

WHAT FACILITATES COMPLETION OF HIGH SCHOOL FOR
STUDENTS WHO EXPERIENCE THE RISK OF EARLY LEAVE

BY

SHIRLEY KATZ

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Department of Counselling Psychology

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

Date August 27, 1999

ABSTRACT

This study explores the facilitation of completion of high school for students who experience the risk of dropping out. The purpose of the study was to develop a comprehensive scheme of categories to describe what facilitates completion from the perspective of high school students. An adaptation of The Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954) was used. Sixteen categories emerged from an analysis of incidents. The soundness and trustworthiness of the categories were tested. Results indicate that completion can be facilitated by emotional support and guidance, respect from teachers, opportunity to participate and get help, goals setting for the future, encouragement of autonomy and responsibility, recognition, participation in the arts or sport, and reward. What remains to be confirmed is the helping value of several categories that were novel, such as identity development through social comparison. Anecdotal information that was consistently observed in the contents of the interviews was included and discussed. Participants made suggestions to help other students struggling to complete high school. This study suggests promising developments in high school completion which have implications for research, practice and curriculum design in counselling and education.

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FOREWARD

The researcher's interest in the study is motivated by personal experience. I did not complete high school, later entered post-secondary as a mature student, and managed to achieve success in university. My retrospective perception of experiences which contributed to her early leave includes the need to be financially self-supportive due to living outside the family home, loss of meaning, boredom with curriculum, and lack of emotional support. The early leave led to a poor self-concept with regard to school ability. What facilitated my return to post-secondary education included information about mature-student entrance requirements, as well as recognition and encouragement from significant figures in the education system with which I had contact through occupational experiences. I have maintained a high degree of interest and participation in a number of creative fields as well. I feel that my interests and personal experiences contributed potential insights, but also potential bias to the interpretation and discussion of the findings and are thus mentioned here.

What Facilitates Completion of High School for Students Who Experience the Risk of Early Leave

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Background

High school completion is increasingly becoming the minimum level of education required for entry-level employment (Clark, 1997; Radwanski, 1987) and those who do not complete high school face high personal costs, including loss of income resulting from lower paying jobs and increased likelihood of unemployment (LeFleur, 1992). Canadian students who leave high school before graduation report difficulty getting jobs, increased use of alcohol and drugs, increased involvement in crime, regret, and the loss of friends (Price-Waterhouse, 1990). Since education is considered essential to Canadian social well-being and economic prosperity (LeFleur, 1992), society also pays the cost of the bleak future of those who do not complete high school (George, Land, & Hickson, 1992). Future technological change may require learning through the lifetime (Clark, 1997). Since those who did not complete high school may lack the basic skills needed to retrain in an increasingly knowledge-intensive world (Clark, 1997; Radwanski, 1987), high school dropouts may continue to be disadvantaged long into their futures. Many of the studies on the problem of

early leave from high school provide correlational data focusing on the risk profile of the early leaver (Frank, 1990; Frymier, 1996; Quirouette, Saint-Denis, & Hout, 1990). There is however, increasing evidence that those who experience the risk of early leave from high school are a heterogeneous group (Franklin & Streeter, 1995; Gilbert, 1993), and researchers have stressed the need to provide for the needs of a diverse group of students (Franklin & Streeter, 1995).

It has been observed that the rich, divergent data pool has often not been utilized in the creation of intervention programs and often the programs are not evaluated (Morris, Pawlovich, & McCall, 1991). The gap between programs and research may indicate that research thus far has not yielded practical information necessary to help the divergent group of individuals struggling to complete high school.

A lack of inclusion of student perspectives is evident in a review of the existing studies. When student perspectives were included, the focus was on what went wrong for those who did not succeed in graduating. Subsequently, much potentially valid data on what facilitates successful completion at times of difficulty has been overlooked in research and program planning. Much of the theory and practice relating to provision of services for high school

students experiencing the risk of early leave is based on opinion and conjecture. It has also been problem-focused. It is therefore important that students themselves be given an opportunity to provide information of what is helpful to them in times of risk, to complete high school. The focus of this study was to address the lack of practical, solution-focused information. In response to this need to understand what students feel is helpful, the research question for this study was: What facilitates completion of high school for students who experience the risk of early leave?

Purpose of the Study

By gathering reports from high school graduates who experienced the risk of dropping out while in high school, the aim of this study was to develop a set of categories with themes that describe what factors are likely to facilitate completion. The category scheme is intended to further the development of a theoretical framework for working with students who experience the risk of leaving. An investigation of this kind is intended to contribute to the field of counseling by providing data and information on appropriate ways to facilitate high school completion for students who risk early leave.

Rationale and Significance of the Study

There are several reasons for conducting a study of what facilitates high school completion for students who experienced the risk of early leave. First, there is concern about the high incidence of dropping out in Canadian schools (Gilbert, 1993). It is therefore critical that more research on what facilitates completion for students at risk be undertaken so that counseling professionals and policy-makers in education can design appropriate programs to address the needs of a diversified student population.

Second, although much work has been devoted to identification of potential drop-outs and attempts at identifying causality (Gilbert, 1993), the field has paid little attention to what constitutes and facilitates successful high school completion for students who experience the risk of leaving. The field needs exploratory, discovery-oriented research to begin building a theory on how to help students in need of assistance in completing.

Third, the concept of students as a resource has been largely overlooked, as has counseling as a resource in both research and program development. Program initiatives have also not been based on research (Roderick, 1993) and have excluded the perspectives of students and counselors. Many initiatives have been unsuccessful. 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, & Moracco, 1991). Research that includes the perspectives of students and counselors is necessary to develop an understanding of what facilitates completion.

Understanding and assisting students who may leave school before graduating is necessary in order to ensure access to education for a diverse population of students. In order to assist them, it is necessary to develop an understanding of what facilitates successful completion. Information of what facilitates completion is more useful than any analysis of a 'problem' after it has occurred. Failure to address the question of how to help students who are still in school struggling to succeed reflects poorly on any efforts to plan interventions to reduce dropout rates. Failure to provide students with programs that address their expressed needs affects students, families, educators, policy makers and society in general, on economic and social levels. How can students who feel that they do not belong in school, can not contribute meaningfully, or have needs which can not be met by one of societies main institutions, become active contributing members of society?

It has been said that all of society has an interest in reducing the number of students who drop out (LeFleur, 1992), however, counselors are in a unique position to help. They have been identified as a resource, and they are in a unique position to conduct qualitative research that includes the views of students and identifies their needs for support. Since counselors are also likely expected to implement programs or refer students, it follows that they are ideal for conducting research in this area. The present project examined the experience of risk of dropping out from a counseling perspective by utilizing an interview technique to address the question, and attempting to gather practical information on what helps in times of adversity. This study addressed these issues by beginning with a research question and approach that included the voices of students to provide practical information for ways counselors might help with the complex process of completion in times of risk of early leave.

Approach to the Study

The methodological approach used in this study is based on the need to give students a voice in identifying what helps them in graduating from high school in times of adversity. An adaptation of The Critical Incident Technique

(Flanagan, 1954) will be used in this study because it allows students to share their own knowledge and voice their own experiences. The Critical Incident Technique provides a reasonable approach to addressing the research question.

This study begins an exploration of the nature of the experience of completion in times of adversity and risk of early leave. It provides a starting point for subsequent research and program development in counseling to help students stay in school. In taking the focus off the problem, and redirecting the research question to understanding and identifying helping factors, this research is ground-breaking and may potentially lead to highly effective interventions with maximized value to students, counsellors and educators.

Limitations

The use of the Critical Incident Technique to collect data through retrospective interviews presents the risk of compromising some accuracy and detail through memory lost over time. However, it is suggested that detail and accuracy can be improved with proper preparation and instruction to participants. Full and precise retrospective reports can then be assumed to contain accurate information. Vague reports suggests that the event and incidents are not well

remembered (Flanagan, 1954). This study relies on the motivation and ability of participants to accurately describe details of an historic experience, and the ability of the researcher to develop rapport and to properly prepare and instruct participants.

This study does not attempt to identify variables associated with or comprising profiles of early school leavers, thus data from this study may not be useful in early identification of those at-risk.

Assumptions

In this study, several assumptions were the foundation for the research. The assumption that enough is known about the problem (Danzberger & Lefkowitz, 1987) was accepted, and drove the question instead: What facilitates completion of high school for students at risk of early leave?

The finding that students who do not complete high school are a diverse group (Franklin & Streeter, 1995) informed the methodology. It was assumed that individual stories of struggling through adversity would vary. However, since the focus of the study was on facilitation of a common goal, it was assumed that commonality would emerge in the themes of what helped. This assumption emerged out of Flanagan's original work with Critical Incident Methodology,

which indicated that while subjective data is obtained, participants do tend to make similar observations with regards to critical incidents, supporting a sense of objectivity (1954).

Also assumed was that completion of high school is a possibility for a divergent group of students with a diverse set of challenges. Therefore the focus of the study was on experience and contextual variables, rather than particular personality variables such as resilience or coping. Furthermore, since contextual variables are more amenable to change, it was assumed that results would have practical utility. The assumption arose from a counseling perspective, which emphasizes utility of findings to the practice of helping.

It was assumed that previous attempts and interventions were not entirely successful because of not incorporating the views of students as experts. This assumption emerged from the fact that students who leave tend to feel that nobody cared or listened. The method in this study gave individuals an opportunity to have their stories told. It is the hope of the researcher that results of this study will have face-value for students struggling with similar issues in the future, due to the peer-contributed nature of the methodology.

It was also assumed that participants would be motivated by the possibility of helping others, so that they will participate actively in the study, giving accurate and detailed accounts of what helped them in completing high school during the time they almost dropped out. Since in the past students who did not complete high school expressed that they felt pushed out it was assumed that those who completed despite this experience would readily share their stories with the aim of helping others to succeed.

CHAPTER 2

THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Looking at dropout prevention through a linear, statistical model that aims to identify at-risk students pathologizes diversity and fails to address the need for providing services to those students, as it is a problem orientation, rather than a solution focused approach. In the attempt to identify causality, helping factors are often overlooked. An adverse experience, which may be a complex, interactive process, is simplified. The affective component is overlooked. Identification and labeling is the outcome of this problem approach. Intervention initiatives are therefore likely to perpetuate the problem expressed by students of feeling ignored by the system. It has been emphasized that feelings of alienation should be dealt with in future initiatives (Radwanski, 1987; Roderick, 1993; Tidwell, 1988), however, professionals working with students experiencing the risk of leaving lack the theoretical knowledge of how to help.

