been slightly edited from the participants' own language, typed onto index cards. Envelopes were provided pasted with the category names along with related sections of descriptive narrative from the integrated story that I was working on. They were not provided with my perspective on how the emergent categories were discreet, or with the thematic labels that reflected my disciplinary lens. For me, this decision was about trying to be descriptive rather than interpretive. As well, this decision was made to allow the co-investigators to examine the data close to its given form.

This created problems for these co-investigators in the process, since some of the narrative descriptions included linking sentences to previous categories in the emerging

unified story. Since it was segments of a unified narrative, the segments were not clear enough in isolation. They articulated these difficulties as they were filing their meaning units. I encouraged them to rely on the titles of the categories in their process of filing. I also explained my rationale for not providing them with the discreet, interpretive category descriptions. However, their feedback was very useful, and I regretted making this decision. Both suggested that since I inherently knew what variables and contexts made the categories more discreet, I should share them. For this reason I offered verbal explanation on how the categories were discreet.

Despite the difficulty that this choice raised, they were able to collectively file 41 out of 46 cards (89%). Eighteen of the 23 cards (79%) were agreed on exactly by both of the researchers conducting this check. I checked the cards that were filed differently from my own, and could clearly see the overlapping content that would have allowed them to be filed where these co-investigators filed them. I could see that my choice in that instance had been related to my knowledge of the context of the meaning unit, having been immersed in the data. The researchers were careful and thoughtful in their process and their filing made sense, considering that the descriptions were not helping them to understand the discreet nature of the categories. One misfiled meaning unit was:

“I just remember feeling very isolated and not in school a lot...I took all the isolation, the segregation and all the ridicule and blame, I just took it all on myself. And literally, as a teenager, I remember just shutting down, just feeling like exhausted all the time”.

This unit, in the context of the interview was clearly about feeling isolated and segregated from the school system. The student had external problems and was being blamed, then felt rejected and misunderstood. Essentially, she was alienated because she wasn't performing as per expectations. The category it was to be filed into was "Belonging vs. Alienation". Where the co-investigators placed it was in the category "Negative Judgements". It is not clear whether this was related to the difficulty the checkers had with the descriptions, which were narrative based and had linking statements that did not help with clarity. It is possible that the co-investigator was considering my verbal explanations. I had explained that the negative judgements were from others or about the self as in when the subject said "...I took all the isolation, the segregation and all the ridicule and blame, I just took it all on myself...". In this example it is obvious that overlapping content could also confuse someone without knowledge of the context and a broad view of the data overall. Perhaps the holistic read-through that is required prior to analysis is related to this issue.

By splitting the analysis of the material and checking with others, I ensured that the logic of inquiry was followed and kept explicit, and that the participants' stories were not unduly or overly influenced by my interpretation. However, it is clear that the validity of the researcher's interpretation in phenomenology is related to the thorough procedures for data analysis that were followed. The question of the type and use of validation procedures in this method of qualitative investigation can not be answered here.

Personally and qualitatively, this was an important learning for me as a researcher. I recognized that my being immersed in the data, having studied the topic,

having been part of the interviews, having looked over the transcripts so many times was truly enabling a clearer understanding of what the participants were sharing. In addition, I developed a greater trust in the qualitative process.

### *Reflexivity/Journaling*

It behooves the phenomenological researcher to not only bracket assumptions by stating them as I will in the following section of text, but to keep track of their influence in the steps followed in the investigations. To keep track of the research process and to establish an audit trail, reactions, thoughts, and changes were recorded in the research journal and essential entries are shared here. Questions, concerns or conflicts were monitored, journalled, and considered at all points in the data analysis. Consultation was sought and the thoughts and reactions to those meetings were also journalled. Personal notes kept regarding any potential reaction to the participants and to be reviewed during the data collection, analysis and writing process.

I kept track of my thought process and any assumptions and interpretations of the material as they emerged. I documented emergent understanding of co-created meanings. I include my thoughts where I believed they might have influenced my data gathering and analysis process to increase transparency of the research process and strengthen trustworthiness.

Although I attempted to bracket my assumptions by explicating presuppositions, I also elaborated on hypothesis I held, stemming from a combination of literature I have explored in the psychology of the Self, Creativity, Self-Determination, Identity, as well as from personal experiences. I did not believe I could truly render my ideas non-influential

but felt that I needed to attempt to do so at minimum by being as explicit as possible. I articulated the presuppositions and hypotheses. I provided a literature review highlighting previous research findings that have been important in the formulation of my hunches.

The pre-understandings that I held were elaborated on in proposing this research to explain why I wanted to know from the adults' view what is the essence of their experience of high school. I wished not to interpret and hoped to illuminate the essence of the experience. Retrospectively, I realize that this aim was lofty, given my pre-understandings and own meaning-making process from my personal and research experiences.

I realize that coming from a psychological background, and writing for the psychological discipline leads as well to the imposing of some kind of disciplinary filter on the original experience. My assumptions as stated indicate an implicit hypothesis that the experience of the phenomenon is unique to certain kinds of people, perhaps creative people or emotionally sensitive people. I believe that there are individual differences in the need to make meaning personal.

In the process of explicating my assumptions, I found myself compelled to use existing literature to elaborate on ideas I held which might influence an interpretation of the lived experience of others. In my own learning and experience, I had developed intrinsic theoretical ideas that explained the at-times atheoretical findings in educational and sociological research on the issue of dropping out, which I had been able to review thoroughly for my Master's study. The literature review in this study therefore went beyond explicating my assumptions in order to bracket them. Somehow, I intuitively

sensed that it would be difficult to truly “bracket” my ideas in the process of gathering data and analysing it to be able to see it as it truly is. However, the texts on phenomenology that I had read thus far seemed to be indicating that this was required, and sufficient. Therefore, I proceeded as planned.

After gathering the information from interviews, I discussed with a supervisor at my internship an experience I had in reviewing transcriptions in the process of breaking text into meaning units. I explained to her that I was concerned that the process of breaking things into parts then consolidating them into a whole felt risky. I worried that the process might strip the rich and meaningful context I was experiencing in reviewing the stories as a whole, in the context of details of the participants’ lives. She handed me a paper she had written explicating the differences between phenomenology and Hermeneutic phenomenology that had an impact on my thinking (Lavery, 2003).

In reading Lavery (2003), I discovered some ideas that resonated with my experience as outlined above. As outlined by Koch (1995), Heidegger emphasized how a person’s history or background influenced how one understands the world. Interpretation is seen as critical, in that every encounter involves an interpretation influenced by a person’s background (Heidegger, 1927/1962). In line with these ideas, Gadamer viewed bracketing as impossible and interpretation as always present and evolving (Annells, 1996) so that a person can not leave their situation in the present by simply adopting an attitude (Gadamer, 1976). Hermeneutic research, I learned, is necessarily interpretive and concentrates on the historical meanings of experience and their effects on people individually and socially. It focuses, according to Allen (1995), on meaning arising from an interpretive interaction. Phenomenological research, alternatively, is descriptive and

aims at structuring experience, giving it form and meaning, making the invisible visible (Kvale, 1996; Osborne, 1994; Polkinghorn, 1983). Methodologically, while a phenomenological study requires a preparation phase of writing down biases and assumptions to bracket them, a hermeneutic approach requires self-reflection as a continued endeavour throughout the research on how their own experience is related to the issues being researched.

I believe that in my literature review and integration, with its psychological explanation of empirical atheoretical results, I resonated with hermeneutical ideas without knowing it. As well, in my experience of the data, and my resistance in the process of breaking down parts of the text into individual units of meaning, I was experiencing something in line with hermeneutical thoughts on phenomenology.

I was disappointed to read in Lavery (2003) that hermeneutic phenomenology requires an approach to data analysis involving participants in an ongoing circle of meaning-making, and likely several meetings in order to do so. I had already completed my data gathering according to what I had proposed and what had been accepted by my ethics department, that involved only two meetings with participants, who themselves had also agreed to just that. Changes to align the research with hermeneutic phenomenology would require a methodological overhaul and a re-submission of ethics for consent in two separate universities, and an amended agreement with 7 participants. So how could I proceed and still be true to what I had read and what had resonated with me?

In reflecting on the aim of the research, I could not see any conflicts between what I had set out to do, and what understandings had emerged for me in exploring

hermeneutics, other than the already stated unusual inclusion of the expansive literature synthesis. The aim of this research was to create a phenomenological text. This text would describe and edify an experience using anecdotes as a way to deepen the significance of the lived experience. It was understood that the description would be elaborate and sophisticated when it was able to reflect the experience of the phenomenon itself in the writing. Ideally, it would be an approximation of the experience, allowing the reader to feel they agree about the sense of the experience (Agar, 1996). This type of writing requires a style that is unlike other techniques, as it requires responsive reading and demands writing and re-writing, to promote and reflect sensitivity to the phenomenon being studied (van Manen, 1990). The final description at the end of this study was to illustrate the lived experience of high school from the perspective of the student who struggles to complete. As such, it aimed to capture the invariant elements of the experience, approaching a depiction of the essence of it. The rich description based on the interviews I was able to conduct will attempt to re-voke the experience for the reader.