There are problems with existing dropout research including inconsistency in the definition of dropout, and subsequent inconsistency in the calculations of dropout rates. Prevention initiatives tend not to be based on

empirical studies, and are rarely evaluated empirically. Neither studies of the problem, nor intervention programs include the perspectives of the student. As a primary stakeholder, the student should be included and considered an expert.

Recommended program initiatives often reflect the need to have individualized contacts for students with a significant mentor in the system. Many studies note that counsellors may be an underdeveloped resource. There is a lack of information available for counsellors to utilize to help facilitate completion for students at risk. This study is designed to address the issues as outlined above.

The Problem with Definition and Profiles

The difficulty in talking accurately about early school leaving, and utilizing existing literature is related to several issues. First, the definition of what constitutes dropping out is not uniformly accepted (Sullivan, 1988). An inconsistency in the existing literature of the definition of dropout and subsequent problem in comparing statistics is also cited. (Morris, Pawlovich, & McCall, 1991). Not surprisingly, there is little agreement or understanding of what may be required to support and promote completion for those having difficulties in school. Second, numbers

calculated by schools do not reflect the various reasons students may leave, such as leaving to go to vocational school, imprisonment, special school needs, or death (Gilbert, 1993; Morris, Pawlovich, & McCall, 1991). There is also a lot of variance of the rates of dropping out related to region, school, nation, historical time, therefore researchers can not rely on quantitative data conducted in previous times and must also look at local, specific data (Morris, Pawlovich, & McCall, 1991).

Literature on the problem of dropping out tends to use statistical language, talking about students, rather than with them. The over-emphasis on statistical profiles and correlation data leads to a 'person-as-problem' orientation. The focus on problems seems to assume that identifying and ameliorating problem variables will automatically lead to success. Successful completion of high school may require more than the amelioration of problem variables. Ameliorating problem variables may also not be possible. Some of these negative factors contributing to early leave from school may be embedded in society or school environments. Factors may be situational and contextual, therefore amenable to change, versus inherent and fixed, such as personality or variables

As well, studies that tend to focus on correlates of those who have dropped out (Frank, 1990; Frymier, 1996; Quirouette, Saint-Denis, & Hout, 1990). Focus on the drop out rather than the problem of early school leaving. In Leaving school: Results from a national survey comparing school leavers and high school graduates, 18-20 years of age, Gilbert (1993) wrote that a large body of research has been devoted to determining the causes and identifying students who are considered susceptible to early leaving. The rationale for this over-emphasis seems to be that early identification is crucial for prevention. Since students who dropped out of school reported that feeling identified as a problem gave them a sense of being pushed out (Price-Waterhouse, 1990), it follows that this kind of research may perpetuate the problem. This also underscores the need to consider students' perspectives and include them in research and program initiatives.

Using statistical information to create a profile of a student at risk of dropping out may also be problematic for the counsellor or other professional who aims to help the individual student stay in school. Some students, regardless of their socio-economic status develop problems that make it difficult for them to stay in school (Morris, Pawlovich, & McCall, 1991) and in fact, dropping out among middle class,

high achieving and majority youth is on the increase (Franklin & Streeter, 1995). Society is responsible to respond effectively to, and provide schooling for, students from all backgrounds and social conditions (Canadian Education Association, 1991). Current at-risk criteria may not be sensitive to all the different types of students who may risk dropping out (Franklin & Streeter, 1995).

Methodology problems, in addition to over-emphasis on correlation information, include the failure to compare the occurrence of so-called identifying variables in cohort populations. What results is information that is not useful, a false assumption of homogeneity (Franklin & Streeter, 1995), simplification of what might be a complex and interactive process (Bearden, Spencer, & Moracco, 1991, 1991), and failure to examine emotional and other contextual factors in the experiences of those who dropout (Bearden, Spencer, & Moracco, 1991).

Another problem with reporting statistics related to the profile of an early school leaver, is that it tends to over-emphasize the individual qualities, rather than an interaction of several variables, and contextual factors. Bearden, Spencer, & Moracco (1991) argue that leaving school is a complex process best understood when attention is paid to the affective component. There appears to be a wealth of

statistical information available, and it is believed that enough is known about the problem to begin working towards solutions (Danzberger & Lefkowitz, 1987).

The tendency to look at success or failure in terms of outcomes also misses the individual responses to real-life experiences. Research that evaluates outcomes without understanding the process misses valuable information about how to work towards desired outcomes. Critical Incident methodology overcomes this problem by asking individuals to evaluate naturally occurring instances of success and failure (Vispoel & Austin, 1995) in the process of reaching a given aim.

Finally, there exists a problem in developing intervention initiatives based largely on the American pool of data, where there may be differences in the education system. Policy, statistics, curriculum, and counselling programs are vastly different than the Canadian system. This study avoids the problem with definitions and profiles and instead includes a heterogeneous sample, focusing instead on the qualitative process of what works in the face of adversity. Results from other studies (Borgen & Amundson, 1984; Cochran, 1985) have shown that the results of qualitative research can be useful to populations outside of the geographic and demographic parameters within which that

data was gathered. Results of this study should therefore prove useful to counsellors and students dealing with the issue of high school completion, regardless of geographic region and school system.

The Importance of School

There are significant social and economic costs to early leave of high school, including poor health, crime, substance abuse, and overall lower quality of life (Gilbert, 1993). Today, most jobs require high school as a minimum requirement (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1997). It is generally agreed that in an increasingly technical, competitive work environment, dropping out places students at risk for low income, and downward mobility (Franklin & Streeter, 1995; Sullivan, 1988). Csikszentmihalyi & McCormack (1986) argue that learning to become an adult member of society starts in school, and it is the responsibility of all educators to assure continuity of society and culture by providing meaningful experiences to the young. Jobs for those who leave high school before completion tend to be concentrated in blue collar and low level service occupations (Sullivan, 1988).

What We Know About Early Leavers

Many studies report statistics associated with students who leave school before graduating (Clark, 1997; LeFleur, 1992; Sullivan, 1988; Roderick, 1993). Although there is much variability in reports about the percentage of students who dropout, recent Canadian statistics (Clark, 1997) report that the school leaver rate was 15% among those aged 24 in 1995, when those who return to school are factored in. Current rates are lower than previously stated (Gilbert, 1993). While 80% of high school graduates pursued further education, only one-in-four of the early leavers that were surveyed in an earlier study had gone on to some kind of further study. Leaving high school had a negative impact on the leavers' employment, with female leavers having the highest (30%) unemployment rate. It was also noted that female leavers were much more likely to have dependent children (27%) versus female high school graduates (4%), which suggested that family responsibilities of female leavers may have affected their decision to leave school.

As pointed out by Roderick (1993), and Gilbert (1993), a wealth of studies explore the problem of early school leaving. These studies identify many different factors as being at the root of the problem. Some point to individual

factors, such as academic failure (Hahn, Danzberger, & Lefkowitz, 1987), difficulty adjusting (Tinto, 1987), or low self-esteem (George et al., 1992). Some emphasize the relevance of school related variables, such as dissatisfaction with teachers or the school environment, or lack of achievement (Cipywnyk, 1983; Franklin & Streeter, 1995; Radwanski, 1987; Tidwell, 1988). Others emphasize family variables such as responsibilities or dysfunction, others socio-economic status, race and cultural variables (Frank, 1990; Morris, Pawlovich, & McCall, 1991; Franklin & Streeter, 1995). However, there is overall agreement that dropping out of high school before graduation is a complex interactive process involving the school environment, the student, the family and social factors (George et al., 1992; Pittman, 1986; Price-Waterhouse, 1990; Wells, 1990).

Qualitative frameworks attempt to provide an understanding of the complex interaction between poor performance in school and socio-economic factors (Roderick, 1993). Citing several studies (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Rumberger et al., 1990; Tidwell, 1988; Tinto, 1987), Roderick, (1993) attempts to describe the process of the interaction, whereby students from disadvantaged families come to school with characteristics that place them at greater risk of dropping out. It follows that the school and classroom environment

may be factors influencing the likelihood of dropping out by contributing to feelings of being marginalized and isolated. These feelings may relate to perceived incongruence between the institution and the students' perceived needs and interests.

Views of students surveyed in a Canadian qualitative study (Price-Waterhouse, 1990) also reflected the view that dropping out was not a one-time decision, but a complex process. For them, the process involved feelings of not fitting in, alienation, isolation and gradual withdrawal, ending in a feeling of lack of perceived support, or even a perceived push to leave. Economic, social and cultural factors were also identified as barriers interacting in the process of dropping out (Price-Waterhouse, 1990).

Qualitative studies indicate that students who leave school before graduating are not a homogenous group, but a heterogeneous one, with varied backgrounds (Franklin & Streeter, 1995). The Price-Waterhouse (1990) study identified several categories of leavers, with distinct socio-economic, cultural, achievement and other contextual characteristics. If students who dropout are a heterogenous group and therefore not easily identified, it follows that the experience of leaving school is likely influenced by situational, and contextual variables.

From the previous review of the literature, an important question emerges: What facilitates completion in some students, and are there common helping factors that influence the process of completion. The answer to this question should be valuable to program planning as well as individual counselling interventions.

Dropout Prevention

Policy prescriptions and interventions often do not follow from the recent research base (Roderick, 1993) and initiatives are rarely evaluated empirically (Morris, Pawlovich, & McCall, 1991). Programs and initiatives to prevent dropouts have centred on identification of students at risk of dropping out, based on statistical profiles.

It has been suggested that prevention programs pay significant attention to the school environment (Radwanski, 1987; Roderick, 1993), maximizing attention and concern to the individual (Franklin & Streeter, 1995). In 1991, the evaluated the effectiveness of some school dropout prevention strategies and made suggestions for future interventions such as utilizing a tutor or mentor, parental involvement, individualized and self-paced instruction, and flexible learning schedules. A common factor among these interventions appears to be attention to specific,

individualized needs of unique students, particularly when needs are not being met by programs designed for the majority. Dropout prevention initiatives are rarely based on research, or empirically evaluated (Morris, Pawlovich, & McCall, 1991). As well, a review of the literature indicates that to date, most studies precludes the expressed or unique needs of the individuals they are designed to serve.

In Fourth Generation Evaluation, Guba and Lincoln (1989) emphasized the importance of designing programs based on the input of those who will be effected by the information, the users of the program, or stakeholders, as they are referred to. In dropout prevention, this would require including the claims, issues and concerns of students in research, evaluation and program development. As noted in Land, and Hicks (1992), if the educational system was more responsive to pupil needs during the phases they go through prior to leaving, they might lessen the possibility of the students' decision to do so. Students need to be included in program development and evaluations designed to help them to stay in school.

In 1988, Sullivan followed-up on students who had left high school and were previously surveyed, asking what might have persuaded them to stay in school. Although the majority believed that no actions or circumstances would have

persuaded them to stay, the ones who felt they could have been persuaded spoke of school factors such as improved courses and student-teacher relations as vital. The students felt that teachers and staff just did not care about them. In the original study (Radwanski, 1987), one of the recommendations was to ensure that feelings of alienation - a major cause of dropping out - be dealt with in future interventions. Assuring that every student had at least one regular, caring relationship such as a mentor, or a teacher assigned to be responsible for monitoring a particular student's progress was suggested. It follows that research should begin such a process by reducing alienation and including students in the research. In Tidwell (1988), dropouts were asked to recommend preventative measures. These students also suggested the need for more attention to be paid to students, including assistance with academic difficulties and greater interaction with teachers.

Roderick's study provided evidence that the structure, policies and organization of schools, particularly in dealing with transitions and repetition of grades were large contributing factors in early school leaving, as they led to students feeling disengaged and withdrawn from membership in the school community (Roderick, 1993).

The above examples illustrate the importance of stakeholder-informed interventions, which lead to students feeling included and valued as members of the education community. This requires including their views and experiences not only in program development, but also in research upon which programs should be based. One of the conditions necessary to produce an effective counsellor-client relationship in order to affect change, is empathy, which requires understanding the experiences, thoughts, feelings and perceptions of the client (Hackney & Cormier, 1996). The methodology chosen for this study enables the identification of helping factors based on reports from those who have experienced the risk of not completing high school. It is therefore in line with Person-Centred principles and stakeholder-informed program development principles (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Counselling Initiatives in Dropout Prevention

The problem of early school leaving has been studied by educators, statisticians, and government, as well as by other social scientists. However, few studies have addressed the issue from the perspective of counsellors or other stakeholders who are in a position to work directly with students. Studies done by educators and policy makers tend to

have different goals, beginning assumptions and frameworks than those that would be done by counselling professionals. For example, educators and policy makers are concerned with retention numbers, and outcomes such as economic and social costs, whereas counsellors are instead concerned with how to help individuals cope with their unique problems. Since counselling research aims at developing programs that help individuals to cope with their own unique problems, at times research initiatives tend to be more solution-focused than problem-focused.

Several studies suggest that counsellors are in a position to work with these individuals and their unique problems (Bearden, Spencer, & Moracco, 1991; Franklin & Streeter, 1995; George et al., 1992). Most existing studies, based on the 'person-as-problem' perspective are incongruent with counselling perspectives on helping, which tend to be Person-Centred and thus solution oriented. Counsellors are expected to implement programs to deal with dropout problems. They work individually with unique students who are not responding to curriculum and programs designed for the majority. Counselling research therefore has a role to play in investigating the issue of early leaving from a Person-Centred perspective, to develop theories and programs that maximize the utility to stakeholder/students.

Franklin and Streeter (1995) emphasized the importance of developing dropout prevention programs that maximize attention and concern to the individual. George, Land, & Hicks (1992) noted that since the school dropout problem is complex, the issue might be best dealt with by the services of a school counsellor. They further pointed out that since school counsellors are in a key role to be able to identify potential dropouts and develop preventive measures, they need to have a thorough understanding of the needs of these students.

Bearden, Spencer, and Moracco (1991) suggest that helpful studies of the process of leaving school need to pay attention to the complex nature of the process, and include the affective component. For students who leave before graduation, lack of understanding may be a greater factor than any learning problem (Bearden, Spencer, & Moracco, 1991).

Students in the Sullivan study (1988) reported that overall, they felt staff members did not try very hard to get them to change their minds about dropping out, although those who spoke with guidance counsellors felt that they did try hard compared with other staff. Bearden, Spencer, and Moracco (1991) state that from the students' viewpoint, schools can help students to stay by counselling them,

showing respect and understanding. This seems to re-affirm that counsellors may be an existing, undeveloped resource in dropout prevention. In Morris, Pawlovich, and McCall's report (1991), it is noted that counselling services can be a significant factor in helping students stay in school by helping them cope with personal and social problems as well as referral to community support and resources. Different types of counselling interventions have been suggested, ranging from peer, career, support, crisis, parent, and group (PRIOR, 1990; Wells, 1990). However, there does not appear to be a consensus in the literature regarding staff development in this area.

In a review of the literature on dropout prevention, Roderick (1993) summarized that commitment to reduce dropout rates in the 90s demands that we use past successes and failures to inform new approaches. Some of the recommendations that grew out of the study include orientation programs, increasing peer and teacher support, guiding and monitoring students through small counselling groups, and restructuring initiatives that allow for teaching a more heterogeneous group of students. The need to take steps to reduce anonymity and bureaucracy for future dropout prevention initiatives was also emphasized. It follows that research initiatives, particularly in counselling, should

take steps to reduce anonymity and bureaucracy. Stakeholder-informed, qualitative investigations focused on success appear to be a natural next step.

Counsellors, typically in a position to deal with individual, unique problems appear to be in an ideal position to contribute meaningfully to stay-in-school research and initiatives, and in doing so, to bridge the gap between the two. The counselling professional's ability to communicate understanding and teach responsibility can be maximized in the design of interventions for student who feels that they do not belong or fit in. Counselling research can also play a role in suggesting ways to make the system more responsive to student needs. In these ways, counselling has a role to play in dealing with both the individual client and the school system.

Frymier (1992) suggested that in addition to caring, understanding and nurturing academic achievement, helping youth at-risk of dropping out requires cultivating a sense of responsibility. Campbell and Myrick (1990) noted that school counsellors have been successful in helping undermotivated students to be more successful by teaching responsibility.

It was the aim of this study to explore what facilitates successful graduation in the face of difficulty, and that the information would be useful for the future development of

theories to aid individual students, coping with their own, complex and unique experiences, to stay in school. The stakeholder-included, Person-Centred methodology chosen considered the first step in reducing bureaucracy, communicating understanding, and teaching responsibility.

What Works

In an analysis of longitudinal studies of early school leavers, PRIOR (1990) identified recommended areas of research. They suggested that most urgent was the question of why certain students stay in school despite the presence of negative factors. In From start to finish: A school district guide to school drop-out prevention, the Canadian Association of School Administrators (1992) argues that we need to listen to the message of students as to why they drop out.

Sullivan (1988) asked non-dropouts if they ever contemplated leaving, and approximately 1 in 6 reported that they had thought about it. When they did, and if they talked to someone, it was most likely to be a guidance counsellor. They were twice as likely to indicate that the person who they spoke to tried very hard to get them to change their minds compared to the ones who eventually dropped out. The individual attention and perceived concern of a staff member

appears to have important influence on staying in school. This contributes to the rationale that certain helping factors exist and can be modified to aid students experiencing the risk of dropping out.

One of the recommendations of the Canadian Education Association report (Morris, Pawlovich, & McCall, 1991) is that future qualitative research is needed to investigate the perceptions of early leavers and discovers what it is about students that stay, that helps them with that decision. This study attempts to address the issue. It was hoped that the methodology used in this study, which paid specific attention to the views of individuals with first hand experience of the risk of dropping out, would help answer that question, eventually informing future programs and counselling interventions. The results of this study should have increased personal relevance to those who experience the risk of early leave.

Summary of Literature Review

The existing data on early leave of school tends to be quantitative, focusing on broad-spectrum program initiatives, problem-focused rather than solution oriented, despite growing evidence that students who dropout are a heterogeneous group of students who feel lost in the

bureaucracy, and who need individualized intervention and attention. Dropping out is beginning to be understood as a complex interactive process including many factors, and studies have begun to emphasize the need for information about the process in terms of what helps. Program initiatives tend not to be based on research, and are rarely evaluated. Student perspectives are rarely heard. Qualitative studies that have included the views of students seem to indicate that what was useful and what is needed are caring, understanding professionals such as counselors who can help students cope with unique problems. Counsellors need information on what helps students who are coping with the process of staying in school or dropping out, in order to facilitate that success with students.

This study explored the issue of the experienced risk of early leave from school from the perspective of the student as stakeholder, and explored what worked for students who almost dropped out then succeeded in graduating. Students who reported having experienced the risk of early leave before completing high school shared their experiences through interviews. The research question was: What facilitates completion of high school for students who experience the risk of early leave? Risk was assessed by self-report rather than statistical profiles in order to

include the experiences of what might be a heterogeneous group. This approach, which included factors that facilitate completion in spite of problems, was taken in an attempt to improve the utility of results to all stakeholders, including students and those working to support them. It is hoped that information discovered in this study will lead to beginning theoretical understanding of how to work with students who experience the risk of early leave. In the long run, the design of materials and perhaps programs that promote completion for those experiencing the risk of dropping out may develop based on this information.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Overview

This study was designed to discover the critical incidents that facilitate high school graduation for students who experience the risk of early leave. In order to provide the richness of information that was necessary to explore a relatively un-researched aspect of the dropout phenomenon, a qualitative, discovery-oriented approach was utilized.

A variation of the Critical Incident Technique was used (Flanagan, 1954). Critical Incident Technique is a form of interview research in which participants provide descriptive accounts of events that facilitate or hinder a particular aim. Participants are selected for a study who have been in a position to experience or observe relevant facilitation or hindrance, and who are able to articulate their experience. Due to the solution orientation explained in the rationale for this study, facilitating events were the focus and hindering events were not included in the data analysis.

In line with the methodology, incidents were defined and described by the participants, who were considered experts. The research was discovery oriented, and therefore results should be useful in beginning to map out a theory rather than testing a specific hypothesis (Mahrer, 1992).

An analysis of the data using an exploratory methodology should contribute ideas on how to support and promote successful completion of high school in students who are experiencing difficulties. By including ideas from students who completed high school despite difficulties, programs that arise out of this study should be valuable to other students who perceive themselves to be experiencing difficulty completing. Those who may not benefit from existing interventions may find greater face-value in helping categories developed from interviews with other students who struggled.

This chapter will present specific information outlining the participants, data gathering techniques, a method of extracting and recording critical incidents and analytical procedures for data analysis.

The Critical Incident Technique

The Critical Incident Technique, a form of interview research in which participants provide descriptive accounts of events that facilitated or hindered a particular aim was developed by Flanagan (1954). He defined an incident as "any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act." (p.327). According to

Flanagan (1954), the incident "must occur in a situation where the purpose or intent of the act seems fairly clear to the observer and where its consequences are sufficiently definite to leave little doubt concerning it's effects." (p. 327).