The aim of the original methodology was not to interpret and only to describe. As explained, I believe that meaning arose from the interpretive interaction that seemed to take place despite the focus on gathering information for description alone. Although the interviews were open-ended and I reflected as little as possible, at times I reflected back meanings and I selectively clarified statements. After the tapes were shut off, I shared my experience with interviewees and some information about the experience that I was already aware of from previous reading. They spoke to me about their understanding, post-hoc, of the experience of struggling in high school during these required debriefing

moments. This minimal, albeit significant interaction happened and I feel it must have influenced at least my understanding of the material and affected somehow the themes I would later look for. For the interviewees, the process of reading their interview transcripts and reviewing meaning units seemed to provoke more of an emotional reaction than any comments at all on the accuracy of my analytical process.

During the second meetings which were aimed at clarification of process only, interviewees seemed interested in discussing the content of the interviews, which I had to resist somewhat to stay focused on outlined procedures. I do not feel that the method protocol was compromised, but I feel that the final text, even in my selection of evocative statements will involve some interpretation. Since the experience is one I myself went through, I feel that completing the research in this way demonstrates trustworthiness through honesty, and adds vigour as well as rigor to the final product. Since the outset of data analysis, I have also kept a reflective journal of decisions, reactions, and emerging interpretations.

Personal notes were also kept regarding reactions to participants. These will not be included here, but were reviewed during the data collection, analysis and writing process. In my notes on the rationale and criterion for identifying units and developing themes, which I used to facilitate reflexivity and transparency, I wrote about my struggles with that stage of analysis. I found that without thinking of what the point or meaning of that unit was, I did not feel confident in my accuracy or the utility of the step of discriminating meaning units. I consulted with a colleague who is familiar with this process, and she shared my experience of it. She felt it was an unnecessary step. When participants returned their transcripts, not one change or question was made to my

meaning unit explication. I wondered if perhaps they too did not understand the point or utility of this? I furthermore found that when I became involved in the next step, this earlier meaning unit elaboration was not as useful as it should have been. I wrote

“I feel uncomfortable after clarifying the meaning units with the participants, because at times it seems I need to merge a few in order to condense and identify the theme. It makes intuitive sense to me that checking with participants should have been set up for after the condensation of units into themes, to check the appropriateness of the label of the theme to the participant. However, I am aware of my own rationale and that in the literature, that I am seeing these through my psychological lens and that might not make sense to the participant. I will keep the units as much as I can in their natural form. I have consulted with a colleague who is familiar with this process. She says I should edit as minimally as possible, just cutting out repeats or digressions. I feel relieved. The themes or labels, I am not so sure about. Will they come together into categories? I cannot think of the categories while I do this. I have to do this step without thinking of the next one.”

When immersed in the data and attempting to begin to form categories, I procrastinated. I experienced a block and a fear that I couldn't do it. I wrote “I don't know if I will be able to do this. It seems onerous. I can shuffle these units around forever and not come up with categories that make sense. Maybe it won't

come together.” I worried that I would not be able to do justice to the richness of their stories if I cut them up into pieces, shuffled them around, and made my own categories. I struggled with the idea of changing methodologies. Then I read more about Narrative Analysis, and saw that it would involve elaborating on the ideas and more interpretation than I was comfortable with. I wanted the original meanings of the participants to be understood as clearly as possible by myself and communicated as clearly and accurately as possible. How could one unified story emerge? Somehow writing out these fears helped me to get back to the task of organizing units into categories, and it was easier than I thought.

“I guess I somehow, maybe in the back of my mind, have made sense of all this. It didn’t take as long as I thought, and was much clearer than I feared. It looks like I have the units organized, and the categories are making sense! What shall I call them?”

I was able to see the factors emerging out of the data and the cards with meaning units glued on did not seem to overlap in any way that threatened the integrity of the process. Although some units shared meanings with other emergent categories, I was familiar with their context. I could remember the entire interview, the person being interviewed, and the card’s place made sense. I felt hopeful and confident in the research process.

Naming the categories raised anxiety. Again I worried I would not be able to do justice to the meaning. Again I was surprised at my experience with the data and how it

enabled me to label the categories in a way that elaborated on the meanings of the clustered units, yet summarized the content of the categories.

### *Ethical Considerations*

In order to maintain confidentiality, no identifying information about the participants is revealed in this study. I knew two of the participants through shared acquaintances. They were aware of my identity when they contacted me to participate. Confidentiality was discussed and they were offered a chance to opt out of the study. They were given a chance to discuss any concerns or questions prior to commencing participation and they were invited to continue discussing any concerns or questions after the interviews. Trust was communicated and neither of the participants chose to terminate their participation. Since I was not close to these participants, I had no previous knowledge of their struggles and felt that my acquaintance with them did not bias me. I also journalled my experience of them in these discussions and feel confident that since I am not close to them, and they expressed trust in me, and eagerness to participate, that I was behaving appropriately and ethically in allowing them to participate. I had acted respectfully in indicating to them the risk and possibility of their own discomfort in disclosure and afterwards, and had trusted their ability to make a decision to participate or withdraw.

Participants were reassured that nothing they shared in the interview will be used in any other context, with any identifying information. Only the elements of their experience that illuminated the essence of it were to be used. Contextual variables that potentially identify participants will be omitted as much as possible. No particular

identifying variables were considered by the researcher to be crucial, thus it was not necessary to consult with participants as planned regarding the inclusion of the variables.

Participants were invited to withdraw from the study at any time they might want to. At the start of the interview, participants were given this information, and also informed of an additional risk. They were told that disclosing this information might bring up emotions they did not anticipate, and offered an opportunity to de-brief with me after the interview, if they felt they required it. A list of referral sources to counselling services in the community was provided, and the participants were encouraged to call a counsellor if they felt it was appropriate. In an informal debriefing conversation, participants were told that it is not unusual to feel disturbing emotions after discussing experiences of challenge or struggle, and they were encouraged to follow up with the referral. Ethical approval was sought and obtained by the appropriate channels at UBC for research involving human subjects and by the University of Calgary ethics board for use of an office on their campus. The protocol for participation was followed as per the information letter and consent form (Appendix B).

## Chapter 4: Results

The following segment is a key to the common themes. It is my explanation of the categories and what makes them different from one another. In line with Phenomenological Methodology, what follows is a story, broken into categories extracted from participants' accounts of their experience of struggle in high school, with vivid examples taken from interviews. The categories are titled and integrated into the story. Little interpretation is offered or infused into the story, as a discussion will follow in the next chapter that allows for a more hermeneutic approach. A summary is provided that illuminates some of my own understanding and questions that emerged in the process of writing this story. Trustworthiness of the story will be revealed in the ability of the writing to engage you and its success in helping you imagine the experience from your own perspective, hopefully bringing you closer to the perspective of students who struggle in high school.

### *Key to Common Themes*

Eleven common themes emerged from participants' accounts of their experiences struggling in high school. These themes were confirmed and refined based on validation procedures including triangulated investigators. The themes that emerged reveal the essence of a complex experience that is often multi-faceted and emotional. The themes were

*1. Emotional/Family Issues.* This category synthesized anecdotes shared about home-based struggles, such as abuse, alcoholism, deaths, depression, or lack of support

and neglect. It excluded negative judgements about school ability or career goals.

2. *School-Based Fear and Anxiety*. This category emerged out of a synthesis of mentions of school-based fear or perceived pressure of a specific topic or of performance in general. (It included test anxiety and thus may be hypothesized as an unidentified learning problem.)

3. *Academic Problems*. This category was composed of behavioural descriptions of failure to perform, including poor study habits, skipping, handing in assignments late, falling behind, missing or failing exams, and getting poor grades. It excluded intra-personal descriptions of the meaning behind these problems.

4. *Negative Judgements*. This category was made up of reports of being blamed and criticized, and sometimes of internalization of those criticisms. It was distinct from general pre and co-existing family and emotional problems. It was about being directly blamed for failure and reflected a lack of understanding.

5. *Interest vs. Disengagement*. These were comments about being engaged in one's own academic development, wanting to be there, being interested in the material being taught or the opposite, being bored, wanting to get it over with or escape altogether.

6. *Choice/Autonomy*. Support of independence and individuality by freedom and ability to learn what and how one wanted was the main crux of this category. While it may be theoretically linked to being interested or engaged, and is in the control of teachers for the most part, these comments were specifically about feeling and being free and having choices, and not about teachers per se.

7. *Future Goals/School-to-work Transition*. This category represented experiences during the struggle that related to thinking about and planning a future after school. Clarity or lack thereof about what would come afterwards, and/or freedom in making such plans was the focus.

8. *Alienation/Belonging*. This category represented comments about identity and belonging in the institution and in the social world. It included comments about fitting in, being included, accepted and supported or conversely being rejected, or like one could not be or express one's essential self. It was not about autonomy with regards to choice of curriculum, although it is arguably overlapping.

9. *Peer Influence*. This category represented a synthesis of comments about friends having a direct positive or negative influence on school performance rather than on a sense of belonging or otherwise.

10. *Teacher Influence*. Experiences with teachers and other school personnel having positive or negative impact on motivation, performance, belonging and otherwise

composed this category. Comments were predominantly about teachers supporting autonomy and inspiring learning or conversely of being controlling. While overlapping, the category is distinct from comments on autonomy in general as it includes specific emphasis on perceptions of good and bad teaching.

*11. Participation in Arts and Sports.* Any comments about being interested in, participating in, achieving in, or missing one's connection to the arts and sports were included. While some units were related to engagement, that was directly attributed to ability to access participation in the arts and sports.