During World War II, Flanagan, (1954) collected critical incidents elicited from pilot trainees. The information gathered was later used as criteria for selection and training of flight crew and pilots. Many studies have since used the approach (Andersson & Nilsson, 1964; McCormick, 1995, Vispoel & Austin, 1995) for gathering and classifying data in the form of observable behaviors or incidents considered critical for those experiencing them. The method gives the researcher definable data that can then be analyzed with relative ease, which is also relevant, practical, and important to participants. Reliability and validity procedures were provided by Andersson and Nilsson (1964), who reported that data collected and analyzed by this method was complete, comprehensive and resistant to interviewer difference, had stable classification of categories, and good inter-rater reliability. Andersson and Nilsson (1964) also outlined additional validity and reliability checks will be used in this study.

This technique was utilized for this study because it provides a useful tool for gathering and classifying data into categories. It is amenable to qualitative and relatively unstructured data gathering procedures and has been widely used by other researchers. Its use in this study should produce useful, practical information to help students struggling with the process of staying in school.

Critical incidents are defined by the participants. In order to be defined as critical, participants will be asked to describe only those events important enough to have influenced their decision to stay in school through completion and the process of doing so.

In a variation of the technique, in this study, participants will be asked to talk about incidents or events that helped them to continue past the at-risk time, to completion of high school. Hindering events will not be censored, but will be excluded from the analysis of the data. Participants complete interviews, from which critical incidents are extracted and then grouped by similarity to form a set of categories to comprehensively cover the events. This category system provides a map of what facilitates a given aim, and can be used to develop a theory, to construct a test, to design programs, or for future research to refine, extend, or revise categories (McCormick, 1995).

The term dropout and the term early school leaver are used interchangeably in this study, reflecting the use of the terms in the current literature. When possible, the researcher uses the words early leave, as it describes a process or experience and thereby avoids labeling an individual. As thus, it is less derogatory. Graduation or completion will mean having completed the requirements and having graduated from high school.

This study looked at the challenge of staying in school for a student who subjectively experienced the risk of early leave, to identify helping factors that may aid other students in similar situations. The general aim, as defined by Flanagan's (1954) original work, is to formulate a description of successful behaviour, or adjustment in a specific situation, in order to determine the requirements for success in that situation.

Participants

The participants for this study were drawn from people who graduated from high school in the last few years. Graduates were chosen because the study explored what facilitates graduation, and those who are still in high school may not graduate. It was decided to limit the study to those who have recently graduated to ensure clarity of

retrospective reports. The benefit of retrospective reports is that in the passing of time, individuals have opportunity to reflect on what happened and may be better able to articulate their experience. The drawback is that it is a recollection.

The results of this study are relevant to all high school students, whether they fit existing at-risk profiles or not, since the sample was not based on a profile, but rather an experience. They are also relevant across geographic regions in high schools. As stated earlier, results from other studies (Borgen & Amundson, 1984; Cochran, 1985) have shown that the results of qualitative research can be useful to populations outside of the geographic and demographic parameters within which that data was gathered.

Sixteen volunteers were recruited (7 males, 9 females) through personal networking, and through posters at community centres and community colleges. It was hoped that participants in the study would reflect the diverse cultural backgrounds of Canadian society. To ensure this, posters were placed in areas with ethnically diverse communities. The following ethno-cultural group memberships were represented in the sample, Korean, Chinese, Jewish, East-Indian, Caucasian and Latino. The ethnic background of

participants, however, was not factored in, since the focus of the study was a common experience, rather than a particular demographic. As well, as mentioned, qualitative research results are useful outside demographic parameters.

Pilot Interviews

Before conducting the study, pilot interviews were conducted with two participants to see whether recollection of events was difficult, to assess the interview procedure and define the context statement, and to determine whether the researcher was using leading questions. The context statement was slightly refined to clarify the request for concrete, helping variables versus theoretical ideas about what helps in times of adversity.

Data Collection

There were no rigid rules in the data collection stage of the research, however, only reports from qualified observers were utilized. While subjective data will be obtained, it has been shown that participants do tend to make similar observations with regards to critical incidents, supporting a sense of objectivity (Flanagan, 1954). The researcher must ensure that incidents are well defined in a clear and concise manner, so that competence in

interpretation can be achieved. Incidents are collected from participants and the data will be described and summarized in a way that interpretations can be drawn.

The main interviews for this study lasted between forty-five minutes and one hour, depending on the participants' ability to recall events, and their willingness to engage in the research process. Interviews were audio-taped. Most interviews were held in an office in the Counselling Psychology department at the University of British Columbia with two interviews conducted at a pre-arranged room in a local community college, and one in a participants' home, at their convenience. An information package consisting of a brief description of the researcher's background and a thorough description of the purpose of the study were provided to participants. The interested people contacted the researcher by telephone or e-mail to arrange for an interview time.

The interviews began with an explanation of confidentiality, and signing of consent forms. The tape recording procedures were then explained. A short demographic questionnaire was answered on audio-tape. A context statement, adapted from Young (1991) and the first question was read:

"People sometimes report difficulties staying in high school until graduation. Some experience a risk of almost dropping out, but manage to stay in school until graduation. Some leave, then return to graduate. Some things work better than others to help with this difficult time. By sharing your experiences, you will help identify positive factors effecting your decision, and subsequent success completing high school. Please think back to specific incidents that helped your decision to complete, and graduate. What I am interested in are concrete events rather than opinions and theories. Think back to when you experienced a risk of almost dropping out of school, but then decided to stay, or left and returned to complete. Describe how you came to make this decision and experience the completion of high school including what happened just before, at the time, and shortly afterwards."

The researcher used a number of prompts to make certain that incidents were developed completely (Flanagan, 1954), to build rapport, and to make certain that the participants were not being biased by the researcher (Borgen & Amundson, 1984). Some participants were asked the following questions for clarification:

1. How did the incident change your feeling or thinking about staying in school?

2. What led up to the incident?
3. What exactly happened at this time?
4. What happened after the incident?

Participants were encouraged to tell their stories in as much detail as they wished. The interview was unstructured with minimal responses from the interviewer in order to elicit information without leading the participants.

Once the first incident was fully explored, the researcher then asked the following:

"Can you think of another event that helped facilitate your decision to stay in school?"

This process was continued until all facilitating events were explored.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the incidents involved three steps. First, incidents were extracted from the audio-taped interviews, and these were recorded on 4X6 inch cards, one incident per card. Second, the incident cards were grouped according to thematic similarity, in order to form categories. Third, these categories were then subjected to several tests to examine their reliability and validity.

Recording and Extracting Incidents

The interviews were audio-recorded, assigned a code number corresponding to consent and confidentiality forms with subjects' names. The audio tapes were then transcribed verbatim. Each audio tape and transcript was carefully studied by the researcher in order to understand the full meaning of the statement. The researcher initially highlighted everything resembling an event. The researcher and research supervisor then intensely examined the list to determine the following: (a) Was there a clear source for the event? (b) Could the story be stated in reasonable completeness? What actually happened? (c) Was there an outcome bearing on the aim? Vague statements and irrelevant information were deleted to ensure that these three criteria were met. The data was transferred to note cards, with tentative category titles provided by the researcher. The circumstances surrounding the incident, what led up to it, what exactly what happened at the time, and what the result were, written onto note cards, one incident per card. The participants' code number was recorded on the back of each card and the incident number was also recorded, for example, "#1-2" was used to indicate the second event mentioned by interviewee number one. Once all the incidents were recorded

and coded for each participant, the audio-tape was reviewed again to ensure incidents were recorded correctly.

Analytical Procedures

The goal of this step according to Flanagan (1954) is "to summarize and describe the data in an efficient manner so that it can be effectively used for many practical purposes." (p. 344). He noted that researchers may increase the usefulness of the analysis by establishing the general frame of reference, by using inductive processes to develop the specific categories, and by selecting a level of specificity through which to report the results. Each incident was recorded onto cards in three constituent parts: source, action taken/what actually happened, and outcome. This was a challenge as the researcher had to ensure that the three criteria were met, especially when participants recalled events with varying degrees of clarity and completeness. Thus, sometimes it was necessary to paraphrase events to convey the full meaning of the participants' messages. Whenever possible, the words of the participant were left unchanged so that the essence of what was said was maintained in its purest form.

In the next step the incidents were divided into groups that seemed similar. Cards were tentatively sorted into piles

thought to have some common meanings. The focus on sorting was on the second criterion: the action taken/what actually happened. To ensure that the events were comprised of the three criteria, prototypical events were identified and used as templates for further decisions. A prototypical event was one that best described the thematic group in question as it had the greatest number and clearest of defining characteristics for that category. Prototypes served as examples for future sorting of events into similar groups/categories. Ambiguous or questionable events were set aside, to be used as challengers to the first attempt at category formation. The categorization was then subjected to the supervisor's examination and as a result, the categories were further refined and revised. Ambiguous events were used in the second attempt at categorizing when they were used as the challenger. Categories were further refined as a result. This process of challenge and confrontation was continued until stability was achieved. Category names emerged from the card content and renamed after the refining process. It was necessary to rename some of the categories to accurately represent the content of the incidents within the category. Sixteen categories emerged, which contained all the incidents.

It was expected that modifications would have to be made as the analysis progressed. Some category names were slightly altered to fully represent the incidents contained in it. Most remained unchanged. To enhance the quality of relationship between category and incidents in terms of participation rate and contents, a few incidents were re-circulated. Participation rates in terms of percentages were then calculated for each category.

Validation Procedures

The categories were assessed in five different ways answering five different types of questions regarding the soundness and trustworthiness of the category system. First, can different people use the categories in a consistent way? To answer this question, two independent judges were asked to participate. Both were graduate students in the Department of Counselling Psychology, University of British Columbia. On separate occasions each judge was provided with a brief description of the categories and then asked to place a sample of twenty-five incidents under appropriate categories. By comparing the placement of incidents by judges with the original placement of incidents while forming categories, the number of hits and misses can be summarized statistically as a percentage of agreement. Flanagan (1954) recommends a 75%

level of agreement or more to consider a system of categories sufficiently reliable for using. A high level of agreement indicates that different persons can use the categories to categorize incidents in a consistent or reliable manner.

The second question is whether the category system is reasonably comprehensive and complete. Following Andersson and Nilsson's guidelines (1964), approximately 10% of the cards (14 incidents) were withdrawn and not examined until the categories were formed. When category formations are finished, these incidents were examined and classified by the researcher. This test checks if the incidents can be easily and reasonably placed in the existing category system. If they can not, new categories would have to be formed. If the incidents are easily and reasonably placed in existing categories, it suggests that the category system is comprehensive, at least provisionally. The possibility exists that the researcher may be motivated to place the incidents in existing categories, however, the since the research aim is comprehensiveness as well as clarity of the category scheme, the risk is minimized.

The third question involves whether the categories are sound and well founded. To form a category, the researcher must identify a significant similarity among group of incidents reported by different people. Participants

independently report the same kind of event. If only one person or a few people report a category of event, it may be dismissed. For example, one person may fabricate or distort the memory of an event. However, when many people report the same kind of event, such possibilities of fabrication or distortion begin to lose force. Agreement among independent persons is one criterion for the objectivity of an event. Certainly there are other ways to assess the soundness of a category (e.g., the clarity and plausibility of events within it). However, interpersonal agreement remains a basic test of soundness. Agreement will be gauged by participation rate for each category (the number of participants reporting a category of event divided by the total number of participants).

Fourth, the soundness of categories can also be assessed by judgements from individuals who are highly qualified to judge the relevance and usefulness of a category of event for facilitating or hindering a particular aim. In this study, two counselling professionals were asked to determine whether the categories are useful to them. In this study, these individuals were counsellor trainers with experience in the school system, with doctoral degrees and experience in facilitating graduation for students at risk of early leave.

Finally, the soundness of a category can be assessed through agreement with previous research. If a category of event disagrees with previous research, its validity may be questioned. It may not be automatically dismissed, but it will be considered more questionable if it contradicts prior evidence from other studies. If a category or event agrees with previous research, confidence in its soundness is called for. If a category of event is novel, neither confirming or disconfirming previous research it will stand alone as a possibility to be confirmed or not by future research. To assess agreement, the categories will be compared with previous research and informed option.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to present information to allow the reader to understand the process of the research in greater depth and detail. A description of the participants was included, as well as an outline of the research procedures that were used. It is anticipated that future researchers will use the techniques described to replicate the study with other populations, or use similar questions. Further information about demographics and consent/information forms will be included in the appendix.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Introduction

Through interviews with 16 high school graduates who reported that at one time they experienced the risk of dropping out (7 men, 9 women), 142 critical incidents were elicited concerning what facilitated completion of high school for this population. The following ethno-cultural group memberships were represented in the sample, Korean, Chinese, Jewish, East-Indian, Caucasian and Latino. Additional information about the participants is available in appendix B.

The 142 critical incidents were organized into 16 categories. In this chapter, these categories are first described, then the methods used to establish the reliability and validity of the categories are reported, followed by informed opinion about the utility of categories, and results of the analysis of agreement with previous research. Anecdotal information, which emerged in the interviews and was considered relevant by the researcher, will be described.

Description of the Categories

This section presents each of the sixteen categories by providing a brief description of the category and examples of

incidents in the category. Categories are presented in random order as there was no attempt to rank them in order of importance. All the incidents describe what has facilitated completion of high school for people who participated in the study.

Emotional support and guidance (29 Incidents).

This category refers to the participants' reported experience of other people acknowledging their struggles and expressing support, encouragement and guidance. It does not include being recognized for a particular achievement in school, but rather the focus is on the emotions of the individual. Support, encouragement and guidance came from different sources, such as friends, family, teachers and counsellors. The events ranged from a teacher passing in the hallway and acknowledging that the student was struggling with an emotional issue, to parents allowing and accepting the individual's own way of coping with emotional problems. A number of participants mentioned having been high achievers who began to fail and skip classes on purpose in order to fit in. Most of the participants mentioned feeling a sense of not belonging, feelings of low self-worth, and the loss of meaning. Some reported problems with their family and social groups. These feelings and problems were often identified as

reasons for needing someone to talk to. In addition, anger, drug involvement, peer pressure, grief, and having to leave troubled homes were mentioned as reasons for needing emotional support. Many participants considered just having someone listen to them to be an important step in dealing with emotions in order to be able to focus on schoolwork.

Examples

"I was pretty depressed most of the time. My mom and my dad were very understanding when I missed school and slept a lot. My mom acknowledged how I was feeling instead of what I should be doing. Like a good therapist, she acknowledged that feelings are okay to have. They didn't criticize me, even though it was a slightly strict Chinese family where academic achievement is so important. They let me do my own healing process. It helped me from getting more upset and less motivated. I was able to maintain at least a minimum level of energy regarding for schoolwork because home was my sanctuary. I could do homework there."

"When I was having emotional problems and not getting work done, the school kept calling. My mother was totally on my side. She told the school that she would not run there every time they think I can't make a

decision on my own. She also accepted it when I needed to take time off for emotional reasons. She didn't say anything about it. It gave me courage to go back and deal with school because she was behind me. Without that, I don't know what would have happened."

"Once I came back, I kept up regular weekly meetings with the counsellor. She would always make time to see me. I couldn't talk to my parents about my problems, and I could tell that she cared. If I had a bad day because of an assignment or something, I could go talk to her. She made a big effort to tell me to leave my problems behind when I come to school, to separate the two. Not forget about my problems, but to think about them on the bus on the way home instead of in school when I had to concentrate. She was a big difference to me. She tried to see if you could figure things out on your own. It gave me the reason to be there. It helped me with my personal life so I wouldn't be distracted at school. It also helped me with relationships with my parents and friends. It was huge. She was my mentor. I was under the impression that all counsellors were like that after I left high school."

"I was having a hard time at school because I was depressed. My grandfather had died, and I was fed up with school. I was failing courses. They signed me up with a social worker. She was great. She just listened and let me talk stuff out. Somebody who listened, which was something I didn't have at all. I was able to get stuff off my chest so I would feel refreshed. I could concentrate on school."

Respect from teachers (9 Incidents).

This category included incidents in which the individual felt respected by a teacher with regards to schoolwork. The experience of feeling respected was often described as being treated like an adult or equal, and having the acknowledged right to a unique or different perspective. Although some of the comments regarding the outcome of being treated with respect suggest a feeling of validation, the focus in this category is on a teacher action or teaching style that communicated acknowledgement of the basic worthiness of the student rather than recognition of an ability or achievement.

Examples

"At my new school, there wasn't a gulf between teachers and students. They recognized that students could be experts on something that they didn't know about. We

were treated like mini-adults. It was unbelievable. I liked the school and felt respected by the teachers, so I worked hard."

"In my new school, we got to call our teachers by their first names. That is a huge thing that puts you on a level playing ground. I had problems with the authoritative style of teaching in the regular school system. I was so insecure and the teachers made me feel subservient in the old school. In this new, egalitarian atmosphere, I worked really hard. We went from trying to make teachers angry and frustrated, to trying to impress them, in six months. Just because of the change in teaching style."

"I wrote a paper about how the school system failed me and that is how I passed and got my English credit. The teacher agreed with every word I said because he was open minded to other perspectives. The teacher I gave it to before had disagreed with my ideas and failed me. It was the second time I took that class, but with this teacher I felt I was being respected. I graduated. And even though I didn't do very well, I got through."

Opportunity to participate and get help (9 Incidents).

This category included the opportunity to share the learning, either by asking questions and getting help, or being asked to contribute in class. The common variable among the incidents was the chance to share the experience of learning. Several participants mentioned feeling motivated and included as an outcome of being allowed to participate and ask questions. Some mentioned that just knowing there was an avenue to get help with homework helped them to relax and concentrate on learning while they were in class. Participants attributed the participation and help to motivation and improvement in grades.

Examples

"They showed me a different way to learn. My English teacher was an acting teacher, and I am really into acting. He would let us read things out loud and participate. He gave you all sorts of ideas. He brought his perspective to class. It was the same class I took before that I dropped, just a different way of teaching. I was motivated. I wanted to learn."

"I would go to this study block time where I could work on things and get help from teachers. I asked questions and could get them answered. It made it feel safe when

I was in class, that I had a backup. That if I don't get it in class, I could go and get my questions answered later."

"My friends who were not in school would sometimes help with my homework and my projects. It helped me really focused on school and want to learn. I was serious and I did well."

Medication (2 Incidents).

This category includes having a prescription for a diagnosed affective disorder changed to a more effective one, or one with less side effects. The outcome was related to an ability to concentrate.

Example

"I had Manic Depression, and I was on these pills with lots of side effects that were a real hassle to take. I wouldn't take them so I would get depressed or manic. Then I got on better medication. The pills were leveling me out better, my head was clearer and I could focus on my schoolwork better."

Reward (3 Incidents).

This category involves knowing that there is a plan to participate in something personally rewarding at the completion of high school. Having knowledge of a reward on completion, the individual was able to feel motivated to complete the requirements for high school graduation. This category does not include incidents that involved the planning of career or educational goals for the future, but incidents where a reward was planned or offered which was not school related. Participants described feelings of being tired of school and wanting to get it over with. These participants felt that their plans to go away after school helped them to get through.

Examples

"My mom promised me a trip when I was struggling in school. She said she would buy me a ticket to Martinique. I had been there with school in Grade 10 and I loved it. I really wanted to go. It totally helped by giving me incentive to finish. Okay, if I can just get that little diploma, then I am going to the Caribbean. But she never gave me the trip."

"I couldn't take school anymore. I wanted to be free. I made a plan to take a year off after high school. I

felt I could make it through because there was a definite amount of time left. There was a definite goal, and then a reward at the end."

Setting goals for the future (12 Incidents).

This category involves making career or college related goals for after graduation. It is distinct from planning a trip or other reward such as time off. Most often participants talked about working at dissatisfying minimum wage jobs as the process by which they found out what they did not want to do. Several mentioned that making the connection between course work and the practical world of work was meaningful and motivating. This conceptual connection tended to develop through career exploration which was for some self-directed and for others through guidance.

Examples

"I left school for a while and worked at temporary clerical jobs. I had some really crappy jobs that I hated for minimum wage, doing all the grunt work. It didn't mean anything to me. It was a good way to realize what I didn't want to do. I felt pressured and made some decisions to take control of my life. I did some research about careers on my own and went back to school."

"I was doing things like aptitude tests, and looking at where my interests were. I was thinking about if I want to go to college, and what I would take. The counsellor was doing career tests, and giving me information about universities. I saw that there is a huge life ahead of me, and I am going to have to buckle down and work. Get through school. And it became easier. I was motivated and there was meaning to what I was doing in school."

"I had dropped out because nothing was meaningful and I hated my courses. I didn't get my course choice. The Principal and Counsellor sat me down and talked to me, told me about the kind of jobs that I might want to get with the interests I had. They made the connection between school and the rest of life. They bridged the gap between what you are suppose to do and why. I realized I needed to go back to high school and complete to go on to the next step. Who would take me seriously without my Grade 12?"

Time off (4 Incidents).

This category includes opportunity to get away from school in order to either deal with emotional issues or think

about and set plans for returning to complete high school. Participants appreciated the time to be with themselves and get away from the pressure. In each case the participants reported that the time off was brief, planned and purposeful.