The themes, highlighted with quotations from participants are elaborated in the following section that is written as an integrated narrative.

*The Experience of Struggle in High School: An Integrated Narrative*

Many life experiences have the potential to interfere with the human drive to learn, to grow, to develop normally. For the majority of people, high school is a pleasurable time of learning about one's interests, and achieving academically, and even negotiating their identity and belonging. For some, unfortunately, high school years are a time of struggle, where academic and/or developmental needs are not met. Even for those who might have been on a normal path, and for some who have been on an exceptional path of recognition and achieving accolades, high school years can be marked by struggle. This is a story of the experience of struggling in high school. Its not about the cause or the cure, although some variables described might suggest things that

could positively or negatively influence the experience of high school for those who struggle.

### *Prior to Struggling*

People who struggle in high school come from diverse backgrounds, ranging from those with a history of personal and/or academic problems to those who are high achievers. One participant told me of a prior experience of herself that was much more esteemed than her memories of high school where she ended up moving from school to school, and having to do extra semesters and courses before eventually graduating. She said "...coming into high school...I was thought of as very bright, very smart. I did very well in school...I had a lot of confidence in who I was."

One participant shared that before high school she had an intellectual assessment and was told she had an extremely high I.Q. She got to participate in a special program for gifted students. Yet another participant was identified as a gifted student and went to a special high school. For others, their prior school history was pleasantly unremarkable. For all, however, during high school, struggle began. Sometimes an obvious precipitating prior event occurred like when this student's learning needs were more advanced than her age:

They told me I was going to die...I went and lived in the hospital for a year...so the teacher would come and I had private classes for an entire year...then went back to school and by this time I was so far in front...they didn't know where to put me. So they said, well, we have to put her ahead at least one year...I would

get so upset in class that I would start shaking because I would get so frustrated. Because I wanted to learn something.

This person was not able to adjust after the chaos she had known so well at home came to an end. The rest of the world seemed to be getting on with their lives, business as usually but she felt stuck:

Prior to when everything collapsed, my father had been sick with cancer at home. Prior to that he was a pretty violent alcoholic. So from seven to eleven was pretty crazy. There was a real shift after he passed away. I seemed to be able to perform for all those years of his kind of craziness, I guess. But after he died that is when it seemed like I was just not able to.

### *Emotional/Family Issues*

Sometimes a not-so-obvious impactful experience co-existed at the time of struggle. These could be family or emotional problems, or emotional problems related to family issues. This participant talked about how she suffered from later-diagnosed depression without anyone knowing:

The majority of time that I was absent I was at home sleeping. I was really quite depressed throughout high school. I wasn't out partying or having fun, it was a real major emotional struggle I was going through. I wasn't abusive in any way, I didn't have major attitudinal problems.

Yet another revealed a disturbing level of violence in her home:

My mom...she was also a maniac. And very difficult to live with. But still, to this day, if someone were to say something, she protects me...she had children when she was 19. She was an artist. She couldn't do what she wanted to do so...I was a trouble child, a trouble child for her. So, um, she....she used to almost kill me. Like beat the shit out of me.

It is not uncommon for those who experience struggle at this time to perceive that they do not have any support for their emotions, or any family support. It seems that despite this, they seem to understand the perspective of those who were not able to attend to their needs. Family and emotional problems made the struggle in high school more unbearable as it left a person feeling totally alone:

All through elementary and high school I went to counselling....because my parents divorced when I was very young and...my mom was so busy, because we moved to Vancouver just the two of us...she had to work to take care of me...so she never really had much time to spend with me.

Another showed insight into her mother's struggle, who she perceived was not able to see her own struggle, a role reversal that left her without emotional needs met:

My mother struggled so much. They were both immigrants, and she was left with nothing. Her whole existence was just trying to stay afloat financially. She was gone all the time...from morning until night...I remember feeling that she could just, after the death and all that, she could just get on with it, and I couldn't. And without being maliciously intentional she was extremely neglectful. For myself during those years...I was by myself.

### *School-Related Fear and Anxiety*

Students who struggle in high school sometimes also have perceptions or misperceptions about their school abilities and pressure to perform, coping silently with fear and anxiety. Despite having always had good grades that seemed to her to come easily, this participant remembered caving under her sense of pressure to do well:

In my school where a lot of the students are really gifted and really talented there is a lot drive to do well and continue your education and go on. Or maybe it was just the group of kids that I was with. Everyone was trying to go on to university and trying to do really well and I don't know...there is a lot of pressure to succeed there...so...I am not one to be pressured.

Another talked about expectations that were never overtly stated. Perhaps they entered her mind from elsewhere?

It was a lot tougher than before. People had very very high expectations.

Anything less than an A would be considered to be failing...they were all very high achievers. It was very tough. Very very tough in the beginning.

### *Academic Problems*

Often the first overt signs of struggle are behavioural problems, particularly those that interfere with conforming to group norms. Skipping classes, taking the minimal or less than the minimal amount of classes necessary to graduate and having a hard time getting homework done were mentioned. Seemingly poor study habits at times also seemed to contribute to the struggle to stay on top of things. Falling behind and feeling hopeless about catching up is was a very common issue for one reason or another. Experiences of difficulties with learning were not followed by reports of being assessed for learning disabilities, or with any understanding of the strengths and challenges of distinct learning styles. A range of academic problems was experienced. These people couldn't catch up:

I just was not able to perform in my school tasks. It ended up becoming a fight to try to do the work.

I hadn't been attending my classes. My school semester was composed of very easy courses so I was able to kind of get through them, get by. My second semester I had four courses which were all diploma exam courses and basically, apart from English, I failed them...attendance would have been one reason.

Others talked about difficulty focusing or concentrating. They were not assessed for learning problems. Maybe they had other things going on? There was a hint of responsibility taking, maybe even self-blame in their description of academic problems:

I have a very hard time concentrating. Anything that goes by or if in the corner of my eye I catch anything moving it disturbs my concentration...it was hard to initiate the process of studying. Even harder to continue the process of studying. I sat down, opened the book, and just thought of having so much to complete, so much to do, so much to read.

I am a mover. So sitting in a classroom, sitting and thinking and only being asked to use my brain for the eight hours, or six hours, or whatever you had school, it didn't work for me. I would just shut down. So as soon as I got into a room like drama, or even phys-ed or something like that, that I could actually physically embody...or experience some of those things, I was interested.

So I would go, but I would skip often. You know? Math, I think it started in Grade 11. Math 20, I will never forget. I was just like, I am out. I have no interest. I can't focus on this, I can't concentrate. So what happens is that you stop going. Then when you finally do go back you realize that you know even less than you could have, so why would you return? That was what it was for me.

And chemistry...

Asking for help, since it was rarely mentioned, might be a problem too. The absence of reports of asking for help, does that suggest something? Here one student tells of her experience of asking for help for academic problems:

I remember once...I forget what class it was, I don't know if it was senior high school or not, you go and get help and say listen, I am having a problem with such and such a chapter in this book. Well, I am too busy right now. Just pay attention a little more in class and maybe raise your hand and we will go over it in class....It took all this energy to get up and do this in the first place and this is what you get? No I don't think so.

### *Negative Judgements*

One can imagine that with behavioural and academic problems, with not complying with expectations, with reduced performance, others in the system react. While struggling in high school, students hear expressions of lack of hope, of character assassination and rejection. Mostly they felt misunderstood or mislabelled and lost trust in the people who could help them. Attributions of guilt and responsibility were placed on the struggling student often with little knowledge or attempt to uncover underlying issues. This acted to discourage but sometimes, later, to also challenge a survival instinct, an inherent drive to develop. But in all cases it hurt. These descriptions came with tears. Sometimes it wasn't clear whether the negative judgements came before or after the struggle described. All players in the system, including family, the individuals themselves, peers and school personal expressed negative judgements. This student had a

hard time trying to please her mother:

Boarding school was very very tough...having no family, um...no encouragement...it was very depressing. To this day, I still remember one phone call that my mom made to me when I was at the boarding school. She asked me, have you ever thought what you would do if you can't graduate this time again? And you can't make it to post-secondary? It was really hard to accept the fact that my mom saw no hope in me. (Teary). Sorry. She told me that when I asked her to just have a little faith in me... that she was simply facing reality that she knew I was not school material, and um, after that I went into a depression.

The same person perceived others to be judging her negatively too:

Uh, I guess what hurts the most is to those who succeed, they just, if they are very negative sometimes. They don't really care about any problems or whatever, they just simply see you as being a failure because you couldn't achieve.

Negative comparison left this other person feeling unable and unwilling to align herself with her parents' goals for her:

I have a big thing with my two older sisters and at some point I just said, I am not as good as them...You know things were said to me like, I was going to end up in jail. I really wasn't all that bad...often they would say, you are going to end up

dropped out...sometimes I wonder if maybe as teenagers do, to lash out, I didn't go. Oh, this is important to you? I am going to make sure it is not important to me.

An intellectually gifted, talented, highly achieved writer reflected back on her days of leaving high school and summed up the effect of negative judgements:

Um, when I left high school, I felt stupid. I didn't feel like I had any abilities.

Um, I ended up going off and having to prove myself. I wasn't given any skills in high school. I was just given a lot of grief as far as I could see. I had to go and then learn how to do things. I was scared. I was petrified...I had no real way to learn. I didn't have any training...my self-esteem as far as learning...as far as perspective and gathering thoughts at that point was non-existent. I felt stupid.