Examples

"I was dealing with too much stuff because of depression, and my grandfather died. I needed to deal with myself and my life outside of school. So I took a week off to stay home. It was me time. It was priceless having that time off. I was able to let myself centre and focus because I didn't have external things pressuring me. When I came back and went to talk to the counsellor to set some goals to get through."

"In the summer before I took my last few courses, I took a few trips, got away from everything. I planned my next year and set goals. The time off was a big breather and I was able to get a lot more motivated in school when I came back."

Change of environment (5 Incidents).

This category means that participants experienced a change of place as helpful in their completion of high school. For some it was a new school, and for several it was

a new home environment. For each, however, the change of place itself was mentioned as a key factor in facilitating their completion. Participants mentioned that getting away from stressful familial and social environments was helpful. The opportunity to be in a new environment renewed participants' sense of commitment to themselves and their goals of completing high school. This category does not include time away to think or set goals, but instead describes the experience of moving to a new home or a new school and continuing as the helpful incident.

Examples

"I decided to leave home because there were a lot of problems going on there. I was having mental breakdowns and skipping. They were threatening to kick me out. So I moved out. The change to a whole new environment helped me. Getting out of that situation I was in helped me realize I had to finish school if I was going to get anywhere, because away from my family it was just me and that was all I had to think about."

"When I went back, I went to night school. The change of place helped out. I only knew a few people and was more geared towards school. I wasn't there to

socialize. I knew what I had to do and I got it done.

I focused on finishing."

Perceived expectation/pressure (8 Incidents).

This category involves the participants' perceptions of the expectation of others that they will graduate, and the experience of pressure to do so. It does not include comments and expressions of encouragement and support, or searching for an identity, but rather the anticipation of the social consequences of failing to complete high school. Participants mentioned not wanting to let others down, or fear of causing hurt to family and friends those who would want them to graduate.

Examples

"My mother would ask all the time if I was ever going to graduate because I didn't do any work. I think I was putting her through a lot of pain. I felt bad and wanted to graduate for her. I didn't want to let her down."

"I started seeing somebody who was a university student and his family was very upper class. They expected me to really strive in school. I really wanted to please them. I tried to strive in school for them."

Autonomy/responsibility (8 Incidents).

This category includes experiences whereby the participants made a decision to take charge of their life and a commitment to complete high school for themselves. The experience was often described as taking control or facing responsibility, and doing it for the self. These participants felt that the decision to do it for themselves and take responsibility for the process of finishing high school was a motivating factor. This category does not include incidents where the participant made a career or college decision, or set a goal for after completion, but rather describes the process of commitment to the task of completion and absorption in the task.

Examples

"I basically took charge of the whole process and put my whole self in it. I had always done things for other people, but I did this for me for the first time. For me, and for nobody else. It helped me get my motivation back. I wrote about the whole experience on my English provincial exams at the end, and I got an "A".

"When I was younger, I did really well, but I was doing it to impress my parents and teachers. I was the class brain, and then I started to fail on purpose because I

was sick of the other kids hating me. After I dropped out, and then went back for myself, I worked really hard because I was doing it for me. I was interested in the subject. My grades went up. It had a motivating effect on me."

"I made a commitment when I returned to school to do it for myself. I had a blind drive to do it because it was going to get me out of doing drugs and going nowhere. I never had to force it. I did really well. It was an identity that I had never really experienced. It was intellectually exciting."

Lessened workload (8 Incidents).

This category means that participants lessened the load of schoolwork either by selecting to take less or easier courses, attending fewer classes, or changing their pace of working on assignments. Often the decision came after speaking to a counsellor and realizing that options were available to them. This category does not include incidents of changing place, getting help with homework or getting practical help getting to class in the morning. Instead the focus is on changing to less, easier, or self-directed schoolwork, specifically. Semester programs, switching to

courses with a practical focus, dropping courses that were not necessary for graduation, and attending a self-directed program were all mentioned.

Examples

"The counsellor helped me focus my efforts on just the courses I needed to graduate. I cut my losses. I was able to make it through with the minimum requirements, and graduate on schedule despite the time I missed."

"When I was depressed, I wasn't doing much. Then I gave myself permission to do things my way, at my own pace, to do only whatever I could do. It was a reduced scale of work. That was good enough. It broke the work down to more digestible pieces, something I could handle, a bit at a time. With lower standards, you can get things done, achieve, and it fuels you to do some more."

"When I went back to finish, I took a night school English. It was business English, which was easier, and had less work than the one I took before. It wasn't that I couldn't handle the load. I just didn't want to do all the work to get the credit. It was also more practical. I got the final credit I needed to graduate with a fairly decent mark."

Practical help getting to school (4 Incidents).

In this category, practical and concrete actions were taken to help participants make it to class. Difficulties getting up in the morning, or difficulties getting to school due to emotions were mentioned as obstacles. Having someone call in the morning, or drive the participant to school were identified as helping to keep participants attendance up.

Examples

"When I went back to school I was still stressed and unhappy. I would walk half way to school and go home. My mom started driving me. I made it to classes more because she took me there."

"I missed a lot of classes before I dropped out. When I went back to finish, I went to night school. It was easier to make it to class because I am not a morning person. I made it to every class. I think I missed one class the whole time."

Recognition (8 Incidents).

This category involves being recognized by a figure of authority for an accomplishment, achievement or skill. Participants mentioned that being acknowledged and validated

by a significant figure in the school system helped them feel good about themselves and subsequently, they worked harder. The category excludes experiences of personal engagement in an extra-curricular activity and instead the unifying variable is receiving acknowledgement from another person. It also excludes incidents where being respected and treated like an adult was the focus, although there is some overlap in terms of the outcome of feeling valued.

Examples

"My graphic arts teacher praised me for my work and gave me extra assignments to do outside class. He wanted me to use my design skills to design a shirt for one of the school clubs. I felt I was good at something and it made me decide to stay in and finish."

"When I went back, there was this English teacher who was very nice. She made praising comments about things I had done in class, about my poetry. I then talked to her after class for two hours. I felt validated by somebody in a relationship. It made me try harder."

Participation in the arts and sports (14 Incidents).

This category includes being involved in an activity that the participant found personally engaging. Most of the activities were in the area of the arts, however sports were also mentioned. The opportunity to apply oneself, to explore and enjoy something in school led to feelings of control, self-esteem, and connection to the school. Many participants mentioned that at the height of their struggles to make it to school, they remained heavily involved in these arts and sport activities. Going to a class that was experienced as meaningless or difficult was aided by the fact that participants knew they would later be able to attend the activity or course they loved.

Examples

"I was in theatre. Even when I was barely going to school, they still let me to school plays. I was very involved in theatre in high school. That kept me in school at least, you know? Like, within the boundaries of the school grounds. And I knew, if I was going to go for that, I would go a little earlier and talk to the counsellor. Or I would feel a little guilty and make more of an effort to go to class the next day. It was an umbilical chord. I felt like, at least I was doing something."

"After I went back to school, I took Art class. I think this was a major factor. And I took photography, and psychology. It was so interesting. I applied myself and did really well. I found the arts so personally engaging."

"I took a broadcasting course just for fun. Being in that class was good for me because it made me enjoy school. If I was going to come to school for that class, I figured I might as well stay for English class too. So that made me go to classes."

"I was doing theatre in school since 9th Grade. I wanted to get out to do theatre at college. So I didn't miss acting class, I got an A. I had an area of school I could relate to. It gave me self-confidence that there was something I was good at in school. And I maintained a certain level of connection with the school environment. It was a life support system that kept me in tune with the academic world. If it wasn't for that class, I would not have gone to school at all."

"I was failing a few courses because I was depressed and stressed out. I felt out of control of my life. The only one I showed up to on a regular basis was graphic design. I was really into it and that class was my salvation. I even went in to do extra time in graphics. It gave me a sense of control, self-esteem. That helped make me decide to stay in school."

Identity development through social comparison (16 Incidents).

This category includes incidents of participants exploring who they are, and who they want to be in the world by making social comparisons. Some participants looked around at friends who were achieving and decided that they too wanted to achieve. Others compared themselves to people who had dropped out and did not want to be identified with those people. In most cases, both comparison and thinking about identity were involved in the action that tended to lead to a commitment to complete high school. In general, it was an internal, thought-based process, however one participant did research on the jobs and lives of dropouts in a broadcasting course and then began to explore her own identity before deciding to stay in school. This category does not include the process of setting goals for a future

career, although that may have been the outcome for some of the mentioned incidents.

Examples

"A lot of my friends started going to college and university and I thought, well, if they can do it, I can do it too. Anyway, they weren't there to hang around and go smoke cigarettes with anymore. I set a goal to finish because my friends were finishing."

"It helped that while I was away and not in school, all my friends graduated. I looked at them and I figured I was a bit smarter than them, so if they could do it I could. I set a goal to graduate and go on to do something else."

"I saw a few people I went to high school with who were working at a convenience store. I thought about it and it scared me. I wanted something more than that. I just had to find out what it was. I decided I was not going to go that route. I started thinking about what I was going to do with myself, and my life and knew I had to finish high school first."

"I looked at my friend who won a big scholarship and I was disappointed, thinking it should have been me. I wanted to prove to everybody that I could finish. I knew I could do better than them, so I tried once again to get the grades and graduate, even if it took me a little longer than them."

"I had left high school seeking freedom. But I looked around at what my friends were doing who dropped out and didn't like what I saw. Some were dealing drugs. Some were criminals. There was so much darkness in that. You are hated by almost everybody. That is not freedom. I didn't want to be a drug dealer, a criminal. I knew I was a smart kid and I could do something better. I realized the only way to find freedom was to find it within society. I realized I had to go back and deal with school."

Fictional role models (3 Incidents).

Included in this category are incidents of identification with a fictional character who either did not fit in and yet contributed greatly to society, or modeled a success story of pushing through adversity. In each case, the incident led to a renewed hope, and a belief in the self.

Although the incidents involved comparison and identification, the identification was with a fictional character and therefore incidents of social comparison are excluded from this category.

Examples

"I read about art history and the different artists. They were all a little weird, the successful ones. Yet they had an impact on history. They were good examples for me of how to be different and succeed. I realized that there must be something to me if I am so misunderstood at school. I felt that maybe I can be something great if I get through high school and move on. I applied myself and got some good marks."

"I was watching movie characters push through adversity and persevere, like Rocky. Just watching people suffering, and succeeding. It certainly helped because if they could do it so could I. Suffering wasn't so bad. I started to believe that if they could go through such hard times and survive, I could squeeze past the finish line for graduation."