### *Interest and Disengagement*

Not surprisingly, motivation is lost. Students struggling disengage from the school system by feeling bored and just not being able to wait to get out. The interest in school is gone. Expressions of boredom, meaninglessness and disinterest are inter-related with other issues like skipping, feeling judged, disrespected, having no control or choice and academic issues. Sometimes interest is about particular subjects or curriculum. Lost interest and motivation are significant and prominent in the experience of struggling. For the most part, they are expressions of loss of interest rather than lack of interest. This was described by students who wanted to finish and to get out. It was

also described by those still desperate to stay and have their learning be meaningful. This person wanted to get out completely:

I think back to the whole high school time and I remember it being like, I cannot wait to get out of here. I cannot wait till this part of my life is done...High school was torture for me. I hated every minute of it. I couldn't wait to become an adult. I didn't like the way we were treated like we were sub-humans because we were teenagers. I didn't like it.

Another just wanted things to have more real-life application:

I did not like English...I could never get interested in it, because it was not my type of material. I like adventure stories, mystery stories, espionage stories, spy stories, war stories, something based on fact. I mean, social studies I thoroughly enjoyed...because it was based on world events. Things that were actually happening out there in the world. The changes in the countries in Africa. But in grade 11 and grade 12 social studies dealt on truth, reality. I have to be with reality.

This student was looking for intellectual stimulation and didn't find it in school:

Mostly they didn't know what to do with me. I was in Grade 10, I was reading Ferlingetti, Ginzberg, Diane Di prima, Michael McClure, Walt Whitman. I had

gone into a book store in Banff when I was studying dance...this fellow...used to lend me books from the bookstore, as long as I didn't crack them. I got this surge of information in Grade 10...I come back to school...I knew more about poetry, and different poets, the contemporary poets than the teacher that I had in Grade 11. I almost had a fit because she didn't know who Ferlingetti was. How can you not know who Ferlingetti was? As that time, this right in the time when the beats were...this is after when they were big. I was frustrated. I was so incredibly frustrated.

The same student explained how boredom led to disengagement:

I was, I had the highest I.Q. at that point in Calgary, Alberta. They sent me to schools because I was, of, exceptional thinking, according to them. But they didn't understand why I got such low marks, is because I would get bored. Quite blank. I would get bored...and then in Grade 12 went to school very seldom.

### *Choice/Autonomy*

However you look at the complaints of boredom, disinterest and loss of motivation, an obvious common thread is the underlying issue of not getting one's learning needs met, of a system that didn't seem to be able to conform to individual needs that might have been different than group needs. Feeling of having no choices, or of being repressed by a regimented environment, or overly structured curriculum was mentioned. An absence of freedom was sighted as part of the struggle, the battle for

autonomy and support of individual development. Perceptions of lack of choice:

...and you are not allowed to change. There is very little room...area for students in school zones...to change and to grow, and to experiment. That should be the place. School should be the place where you get to try everything that you can so that when you step out into the world...

I always felt like school couldn't keep up with me. There was no alley for me in school. There was like, these are the classes, this is the curriculum, and this is how you are going to learn it, and there was no variation of that.

One participant sums up her experience of that lack of choice, of her reaction to the structure in reflecting on an event that happened several years after school. She hinted at the reason that she did not want to conform:

Oh, I ran into my high school English teacher. She came to a performance I did here. She said, it doesn't surprise me that you are a poet. She says I would ask you for essays and you would give me these...you never ever wrote an essay. You almost refused to stay within any structure and...it was very frustrating for me because I needed you to do it once so I knew you could do it. I said, why didn't you tell me that...because it would have helped me to know that if I did it once, I wouldn't have to do it again. I was capable of doing it. But I was also a little afraid...it was a fear there as well that...they wouldn't see my extraordinariness.

Because I wanted them to see my extraordinariness. But they didn't.

*Future Goals/School-to-work Transition*

Despite hating school and being desperate to escape, part of the struggle in high school is about not knowing what one is going to do afterwards, of not having goals, not being able to follow one's goals, or not having school-to-work transition assistance.

Uncertainty for the future was expressed:

Yeah, the uncertainty of not knowing whether to go to college or university didn't help me with any sort of direction from high school. I was...I don't know, it made it more difficult the uncertainty of not knowing what was going to happen after I was done, high school.

The anti-climactic feeling of having nothing to look forward to was described by this person:

Also for the whole graduation thing at the end, everybody started talking about it within a couple of months of school starting. They were talking about their dress, about getting their hair done, and the limo and their date. Then I realized afterwards I figured out, what is at the end of all of this...like, that's it? I thought there was more. I don't know what I was expecting but I was expecting...everybody talking about it, there had to be more than just the final dinner and dance.

This participant remembers knowing exactly what she wanted to do, but her goals were shut down by the opinions of those she was supposed to trust:

He [psychologist] talked to me for so long, and he was like you know, fashion design isn't really a stable career choice and how do you expect to make yourself a living. I understood the reality of it, but the idea that I don't believe that it is a good path to take was kind of painful in that sense. It was just, the whole...they [parents] still think it is a joke. For me...pursue fashion design, they still think it is stupid.

Messages that she could not pursue her goal made this person lose hope and faith, and she disengaged:

I think in January...I think I was kind of depressed at that time...that I couldn't...if I wasn't able to pursue what I wanted to do afterwards than it didn't really matter how I graduated, or what happened at all. Because at that time, I didn't want to go to university, and my mom was just totally against everything that I wanted to do. It was just, I can't do what I wanted to do, the whole graduation thing...I didn't think it was worth it.

### *Belonging versus Alienation*

Obviously, future decisions of what to do after high school are difficult when the

present moment feels like such a struggle. Tied into the task of making future decisions for career or education were issues of identity and questions of where one belonged. Unfortunately, struggling in high school led one to feel that they did not belong. It was not uncommon for the sense of not fitting in to be related to having been skipped ahead, to being younger than others. For others, feelings of being alone or lost are related to school structure, transitions, or other co-existing experiences. Complaints of not fitting in and feelings of lack of belonging and alienation were described by most of the people who talked about the struggle in high school:

I just remember feeling very isolated and not in school a lot... I took all the isolation, the segregation and all the ridicule and the blame, I just took it all on myself. And literally as a teenager I remember just shutting down, just feeling like exhausted all the time.

A sense of being outside of one's cultural group also was experienced as isolating:

I didn't like the community, I didn't like the people that were there. They just seemed different...I wasn't part of it. I mean, at that time, when I went there, there were probably about 5 Chinese people, and when I was at my junior high there were quite a few more than five. In one class there were at least 5 Chinese people...the one friend that I did know that saw me when I got there and...she was Chinese and so then afterwards...she would introduce me to people, and I would meet new people and that was how I got to be friends with other people. But at

first it was hell.

High school made this individual feel like she was alienated from herself, and the part she liked didn't belong:

I wasn't what I considered to be a popular girl, although since then I have met a lot of people from high school who thought that I was this beautiful, calm...the fact that I was kind of calm in high school. But in ballet, I was the clown. So it is kind of...I had two personalities. Inside the cage and outside the cage...and you know, they didn't understand that I felt repressed, ugly, too skinny, flat chested, the things I felt.

For some, not able to find their place leads to rejection of the system, or the group they feel they have not been accepted into. It seems to be described as a struggle for survival of individuality, again inter-related with other factors in the struggle. Here are some examples of this process related to alienation:

...and I felt totally alienated....So because from minute one you feel alienated, the group of friends that I had...we sort of hated everything about it. We hated the majority of people that went there. We hated all the teachers because they fit into the majority right? So being this minority, um, I started to grow this attitude. Like the teenage-itis attitude. That everything sucks. This sucks. And I liked to blame everyone else. So I really didn't feel like I belonged. People disliked me

and didn't understand me; and,

You are not given the freedom. And if you do, you are acting out, and you are bad. You are bad and your behaviour is bad instead of wow, you are close to a genius...It changes the way you want to fit into society. It made me go, no, I don't want to be like everybody else. I do not want to be a sheep. Look at all these people. Because I was alienated, I don't want to follow the path that everybody else is following. I think that those feelings made me go, I need to live on the periphery of this culture and this society. I don't not want to be like all of them.

### *Influence of Peers*

When one feels isolated, rejected by the majority or the system that is supposed to support development, the need to belong and be accepted is not met readily. The need survives. It drives the desire to make friends with anyone, sometimes the wrong kind of people. Whether positive or negative in their effect on the struggle in high school, peers had a huge influence:

When I was around Grade 10, there was a certain underground that was really popular...raves...it was new to all of us, to the younger ones that hadn't heard about it...my best friend liked to try out everything. I guess the same thing goes for me. I guess I feel that you are only young once and if I don't try it out now chances are...I won't go back and do it. It affected my grades a lot. I never went

beyond Ecstasy...it wasn't on a daily basis...during the weekends if I have a test exam or assignment due on Monday, going out on a Friday night or Saturday night, doing that, your sleeping schedule is completely turned around. So it was very hard. I could get no work done on the weekends.

A student who was gifted, and had previously done really well in school recounts her experience of finding social belonging. The influence of peers was an obstacle to school goals:

I just completely lost interest....I think it was during the last year because I got more of a social life, you know, had more friends who were going out...I worked and went out with the people at work. You know, it was more fun than going to school...it was a real social atmosphere...we all knew each other from when we were younger and started going out to bars and...I just lost interest in school. I didn't see the point of it...Going out...partying...that is just what certain people were doing, what some of my friends were doing instead of high school...I was more focused on socializing. Because in the earlier years I had not socialized. I had focused more on schoolwork. I guess maybe that just got old, or I found more enjoyment in going out and socializing in the later years of high school than the earlier ones when I really didn't connect with anyone.

Sometimes the right peers can influence change in a positive way. The same participant whose struggle to belong got her involved in drugs and all night parties, later

found a friend to influence her in a positive way:

I guess I was very lucky, I had a roommate that...also went through a hard time in high school life. So it felt like there was someone that I could relate to, that could relate to me. She was working very hard in her last year, in her Grade 12 year. It kind of motivated me to do well as well. She was a year older than me and I guess, I don't know, she was able to kind of keep me on track sometimes, when I was being lazy or um, wanted to go off track.

The right peers seem to also be able to influence positively the setting of goals, and the belief in oneself to achieve them:

I had a steady boyfriend at the time that was in university and he was more of an influence to go back and get my education than...than...he helped me, I guess, to continue in high school than not.

Another example:

I had a friend who was in Grade 12 that was in the same English class. The teacher kept on saying how wonderful this guy was writing...I was so impressed... He didn't need to be taught how to write, he just could write...then him and I got to be friends. He was great, in terms of, as a friend, he was everything...everybody else at that time, like most guys thought that art was

dumb, he was the only one that thought that it was cool...he was there to support me, to say that, you know, I think that you can do....he wanted to pursue art as a profession too....that was nice to have been pulled through there. I think he was, he gave me a lot of support in terms of just being there for me.

### *Influence of Teachers*

Peers are a strong influence on academic achievement but they are not the only social context variable. More directly related to academic achievement is satisfaction in interactions with school teachers. Teachers seem to be able to support students in a way that increases motivation and even to make things meaningful. They can be understanding, or inquisitive, and supportive of students who are struggling, even lenient with those who are having a hard time. They can also teach in a stimulating manner, and allow students some ability to find themselves in the curriculum. They can inspire. They also have the power to scare students away, to humiliate them and to influence them to disengage from the system. What follows are, from the perspective of students, some examples of opinions about good and bad teaching. On inappropriate conduct, one participant said:

I think the town where we were from the standards were really low...the requirements for teachers were low, we lived in isolation and there was really no culture. But uh, actually a lot of teachers were quite bad. When I look back I know there was uh, they were a real loser bunch. The one guy had alcohol in his desk and all the students knew it. Another one was going out with high school

students.

Describing a horrible experience with a teacher, a participant who is now completing university said she couldn't stand the attitude she felt was conveyed by the teacher:

...authoritarian, the negative. I don't respond well to that. Critical, uh, negative reinforcement, punishing. I had a teacher who if you were late he made you stand in a corner holding your book. You couldn't sit down for the whole class and he would chastise you in front of the whole class. Truly he was awful. He thought it was funny. Total disrespect. Like teenagers were sub-humans. Control. Absolutely. Dictatorial, authoritarian, that sort of thing. Totally not my way to learn. Fear, through fear and intimidation.

Slightly less extreme, but equally de-motivating, bad teaching was also described as not letting students "have their own thoughts or go through their own thought pattern". This person felt that the teacher was just going through the motions and didn't really want to teach, that the teacher had "lost their passion". This student felt this was a "big factor" in her ability to learn. Helping students feel motivated, try harder and believe in themselves were factors attributed to teachers. More positive than negative experiences with teachers were mentioned, like:

I really liked the teacher, he seemed not like a grown up but like, um, so I

remember kind of being intrigued by some of the teachers that I experienced there. Maybe that is also why I was trying harder...I remember trying to do writing and really wanting to get it done because I liked the ideas he was talking about.

After repeating the same Calculus course, this gifted student who had troubles with applying herself when things were not easy, kept persisting. She attributed it to good teaching too:

I had the best teacher and didn't do extremely well in it, but had a lot of fun going to class, and he made it interesting (laugh) I know, calculus! I even took it again because I knew I was going to have him and I was trying to lift my mark but I got the exact same mark anyway. But, he was just a really, really good teacher and that made a difference.

School staff can also be influential and motivate students to achieve:

I think he was a counsellor...they were trying to draw me out...I am sure they saw my high school record as very patchy...so they were trying to engage me...the counsellor said, is there anything we can do for you? Yeah, can you imagine? I remember that is when that real spiral of trying to do homework started, of trying to get the homework done. I had never really done homework before.

When they support autonomy, stimulate interest and challenge students, they inspire.

This person explained how she felt a teacher made a difference:

Such a difference with teachers you connect with and teachers you don't. I had another teacher who his first statement to the entire class on the first day was, my philosophy is that you do the least amount of work for the most amount of marks. I remember most of the material he taught in class. All that he asked is that you show up and participate when you could. I think we had two projects throughout the entire year. I remember distinctly the only time I was absent from his class is when I had a doctor's appointment. I went to every single one of his classes. He made it entertaining. It was so much less pressure. That one you got to choose the project you wanted, you got to choose what you were interested in and seek it out and create something out of it. It was a lot of fun.

Yet another explained how teachers influenced her interest and achievement motivation:

Teachers, in the subjects that I did well in...they were great, great teachers...They found a way to really connect with you...where you were at, and they didn't talk down to you. They didn't just hand you the information that you needed to learn and regurgitate. They challenged me. They made me think. Those teachers...they really do make a difference in your life...they have really found a way to inspire kids and to make them search for something beyond the grade. To make them search for....like it was for me, for that sense of pride...of accomplishment. To be

the thing that drives you forward, not just to get your advanced diploma, or your general diploma, to go on to university, to become a management student...but to make life meaningful...when I got those teachers, I wanted to impress them...they were an inspiration.

### *Participation in the Arts and Sports*

So what else motivated or inspired them? What helped students cope with struggle or find their sense of self in a time of struggle? Participation in the arts and sports did. Hints of this are woven into factors already described as influential in the struggle when they talked about interest, and about goals. Access to the arts and sports was essential for some students who struggled in high school. Some people feel that without this participation they would not have made it:

I like drawing. So I took art and I took sports...I love sports...it was a release...I am an outside person, always have been. And it shows in my lifestyle all growing up. I never went to parties at school...but if there was a hockey match on, or a soccer match on, or basketball or something like that, I was there like a dirty shirt. I was on the school basketball team for the three years that I was there...if I didn't have those two subjects there would have been a mess.

One person lost her connection to the arts and then regained it. She talked about how she learned about the importance of those subjects to her engagement in school. Reconnection re-motivated her:

Musical theatre and drama...didn't take those at the other school, but I only was at that other school for one semester. I didn't do very well. Like I actually failed classes. I had never done that poorly before. I wasn't going....I was the one going, there is something wrong here, I am not learning, I am not doing well, so I went back...I think it was because I missed the musical theatre and the drama. The school I went to had a reputation for having a really high calibre musical theatre and drama program...I went more. Because for the first time I realized that this other school...had things to offer me that I had not realized before because I had not been outside of there; and,

When I found drama and musical theatre and things like that, that is when school served a purpose for me. So I had a reason to go. A reason to go to school. And I actually think that is how I got through school. Because I wouldn't have gone, I would not have continued.

### *After the Struggle in High School*

Unlike the stereotype of students who drop out, some people who struggled in high school somehow developed a strong desire that carries them through fulfillment of their academic goals. They were persistent. They developed strong feelings and opinions about school, about learning and teaching. Sometimes the cause of the struggle, if it wasn't obvious to them in the past, became obvious in their future. One person told of continued weaving in and out of high school and post-secondary programs taking

courses over and over before finally getting a diagnosis of a reading disability and assistance with emotional issues. This is what she said happened:

Then I got into university and had just experienced a personal stressful thing and my doctor put me on Elavil. That seemed to really help.....for some reason that really boosted me and I ended up that first year back doing nine courses and I had a 3.9 average.

She also, incidentally, maintained a love for painting and continued to do art work on her own. Another who made it to university attributed her success to staying in the arts. She said "...yes, I have done well, I have done well...I mean university worked out somewhat for me because I chose dance".

Making it to university was a good thing for some, and a not-so-good thing for others. Uncertainty in terms of career goal was mentioned. For two of the several who made it to university, it was not their goal, it was their parents'. One still feels sadness that she is far away from her interests in the arts. Another person found satisfaction after school in a long career in the military that allowed for the variety and practicality she was so desperately seeking in high school. Several mentioned teaching in schools and universities, having achieved merit in their selective areas. They talked about their own experiences teaching and how the meaning of their own earlier experiences in school wove together with the teaching experiences. One participant articulated this beautifully:

You know I teach in high schools and it is so funny for me to go back and look at

them from my eyes now because I really had a very, and have a very negative perspective on the way high schools are. I feel like we are trying to ask students to become things...we have a very regimented way of putting our students through high school. There is not a lot of freedom and acceptance...and flexibility. In the way that the programs are set up. So they don't really have the opportunity to explore some of the other ways that they can be intelligent.