Validation of the Categories

In developing a scheme of categories it is important to determine if the category scheme developed can be used with confidence. Are the categories sound and trustworthy? The validity of the categories concerns whether the categories are sound and well founded. As outlined by McCormick (1995), it is not possible to attain absolute certainty as to the soundness and trustworthiness of any category scheme, however it is necessary to ensure that the category scheme is reasonably certain if it will be used in practice. Several measures have been taken in this study to assure the usefulness of an acceptable level of trustworthiness and soundness of the emergent categories.

Reliability of Categorizing Incidents

Reliability is a good indication of trustworthiness. Andersson and Nilsson (1964) suggested that reliability in a Critical Incident study can be determined by degree of agreement of independent judges using the category scheme. Degree of agreement is calculated statistically by percentage. Flanagan (1954) suggested that a category scheme should attain a score exceeding 75% agreement. In this study a sample of 25 incidents was used.

The two independent judges who participated in this procedure were Master's students in the Department of Counselling Psychology at the University of British Columbia. The judges were given a brief description of the categories by the researcher and asked to place the sample of 25 incidents in the categories. The judges were asked to place the incidents in categories they felt were most appropriate. Both judges took approximately 30 minutes to place the incidents. Table 1 represents the percentage of agreement between the researcher's and the judges' placement of the incidents in the category scheme.

To make best use of the results, the researcher interviewed both judges to determine if the reasons for any disagreement warranted changes in the category schemes. An examination of the incorrectly placed incidents revealed that the judges either misread or focused on one trigger word, without looking at the whole incident. This inconsistency can be attributed to haste and as such does not warrant changes to the category scheme.

The high percentage of a agreement obtained by the independent judges means that other people can use the categories to categorize incidents in a consistent and reliable way.

Table 1

Reliability of Category Schemes

Judges	Percentage agreement
Judge #1	96%
Judge #2	92%
Average inter-rater reliability	94%

Comprehensiveness of Categories

An important way to determine the soundness of a category scheme is to determine whether it is reasonably complete or comprehensive (Andersson & Nilsson, 1964). One test used to check for comprehensiveness or completeness in this study involved the procedure of withholding 14 incidents (approximately 10%) until the categories had been formed. Once the categories were formed, the withheld incidents were brought back and classified. All incidents were easily placed within the categories. If the incidents were difficult to place, it would have been necessary to form new categories until all of the withheld incidents had been placed. It is therefore reasonable to say that the categories are provisionally comprehensive. It is necessary

to make this claim because there is always the possibility that a new category might be discovered.

Participation Rate for the Categories

Examining the level of agreement among the participants in the study reporting the same thing is another method to determine if a category is sound and well founded. In forming a category, the researcher must ensure the identification of a significant similarity among a group of incidents reported by different people. Participants independently report the same kind of event. If only one person or a few persons report a category of event, it might be dismissed. For example, one person might distort or fabricate an event. When many people report the same kind of event, such possibilities as distortion begin to lose force. Agreement among observers is an important test of soundness. Agreement is gauged by the participation rate for each category (the number of participants reporting a category divided by the total number of participants; see Table 2). The categories with the highest participation rate are thus those with the highest level of agreement. The participation rates ranged from a low of 12% (Medication) to a high of 75% (Emotional Support and Guidance). Other categories with a participation rate of 50% or higher are: Setting Goals for

the Future, Autonomy/Responsibility, and Participation in Arts and Sports. The categories of Medication, Reward, and Fictional Role Models had a relatively low participation rate, however the categories are not necessarily ill founded. On re-examination it was determined that the categories should be preserved because of the vividness and clarity of the events contained in the category and their similarity. The incidents and their categories were sufficiently clear and distinct to remain intact.

Table 2

Participation Rates and Summary of Expert Commentary

<u>Category</u>	<u>% Partic.</u>	<u>Expert Commentary</u>
Emotional Support/Guidance	75%	useful
Respect from Teachers	31%	idea of fairness
Participate/Get Help	38%	doesn't lead to Counsel.practice, seems self-evident
Medication	12%	suggests utility of multi-disc. teams, communication with community services
Reward	19%	question of behavior Theory - intermittent reinforcement vs. personally relevant rewards
Setting Goals for the Future	50%	useful
Time Off	25%	intuitive sense
Change of Environment	31%	useful
Perceived Expectation/Pressure	44%	concept of challenge
Autonomy/Responsibility	50%	useful
Lessened Workload	44%	useful in practice
Practical Help Getting to School	25%	alternatives & flex scheduling
Recognition	31%	useful, intuitive sense
Participation in Arts/Sports	56%	useful

Table 2 continued

Participation Rates and Summary of Expert Commentary

<u>Category</u>	<u>Partic.</u>	<u>Expert Commentary</u>
	<u>%</u>	
Identity Devel./Soc. Comparis.	38%	interesting
Fictional Role Models	19%	surprising that role models did not figure more prominently

Expert Commentary

Another test of the soundness of categories, which was used in this study, was expert validation. This analysis puts research into the context of the field by consulting with experts to determine if the categories are valid and useful for practice. Experts are asked to bring their relevant experience to bear (Cronbach, 1971) by explaining whether the findings of a particular study are consistent with what they have found from their professional experiences. Expert validation is an important test of soundness since experts have witnessed events that the average person might not have experience with. They can provide collaborative evidence and content validity to the results of an investigation.

In this study the researcher asked two professors in Counselling Psychology who are considered experts in facilitating completion of high school for students with difficulties. Both are also experienced at training high school counsellors to work with students who may be at risk of early leave. Both possess doctoral degrees in Counselling Psychology. The researcher conducted an interview with each of the two experts separately after describing each of the categories, asking them to go through the categories to assess their usefulness. The instructions were simply to

consider the categories and comment on their utility to practice. The results of the interviews with the experts confirmed that overall, the 16 categories in the scheme are potentially useful and valid with regards to the practice of counselling.

Comments made by the experts utilized in the study confirmed that most of the categories are important, and likely to be useful in facilitating graduation for students who experience the risk of early leave from high school. Most of the categories had been used at one time or another by them to facilitate completion, or by a student they had worked with who struggled to complete high school before graduating.

More specifically, one expert was surprised at the category practical help getting to school, but felt it was valid and useful information for educators, particularly with regard to flexible scheduling and alternative programs. The category describing opportunity to participate and get help seemed self evident, and less relevant to the practice of counselling than the other categories. With regard to respect from teachers, one expert felt that it was common for students to emphasize their desire to be treated fairly. The category medication raised the issue of the need for multidisciplinary teams, including medical personnel and

communication between professionals working with students. The analysis of these experts adds further strength to the soundness or validity of the categories and the category scheme.

Support of Related Literature

Another method used to check for the soundness of the categories is agreement with previous research. If a category disagreed with previous research, there would be good reason to question its validity. It could not be automatically dismissed, but it would be more questionable because in comparison to prior evidence from other studies, it was contradictory. High agreement with a category of event with previous research indicates confidence in the soundness of the category. If a category is novel, neither confirming nor disconfirming previous research, it stands alone as a possibility to be confirmed or disconfirmed by future research. To assess agreement, the categories formed were compared with previous research. In this analysis, 8 of 16 categories agreed with previous research. This finding increases the confidence that the categories are well founded. As no mention could be found for the remaining 8 novel categories, they stand alone as a possibility to be confirmed or not by future research. Reference to relevant

research for the eight supported categories are as follows
(See Table 3). The eight novel categories will be discussed
in the chapter that follows with regard to broader theory.

Table 3

Summary of Support of Related Literature

<u>Category</u>	<u>Literature Support</u>
Emotional Support Or Guidance	Affect component necessary must support & encourage
Respect from Teacher	Effective schools treat everyone equal, respect keeps them in school
Opportunity to Partic. or Get Help	Remedial instruc'n, tutoring, & experiential learning enviro's facilit. staying in school
Medication	New subject, no previous research
Reward	Can motivate, must be personally relevant and lead to feeling of autonomy/control - can also "over- justify" behaviour and backfire
Setting Future Goals	Counselling for academic & career choice works, vocational programs invigorate interest in acad. subject
Time Off	New subject, no previous research
Change of Environment	New subject, no research
Perceived Expectation Pressure	New subject, no research
Autonomy/Responsibility	Motivating, leads to identity & competence
Lessened Workload	Not discussed in the literature
Practical Help Getting To school	Not discussed
Recognition	External validation for self-worth is motivating. Gifted underachievers tend to be perfectionist & need more recognition

Table 3 continued

Summary of Support of Related Literature

<u>Category</u>	<u>Literature Support</u>
Particip'n in Arts & Sports	Enhanced retention, builds interest in school and enhances sense of self
Identity Development Thru Soc. Compar.	New idea, not researched
Fictional Role Models	New idea (fictional) - no research

Emotional Support and Guidance

Researchers have pointed out a strong affective component to dropping out (Bearden, Spencer, & Moracco, 1991). It has been observed that dropout prevention programs do not produce effective and lasting results when there is insufficient attention to the affective domain of student experiences (Morris, Pawlovich, & McCall, 1991; PIOR 1990; Quiroutte, Saint-Denis, & Hout, 1990, Rumberger, 1987). Effective schools include programs that support and encourage students at risk. Although programs vary, they are designed to motivate students, to encourage positive social behavior and facilitate a sense of belonging, and such programs are considered critical for success (Gaskell, 1995). It has been confirmed that individual attention such as support and guidance needs to be paid to students as it has an important influence on staying in school (Roderick, 1993; Sullivan, 1988). This category appears to be well supported in the literature.

Respect from Teachers

It is well known that classroom teachers have a direct influence on students' performance (Oliver, 1995). When students who left high school before graduating were surveyed and asked to suggest ways in which schools could help keep

students in school, many suggested that teachers should talk to students, be more understanding and show more respect. Having a problem with faculty was a factor highly endorsed as their original reason for leaving (Bearden, Spencer, & Moracco, 1991). In a recent study of effective schools across Canada, Gaskell (1995) found that teachers who are able to relate to students, and schools with an environment where everyone was treated equally, were considered crucial factors. This category appears to be sound and well-founded according to related literature.