The same participant shared her attitude towards school and her sense that the best students are cheated out of an education, as well as how the system loses in this process:

So when I go in and I teach, I am just really amazed at some of the students that I have...the ones that get kicked out...are also the ones who get it, who ask me those questions and who haven't yet figured out a way to channel those questions...those are the kids that...I will be trying to do something and they will be like, well shouldn't it be this? I'll go, hey, I would have spent a week trying to figure out how to do something, what this kid just figured out, he is a genius. But he is a problem student, no teachers like him. He looks different than everyone else, he is me, this student is me, he gets it. But he feels alienated, and looks different, and acts out because he has been bored...its frustrating. Because the system that I went through...fails the brightest students, the most creative and the brightest students. It totally fails them.

Overall, the struggle was followed by stories of resistance, resilience, and perseverance. All were achieving significantly either as students or in their participation in the arts. One exception was a person who had a long and colourful career in the military, and experienced it as an enriching journey that had fulfilled her need for practical, real life learning that she had yearned for in high school. She also had successful experiences teaching. Most had struggled through times of fearing they would give up, fearing they were not capable, and feeling they could not find their place to be valued and to belong. However resilience was obvious. Dedication to goals and perseverance never died, and achievement and satisfaction eventually followed.

### *Summary*

In this story, there are many interwoven elements of vivid descriptions of struggling in high school. Some suggest cause, or consequence, that retrospectively are difficult to confirm. More importantly, the descriptions suggest areas for potential change and for expressions of understanding. Sometimes students begin to struggle academically because of emotional problems, or family problems ranging from severe abuse to absent parents. Some experience fear and anxiety about their abilities that may or may not be based on potential performance. Academic problems mark the struggle for most regardless of precipitating event or identifiable cause. The identifiable behavioural/academic problems offer little insight into what is behind the behaviour. Therefore, without a closer look and understanding about cause, negative judgements come easily and are prominent. They are hurtful and de-motivating at a time when adolescents are vulnerable to social influences. They often result in disengaged

responses, in withdrawal. Efforts to communicate understanding and caring at the time inspire belief in oneself and motivation to achieve. Disinterest in school subjects is complicated. Sometimes it is related to other difficulties, sometimes it may be about learning styles, or just plain disinterest in particular topics, perhaps related to personality. It isn't clear how to remedy disinterest, but it is clear that when interest is stimulated it has profound affects on engagement in school. Having future goals seems to help one cope with present struggles. However, setting future goals is challenging when the present is fraught with difficulty and with little help or support for planning. It isn't surprising that alienation is a pervasive feeling. Isolation and loneliness in a time of struggle makes one vulnerable to social influence. Peers and teachers can be positive and negative influences. Overall, support and acceptance of individuality, of goals for development seem to have the most inspiring affect. Opportunity to access a range of activities in the arts and sports allows for and facilitates engagement in school, and exploration and expression of the self in this pivotal time and thus should be accessible to everyone.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

The focus of this chapter is to discuss the significance of the findings in relation to the literature reviewed, to theory, counselling practice and for future research. The chapter will conclude with limitations of the study.

### *Introduction and Re-statement of the Purpose of the Study*

At the outset of this study previous research was reviewed and integrated with psychological literature to pose a model for understanding the process of struggling in high school. Existing research, having focused on looking for causes (Renihan, 1994) through mostly correlational studies, has not resulted in literature that helps counsellors to understand the experience of struggle or factors that might help students who are struggling. There is growing acceptance of the idea that dropping out of high school involves a complex process that is not well understood (Canadian Education Association, 1990; Gilbert, 1993). This complex experience can not be simplified by focusing on personal determinants (Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997) which contributes to stereotypes and is much like talking about symptoms. Growing evidence that many of those who struggle are capable underachievers who do not fit at-risk profiles (Fitzpatrick 1984; Blythe, 1998; Franklin & Streeter, 1995; Gilbert, 1993) demands a research approach that contributes to a greater understanding of the experience, which may be shared among students of diverse backgrounds.

Counsellors understand that focusing on or talking about symptoms does little to inform people about how to cope during difficult times, how to overcome obstacles and to support and promote development. This study was aimed at using a phenomenological

approach to gain an understanding and provide a rich description of the process and experience of struggle in high school, without focusing exclusively on those who drop out. It asked the primary research question: What is the experience of high school for students who struggle to complete? A secondary question was what factors facilitate completion and whether those factors relate to theories on self-determination and intrinsic motivation.

### *Implications for Theory*

The results of this study offer partial but meaningful support for Finn's (1989) theoretical model of participation-identification related to disengaging from school. Finn's theory of participation-identification emphasizes the importance of bonding with the school. A well-established link between participation and school-related outcomes has been demonstrated in the literature and was confirmed in the present study. Identification with school has been less demonstrated, although some evidence has been provided indirectly through studies on alienation, bonding, etc. This study provided more direct support for Finn's notion of the emotional aspect of identification to the school, particularly belonging and valuing.

Contents of the category Interest vs. Disengagement demonstrate that students wanted to be in school, to be interested and involved. However disinterest and demotivation was inter-related with other behavioural issues and with feelings of being judged negatively, and having little or no autonomy. Overall, the results also provide partial support for Finn's notion that disengagement is a developmental process where failure to participate according to expectations academically leads to rejection by the

school or exclusion from extra-curricular involvement, which can lead to more disengagement on the part of the student.

Contrary to Finn's conceptualization, most of the participants in this study did not seem to conceptualize dropping out as a small final step. Instead they seemed to demonstrate self-determination with regards to staying involved and engaged. Perhaps for this reason the majority of participants in this study eventually completed the requirements for graduating. One might speculate that had they not been able or determined enough to participate at all, they might have not completed high school.

The results of this study offer limited support for one common aspect of theories on adolescent development, specifically, the concept of sensitivity to views of others on the self. Kegan (1994, cited in Kroger, 1995) and others view that during adolescence the self is anchored in its relationships with others and is thus very vulnerable to the attitudes of those in its context. Negative judgements were heard and internalized, consequently affecting school self-efficacy. The voiced criticism and blame in the category Negative Judgements was related to lack of hope and loss of motivation as expected. Interestingly, the participants in the current study somehow overcame these effects. Some spoke of the benefit of compensatory relationships, activities and group affiliations that did support their sense of self.

These results had further implications for Kegan's ideas about the experience of anchoring one's identity to the environment. In this next stage of identity development there is a sense that one is one's institution, and thus one needs to find meaning and belonging there. While there is no sequential process of identity development clearly

evident in the shared stories, the need to feel a sense of belonging to the school is evident in comments about alienation and belonging.

In Kegan's model, overall development is threatened by an institution that does not recognize the individual. This was discussed in terms of feeling alienated, not having freedom, not being supported, and needing to find and express the self in other ways and for some, rejection of the environment. In this model of identity development, the idea of questioning and differentiating the self from the institution is considered to be a higher stage of identity development. Perhaps the complaints of those who struggle are based on a more complex or advanced process of forming identity. Or perhaps the process of struggle itself, when overcome, leads to maturity and a higher level of self-understanding. Overall, Kegan's theories seem to be supported by the results. Some students who struggle with conventional ways of learning and who question content may be reasoning at a higher level of development, balancing their acceptance of norms with internalized ideas about justice and appropriateness. Their struggles may represent a conflict that ultimately leads to greater maturity in multiple areas of personal development, while academic development is hindered. The fact that the participants tended to go on to higher learning and achievement suggests that at least some students who struggle in high school fit this description.

The results further offer partial support for social-cognitive theory related to the idea that behaviour is motivated, and that approval by others perceived to be in power or authority may influence that motivation (Green, 1989). Both teachers and peers were able to motivate or de-motivate the participants. As pointed out by the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine (2004), there is evidence that school contexts and

peers have the power to influence negatively, and also positively thus helping students overcome pre-existing issues that lead to being demotivated.

In Bandura's theory of reciprocal determinism, environmental factors such as the roles played by parents, teachers and peers interact with personal and behavioural factors to influence learning (Schunk, 1991). This is evident in the results. What is not confirmed or disconfirmed is the notion that these interactions are mediated by cognitive interpretations. The relationship between negative evaluation by others and demotivation seems to be more direct given the clear examples of judgements and criticisms offered in the stories. Self-efficacy for school ability may have been influenced by cognitive tendencies as in the case of self-blame and susceptibility to disconfirming evidence; however, stable cues such as comments on ability and character are a more obvious and direct influence. As well, students seemed to overcome these negative evaluations and low or weak self-efficacy for school goals to persist and achieve.

In my own experience, I also somehow regained my sense of self-worth and academic self-efficacy I managed to find success in meeting my chosen goals. The loss of self-efficacy was domain-specific but also short-lived as in the case of several of the participants. These results have some implications for the conceptualization of cognitive attribution styles as mediators in self-efficacy and regarding self-efficacy as a state versus a trait. In my own experience, I do not believe that I had a tendency to view things more negatively but that I was being directly told negative things and I temporarily believed them. Like others, I reacted with a will to prove the 'nay-sayers' wrong. Not all are so resilient.

### *Implications for Practice*

While the current study did not aim to generalize, and includes a small sample of seven participants, it is noteworthy that only one of these participants actually did dropout. While some experienced years with poor achievement, and some changed schools, six of seven managed to eventually complete high school through self-determination. Two were identified as gifted prior to the beginning of their struggles. All showed evidence before or after their struggles of potential for high achievement. The one who dropped out of high school was one of the identified gifted, who later went on to become a world-renowned writer and performer who currently teaches at university. This suggests students from diverse backgrounds and ability levels may struggle. It confirms that stereotypes about students at risk for school-related problems are not useful. It also suggests that students who may be struggling in one area should be helped to deal with challenges to maximize their future potential and cautions against over-reacting to behaviour without understanding the developmental needs behind it.

The Gilbert (1993) study associated lessened participation in extracurricular activities with early leaving. In this study, participants talked about the dire importance for them to be involved in the arts and sports at the time, and those who did not have access at school sought out opportunities outside of class. Perhaps these factors made the difference that allowed these participants to overcome their struggles rather than drop out. The results imply that students who are struggling need to continue to be involved in the school system and should not be kept from extra-curricular participation as a punishment for academic struggles.

Consistent with a study on school leavers (HRDC, 1995), the participants in this study did report dissatisfaction with courses and problems with teachers and experiences of not fitting in. However, they also reported experiences with teachers that inspired them, and of finding friends who also positively influenced their behaviour. I also talked about personal emotional struggles related to problems with my family, of which nobody at school was aware. Some participants in the study experienced and identified having emotional issues and family conflict. Like my experience, they had little opportunity at school to deal with these problems, or strategies for putting them away. There was rare mention of a guidance counsellor or teacher who was aware of and sensitive to outside pressures, but rather negative judgements were the norm.

It has been pointed out that students who come to school with emotional or family problems cannot engage properly in academic curriculum. These students' non-academic needs must also be met (National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, 2004). While it is not always possible for the school system to meet those needs, they are often the gate keeping role for access to community resources. Stronger links to community resources might help students and their families whose issues are negatively influencing their academic engagement achievement. In light of the other implications, it seems that it would be important to ensure that referrals to outside resources do not leave a student feeling that they are different. Equally important would be ensuring that the student struggling with these issues not be labelled as problematic for the school.

Like others, I felt I did not fit in and that I was not understood by anyone in the school environment. I missed some classes and felt utterly invisible to anyone who might have made a difference. Alienation was evident in my sense of feeling pushed out,

and subsequent loss of academic self-worth followed. As described, people I had spoken to prior to the study also talked about feeling misunderstood, pushed out and rejected. Teachers need to be aware of the power they have to inspire, motivate and support students. School personnel must also respect the power of peer influence in designing counselling programs. Group activities that utilize mentors and peers for socialization and support make sense. As well, it has been pointed out that students who are at risk should not be tracked in any way that prevents them from developing peer relationships with other students who can provide a model of normal school interactions (National Council and the Institute of Medicine, 2004).

As stated above, the results with regards to alienation and belonging provide partial support for Kegan's theories of identity development and suggests that students who struggle may be conceptualized as being at a higher level of self-development. They thus have greater needs to be supported in their individuating process within the school system. Counsellors and teachers must respect that students, who may seem to be rebelling against group norms and expectations, may be struggling with more advanced or complex developmental and/or psychological experiences. Their needs may be different than other students. As well, while their demands for choice and control may seem contrary to their needs for support and guidance, they are not mutually exclusive. As pointed out by the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine (2004), counselling resources in schools are limited and poorly integrated with learning, schools must be a part of offering mental health services to students in need. They point to evidence that well-designed counselling programs have positive effects on multiple school-related goals. They cite Borders and Drury's (1992, cited in National Research

Council and the Institute of Medicine, 2004) summary of the literature on effects of counselling programs pointed out that time-limited, developmentally sensitive groups allow students to support and challenge each other. It seems then that creation of a counselling group that included other students struggling with issues of school engagement could be helpful if they were designed with elements to prevent negative peer influence. Using mentors who had struggled prior to achieving might also be helpful.

Radwanski's (1987) policy study used focus groups to investigate and make recommendations to the Ontario Ministry of Education not only on the issue of dropping out, but on the education system overall. He expressed a need to address the problem of a system that makes people feel "alienated, bored, rejected or unable to cope academically" (p. 66). That description suggests a responsibility on the part of educators to make change that leads to inclusion, interest, belonging, help for academic problems, and to reducing internalized sentiment about ability to achieve. The category Interest vs. Disengagement relates to Radwanski's comments, as well as Academic Problems, Negative Judgement and Teacher Influence. Participants in this study talked about being bored and disinterested in school subjects, or feeling they were not capable, sometimes related these experiences to poor teaching and other times to internalized negative comments coming from home and from school. There was little mention of getting any help, and some mention of trying unsuccessfully to get help with academic struggles in certain subjects. The idea of inclusion and belonging was represented by the experiences of the participants in their reports in the category Alienation vs. Belonging; however, this experience was complex and not just tied to the system per se. The school system had a

strong influence, particularly when students were able to participate and excel and in what they wanted to do or did well at, but peers also influenced a sense of belonging.

Research on identity development suggests that for some, anchoring the self into something before a thorough exploration of who one is and where one belongs is just as useful as achievement of a fully-explored, authentic identity is for others in terms of wellness (Meeus, Iedema, Helsen, & Vollebergh, 1999). Content in categories related to autonomy, belonging, and participation in the arts and sport suggested that some student struggle simultaneously to fit in and to individuate. Therefore at any given time, opportunity and support for group affiliation might be beneficial for some, whereas expression of individuality may take a focus and be more motivating. The two needs are not mutually exclusive and may be served by a similar means. Through access and choice built into curriculum and opportunity to participate in art and sports, multiple factors in identity development might be addressed.

It was clear from the results of the current study that individual problems such as academic struggles, boredom, emotional issues, and so on, may be brought to the school or emerge out of school experience. As pointed out by Wehlage (1989), it really is more important to focus on what the school can do to change and allow students to feel empowered and engaged in a caring school community. Other studies that recommend strategies to increase retention and improve performance, particularly studies that include stakeholders in their data collection, also point to schools in terms of change. They recognize that struggle, or ultimately leaving early, is a complex process and care needs to be taken to prevent failure to support students and even of pushing students out (Canadian Education Association, 1990; Price Waterhouse, 1990). Radwanski (1987)

noted that the school system can leave all students feeling alienated, not just those who have multiple stressors and pressures – those are simply the ones who end up leaving. The onus is on schools to be supportive and respond to individual needs.

Participants in this study described their struggle but also remarked about what was helpful to them. There were positive experiences within the categories of Interest vs. Boredom, Choice/Autonomy, Alienation vs. Belonging, Peer Influence, Teacher Influence, and Participation in the Arts and Sports. Suggested in the Interest vs. Boredom category was the idea that students want to be able to read what they like, sometimes things that are practical or made meaningful in their relevance to real-life. There was an obvious desire to learn and understand that was not met. There were signs of intellectual boredom and lack of stimulation. Choice and freedom to explore and experiment were needed. When challenged but supported in their academic development by teachers, motivation and achievement was present. It is suggested here that the school system needs to be more flexible and experiences provided there need to be more meaningfully tied to real life, in order to support and promote the academic and personal development of diverse students.

In the descriptions that I shared about my own experiences, and those shared with me over the years, and in explicating my assumptions regarding those who struggle in high school, I talked about issues that also were echoed in the literature that I presented. As well, these issues and themes were tied to the data that emerged in this study. The lack of personal control or choices and the need for autonomy, a sense of being demotivated and feeling uncertain about their role in life/futures were represented in the categories. In my own disclosure, I also talked about the need for things to be meaningful

in general, not just in the curriculum. That was only alluded to by the participants in this study, who were restricted by the subject matter to focusing their disclosure on the struggle in high school. The process of disclosure, however, and some of the content suggested the need to make meaning. The desire to share the story years later, which prompted participation in this study, suggested to me the need to make things meaningful. The contextualizing the story within what happened prior and after the struggle, and the attempt some made to attribute causality in their description of struggle without guidance to do so, confirms only that some people are meaning-making by nature – but suggests that making meaning was important here. One could certainly argue that content in many of the categories was about making things meaningful, like having choices, being interested, expressing the self and one's experiences in the arts and sports, belonging, being stimulated and interested. Curriculum needs to consider process as well as content to include learning activities that allow students to make lessons personally meaningful.

While falling into relationships with the right friends also was indicated as a factor that motivated students to keep trying, the need for a more structured means of helping in times of struggle was identified. More attention from teachers, understanding and acceptance of diversity and of diverse learning needs and future goals were suggested. The ability to express the self through arts or sports was reported as crucial for some who would have dropped out without those opportunities. Whether it helped with a sense of belonging, a sense of being able to be oneself, the only learning that was personally meaningful, the only place one could concentrate, or the only place a student could deal with outside troubles – it was necessary and beneficial. Obviously, one way

schools can be responsive and supportive, the way Radwanski (1987) suggested they should be, without having to increase resources to provide for individual needs, would be to facilitate participation in extra-curricular activities.

The benefit of involvement in extra-curricular activities, particularly at a time when outside pressures might be teaching more practical lessons about life than academic lessons, seems to be strongly supported by the results as well as the existing literature and psychological theories on identity development presented here. Indeed research supports the link between participation in extra-curricular activities and school-related goals (Camp, 1990; Brown & Steinberg, 1991; Mahoney, 2000; Marsh, 1992; Renzulli and Park, 2000). Finn (1989) theorized that the relationship between participation and school-related goals is about feeling identified with the school, leading to a sense of belonging and valuing of school-related outcomes. It is an answer to withdrawal and disengagement. He suggested that efforts should be made to increase and maintain participation in extracurricular, social, athletic, and even student government activities to help students stay in contact with schools. The results taken together provide validation for this practice.

Another implication for practice is the need for personal choice or autonomy for students who struggle. While some students may benefit from structure, those who seek personal meaning may require greater freedom and opportunity to explore and synthesize new information. Personal autonomy is also regarded in modern educational theory as an extremely important aim that is learned. It is considered important in providing for the development of a person's ability to think and act in responsible ways. In this perspective education is viewed as a process that results in emancipation rather than

socialization (Snik, 1997). Autonomy, in terms of choices of what to study to maintain interest, as well as the freedom to participate in activities related to self-directed development of identity, and the ability to plan one's future was a factor that wove through the categories. In this study, there were many comments made about how teachers could positively or negatively influence students. When teaching was described as positive, it was supportive of choices and of self-development, thus inspiring hard work, determination, and greater motivation, as well as a sense of hope.

Autonomy is central to the notion of agency, that according to Deci (1993) it is not about independence, per se, but about good quality relationships that support self-determination. An autonomous person is a critical thinker who questions but doesn't necessarily act without influence of the beliefs and traditions of their context (Snik, 1997). A social context can either support or inhibit development by facilitating need fulfillment in areas of autonomy as well as competency and relatedness (Miserandino, 1996). Relationships and social environments that these needs lead to integration of desired values as well as healthy relationships (Ryan, 1993), rather than to rebellious independence or disengagement. Autonomy does not exclude recognition of authority or the knowledge of the authority (Snik, 1997). Self-determination is a psychological need that motivates a person and fosters engagement (Deci & Ryan, 1985). If students can be helped to perceive themselves as autonomous and to feel competent, they will have a sense of self-determination and be motivated, lessening the chance of dropping out (Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997). When this intrinsic motivation is enhanced through support of self-determination, creativity is also enhanced (Amabile, 1990). The implications of the previous research and the current results confirm the care that needs to

be taken by educators to foster relationships that respect and support autonomy and facilitate experiences that lead to engagement. Intrinsically motivated students who feel engaged in their environment would maximize their strengths in their own development, as well as in their contributions to society.

Finally, in the case of students who struggle with academic issues such as poor study skills or learning issues, it is clear that either there is little help available or that they have poor help-seeking habits. Counselling services must include learning-enhancement services. Providing workshops on study skills, test-taking anxiety and so on might serve to normalize the experience and invite students who struggle with these issues to utilize counselling as a means of supporting their academic goals. A general climate of academic success could also be created with highly visible and accessible learning workshops as in those that are available at some university counselling centres.

### *Implications for Research*

Future research needs to address the issue of stereotyping students who struggle. Consistent with the existing literature, the results include behavioural descriptions of handing assignments in late, not asking for help, not being prepared for exams, not doing homework, skipping class, falling behind, etc. These were contained in the category "Academic Problems". Focus on one aspect of descriptions in isolation might reinforce stereotypes. Results were also inconsistent with data from studies on school leavers (Gilbert, 1993). Participants in this study (recall, most of whom did eventually complete), did not talk about coming from low-income homes, of being married, single parenting, or of having friends who did not value school. Others talked about being gifted

and bored or how the absence of more personally meaningful material led to their academic disinterest and disengagement. Certainly problems in the home were present for some; however, school achievement was reportedly valued by most families and by friends. School-related variables such as boredom and psychological variables such as pre-existing family issues were demonstrated; however, none were identified by participants as the cause of defining characteristic of their struggle. The results taken together paint a more complex picture of dropping out and of struggling, suggesting that future research consider context and the complex interaction of variables. As well, it suggests that stereotyping is not useful.

In my personal disclosure, I reported that I had experienced a difficulty concentrating, related to being bored and having a frustrated need to move faster, as well as having the material be more meaningful. This was echoed in stories of participants who talked about being bored and not being able to focus on homework or classroom tasks. It fits with the idea that at least some of the students who struggle may actually be intellectually gifted or otherwise having unique learning needs. Future research will have to determine whether indeed students who struggle have unidentified learning problems or if those problems are related to the material not being personally meaningful.

Cautioning against stereo-typing, Radwanski (1987) talked about academically gifted students being among students who struggle, which also emerged in the current study where a few had been identified as gifted, and most of the others showed significant ability to achieve academically after their struggles. Similar to Radwanski's study, this dissertation was of a qualitative nature. Radwanski's focus group obviously allowed for a more meaningful understanding of the experience of those who struggled,

but it was limited by the nature of the questions it asked and the fact that the students it surveyed had all dropped out. Again, the experience is complex and variables previously described as causal are possibly inter-related. This dissertation raised doubts about the tendency to separate various influences like school, community and peers in effort to explore the subject matter. Researchers need to take this into account when designing future studies. More qualitative studies that can embrace multiple inter-related variables in this complex process are required.

The qualitative and holistic nature of this study provided a rich description of an experience in context, allowing for the results to demonstrate that variables are a part of a complex interaction. Studies investigating the reason people struggle and what helps them to overcome such non-normative experiences are clearly psychological. Large government sponsored surveys that create false dichotomies between dropouts and completers do not generate useful information for counsellors or educators. These studies lack theory (Holland & Andre, 1987) and thus serve to perpetuate the gap between theory and research, and between research and practice. Beginning with participant-sensitive questions, future research needs to be grounded in psychology and be conducted by researchers with an awareness of counselling practice.

Finally, future research is required to determine whether the story that emerged is representative of a unique group of students who struggle and eventually complete high school or of a wider group of those struggle whether or not they complete high school. It may even be reflective of a general dissatisfaction with high school experienced by many students who do not struggle.

### *Limitations*

While this study was not designed for analysis and conjecture about an experience, but a description of one, the implications are clear. The study is limited by its philosophical framework and associated qualitative methodology. It was not meant to generalize. Neither was it designed to develop theory about the causes of a particular constellation of behaviours or to understand a population. This research does not claim to be an objective finding or an unbiased representation of some objective truth. In addition, the people who participated in the study happened to be all females (one male had offered to participate but was not able to). While nothing in their stories was specifically gender-focused, results may not be generalizable to the experience of males.

In line with a constructivist paradigm, a researcher's conclusion is not provided, impressions were included. The study did however raise questions about stereotypes, and about assumptions and shed light on the experience of struggle. In the rich description of struggle, it conceptually related to psychological theories on identity development and wellness, on self-determination and intrinsic motivation, and on engagement. Overall, it suggested that change, even minimal change in the form of ability to have some choice and some participation in arts and sports, is required on the part of the education system in order to help students who are struggling, and others who feel alienated from the system.

### *Final Comments*

The aim of the description was not to provide answers, but to raise useful

questions. It raised questions and implications for meeting the needs of students whose experiences are non-normative. Implications are made without a clear indication of causality and without identification of variables associated with a demographic. This may be difficult for some readers looking for a way to simplify the experience of struggle in high school by stereotyping or by looking for a single cause. However, while the experience may be complex and may require a holistic understanding, the implications and recommendations are less complex. They involve relatively little in terms of risk and cost. Instead they require a challenging human response. They require a system to engage in the development of an individual by responding to individuality rather than reacting by excluding a person whose behaviours may seem to be an interference with goals designed for a larger group. As well, when setting goals for a group such as the design of academic learning goals, we must not forget to teach students to survive in what is now a fast-paced and ever-changing world. We need to model flexibility and respect for diversity. We need to support autonomy, foster creativity, and embrace uniqueness. We also need to understand that at times life makes other areas of development take precedence over academic development. If we can respond to high school students' needs regarding development of social ability, identity, emotional maturity, they should be better equipped to manage the challenges and rewards of greater academic achievement.

Overall, this study supports the idea that students' potential to achieve can be enhanced in times of struggle, regardless of the cause and nature of their struggles. Educators must be able to respond to students' need to bond with the system, and to find belonging and expression of self through involvement in individually meaningful

activity. This means change on the part of the school system and a willingness to re-think and re-structure. Identity development during high school years may or may not involve a process of struggle. Mental health, as well as achievement can be supported by supportive and understanding social contexts that facilitate affiliation while allowing for individualized exploration. This means a continued culture with group norms and structured goals and activities, but one that also is flexible to diversity and able to not only accept, but honour and celebrate difference. It calls for a change in attitude for a changing world that not only requires, but places value on flexibility, diversity and lifelong development.

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Appendix A

*Recruitment Poster*

Appendix B

*Informed Consent Form*

## Appendix C

### *Interview Schedule*

#### *General Research Question*

What is the experience of high school for people who struggled to complete?

#### *Interview Question*

What is your experience of high school, before completing or leaving, and after? What were your thoughts? Feelings? What did you do?

#### *Additional Interview Questions/Thematic Areas for Probing*

(Although these questions are not purely from a phenomenological perspective, they are included as possible probes to encourage participants to think about their experiences)

- Experience with leaving or struggling to complete
- Nature of difficulties at the time
- Thoughts/feelings/actions at the time of leaving or struggling
- Intra-personal characteristics or situation considered relevant
- Facilitative or hindering factors at the time
- Family, School, Peer and other contextual variables at the time
- Education or career experiences afterwards/later in life
- Experience of Self/Identity during or after if considered relevant
- Prior or later experiences with struggling, or other struggles experienced at the time relevant to the high school experience
- General attitude towards high school, education, and/or institutions
  - Involvement in extra-curricular activities? Meaning of those activities?

Appendix D

*Ethical Acceptance from the University of British Columbia*

Appendix E

*Ethical Approval from the University of Calgary*