Reward

It is generally accepted that, according to behavioural principles, giving rewards increases motivation for and engagement in an activity. Intermittent rewards that are personally relevant are considered to have motivational influence. Some research has indicated that for children and college students concrete, external rewards for performance can have an undermining effect on subsequent interest in the task (de Charms & Muir, 1978; Lepper & Green, 1976). The argument is that a concrete reward might lead to a student feeling overcompensated for working towards a goal, which undermines their intrinsic motivation the next time they engage in the task. The student feels that since they have

been rewarded for the task, it must not be something they would have done without the reward, and motivation is reduced in the future. Based on basic behavioural principles, this category appears to be sound with regards to facilitating the aim of completion of high school in that a concrete, personally relevant reward was related to motivation towards task completion. However, caution should be exercised in considering this category in future practice, since the literature seems to suggest that future motivation for academic performance or completion might be undermined with the use of such external and concrete rewards. (Alternatively, recognition and praise for task completion are not considered to be a concrete reward and as such can be a motivator).

Opportunity to Participate and Get Help

Remediation with individualized instruction, such as tutoring, and mentoring, have been mentioned by researchers and students in the literature as useful and effective in promoting the completion of high school (Gaskel, 1995; Morris, Pawlovich, & McCall, 1991; Tidwell, 1988). A growing body of evidence indicates that experiential learning activities are more effective than traditional methods in producing a wide range of desirable student outcomes,

including retention (Butchart, 1986; Crist, 1991; Hartshorn, & Nelson, 1990). There appears to be adequate support in the literature to assume the soundness of this category.

Setting Goals for the Future

Morris, Pawlovich, and McCall (1991), reported that one effective strategy for keeping students in school is counselling services to provide direction for academic and career choices. Also suggested was pre-employment awareness training. Gaskell (1995) also found that many exemplary schools use work experience and vocational programs to motivate students, to teach responsibility to society, to orient students to the world of work, and as well to invigorate interest in traditional subjects. Particularly in programs for talented and at-risk students, it was considered important for curriculum to make the connection to the labour market.

Autonomy/Responsibility

Corsini and Painter (1975) argue that teaching youth responsibility leads to positive development of identity. It has been suggested that motivating youth at-risk of dropping out does require cultivating a sense of responsibility, autonomy and competence (Campbell & Myrick, 1990; Frymier,

1992; Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997). This category is supported by existing literature.

Recognition

Youth often depend on external sources of validation such as peers, teachers, and parents for their sense of self-worth (Ishuyama, 1989). In terms of behavioural principles, praise and recognition can be effective motivators with students. Recognition and praise allow them to feel in control and believe in their own internal motivation towards a task (Ross, 1975). Since some underachievers, particularly gifted underachievers, tend to be more self-critical and perfectionistic, they possess poor self-concepts. It is therefore important for teachers to develop the underachieving student's sense of self-worth (Borthwick, Dow, Levesque, & Banks, 1980). Recognition appears to be an important category, indicating the significance of reinforcing achieving behaviours.

Participation in the Arts and Sports

Recent findings of a large study indicated that participation in extracurricular activities such as athletics and fine arts significantly reduced a student's likelihood of dropping out, whereas participation in academic or vocational

clubs had no effect (McNeal, 1995). Oliver (1995) also found that enhanced retention was facilitated by participation in extra-curricular activities, teachers' projects and sports. Participation was shown to build students' interest in school, and enhance their sense of self.

Summary of Supported Categories

Based on the results of this analysis an effective high school completion program for students who experience the risk of dropping out should consider the categories that were developed in this study. They are: emotional support and guidance, respect from teachers, opportunity to participate and get help, goals setting for the future, encouragement of autonomy and responsibility, recognition, participation in the arts or sport, and an aspect of reward such as praise. What remains to be confirmed are the novel categories that emerged in the study. They include time off, medication, change of environment, expectation or pressure to graduate, lessened workloads, practical help getting to school, identity development through social comparison, and the use of fictional role models.

Relevant Anecdotal Information

Anecdotal information emerged that the researcher considered important to include in the results. Although this data was not part of the critical events initially sought, there was some consistency in terms of participants reporting these variables and thus they are included here. The anecdotal information is presented here as an illustration and no attempt was made to examine the transcripts to see if the suggestions overlapped with actions taken towards the aim of completion, by the particular participant making the suggestion. Validity and reliability tests were not conducted on this anecdotal information.

Emotional problems were mentioned by 14 of the 16 participants as strong contributing factors leading to difficulties in school. The two individuals whom did not report problems with mood, reported significant stress related peer groups and family problems. Many spoke of depression and grief, and the subsequent lack of meaning and difficulty concentrating on school-related goals which led to skipping or failure.

Participants mentioned either having been high achievers before encountering difficulties with high school, or spoke of high achievement in post-secondary studies after

completion. Almost all of the participants mentioned feeling that they did not belong or fit in. Of the 9 who mentioned doing well in high school, 5 reported making intentional attempts to fail. These attempts to fail were related to wanting either attention from teachers, or for the purpose of belonging with a social group who were not high achieving. Most of the participants had, since completion, either attended post-secondary, or a vocational preparation program.

Several participants mentioned either working in artistic fields, or having goals to do so. Of the 16 participants, 12 mentioned a personal interest, and regularly participation in creative activities including theatre, music, visual art and writing. When asked about current career and college foci, 9 of the 16 participants mentioned creative areas, including interior design, and acting, for example.

Several remarks emerged as suggestions made by interviewees for facilitating completion of high school. These helping suggestions were condensed into thematic categories for clarity, including some examples, and presented here as anecdotal information. Some overlap to the category system of critical incidents is evident.

Suggestion: Setting goals for the future.

Several participants suggested that students have an opportunity to explore their careers and set goals. The following example illustrates the suggestions included in this theme, which overlaps with the category system already formed and analyzed.

Example

"People need to have goals of where they are going to go next when they get out of high school. Without a sense of direction, we don't have a motivation for the process."

Suggestion: Lessened workload.

Several participants suggested that students should cut back on their courses and expectations for themselves and learn to have fun.

Suggestion: Participation in the arts and sports.

Several participants indicated that involvement in extra-curricular, particularly creative activities would facilitate completion. The following example articulates the suggestion, which overlaps with the category of the same name.

Example

"I think kids need an opportunity to get acknowledged for what their real abilities are. They need some opportunities to be creative. They need to take their creative energy and express it, release it. It would be fulfilling, and kids would be a lot happier to go to school if they had that one thing to grasp on to."

Suggestion: Encouragement and guidance.

Several suggestions were made by participants for someone to be available and supportive in a genuine manner, whether it was a counsellor, teacher, family or friend.

Example

"Counsellors need to spend a little more time and show that they really care, and not just professional concern."

Suggestion: Respect from teachers.

Participants suggested that teachers treat students with more respect. This included treating students like equals, and being able to call teachers by their first names.

Participants were aware of, and uncomfortable with the power differential between students and teachers. One participant suggested that high school students are insecure and need an opportunity to assert their own power rather than being made to feel subordinate.

Suggestion: Meaning of curriculum.

Participants mentioned the importance of understanding the meaning of what they were being taught. They suggested that a connection between the real world and the curriculum would make coursework more meaningful. Several participants experienced boredom, and suggested that the curriculum should examine material more critically and less broadly.

Summary

In response to the question addressed to 16 students who completed high school after experiencing the risk of early leave: What facilitated completion for you? Participants responded with 142 critical incidents. These 142 incidents were organized into 16 categories that are described in this

chapter. Tests were employed in the study to support the soundness and trustworthiness of the category system. It was determined that the 16 categories were reliable and valid as a category system. As well, the utility of the helping factors was validated by expert opinion with regard to practice. However, 8 of the 16 categories presented novel concepts, and thus could not be supported by related literature. These 8 categories remain to be either confirmed or disconfirmed in future research. Anecdotal information emerging from the interviews was included in the results to illustrate helping suggestions made by participants. Important anecdotal information regarding participants' experiences leading up to their difficult time, and following their completion was included for later discussion.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

This research study was done to determine the conditions that facilitate completion of high school for students who experience the risk of dropping out. In order to answer this question an adaptation of Flanagan's (1954) Critical Incident Technique was used to interview 16 individuals who reported having experienced the risk of dropping out before completing high school. One-hundred and forty-two incidents were obtained and classified into 16 categories, with reasonable reliability and validity. Eight of the categories were supported by the related literature, and eight were novel. Participation rates for the categories ranged from 12 to 75 percent (Table 2). The highest rate of participation was: Emotional Support and Guidance, at 75 percent, followed by Participation in Arts and Sports at 56 percent, Autonomy/Responsibility at 50 percent, and Setting Goals for the future at 50 percent. Anecdotal information from the interviews, which was considered important by the researcher, was included in the results. Participants suggested that the following might help students struggling to complete high school: goal setting, participating in the arts and sport, teacher encouragement, guidance and respect from teachers,

and making curriculum meaningfully linked to the outside world. It was also noted that the participants in this study tended to report emotional problems such as grief and depression as contributing to their difficulties in school. Many indicated that they had either been high achievers prior to their difficulties, or that at the time of the study they were experiencing success in post-secondary studies. Some reported that they had intentionally tried to fail in high school in order to get attention or to fit in with peers. More than half of the participants indicated that at the time of the study they were pursuing careers in the arts.

Limitations of Research

A number of factors limit this investigation. First, the results of this study may not be easily generalized at this time due to the small number of participants. This could be described as a delimitation since it was known at the onset that this study would only provide an initial set of categories that describe facilitation of high school completion, and not a definitive description of effective and ineffective helping factors for youth at risk of early leave. Future studies will be needed to determine the generalizability of the categories and to begin to use the categories to further develop theory and practice.

Another limitation of the study is that the categories were derived from retrospective self-reports rather than by observation. Critical incidents obtained this way are limited to the event that people are able to remember and articulate at the time of the interview. It is possible that some events were not mentioned because participants may not have recalled them or been able to describe them. As well, the study focused on concrete events in terms of actions taken or experienced by participants. Therefore, helpful relationships, internal personality factors, or other such variables may not have been revealed.

An additional limitation to consider is that participants in this study were volunteers. Those who chose not to respond to recruitment efforts may have had different experiences with high school completion than the participants of the study. For example, those who were not recruited for the study may have had more negative experiences and not have wanted to contribute to the study. As well, the study focused on helping incidents during the experienced risk of early leave, without differentiating between the kinds of experiences that led up to problems with completion. Subsequently, a complete context for the helping factors may not be truly represented. Different helping factors may be more or less useful to different problems with completion.

As well, only student perspectives were included, whereas important information might have come from counsellors and educators as well.

A final limitation concerns the methodology. Although a categorical framework can provide practical information for theory building and program development, it misses the unique and creative ways some individuals might have come to stay in school. In looking for commonality, some uniqueness is inevitably lost. This suggests that a narrative approach might be taken in future research on what facilitates completion.

Implications for Theory and Research

The results of this study confirm and expand on the research pertaining to the facilitation of high school completion for those who experience the risk of early leave, as described in the literature review and support of related literature for 8 of the categories in the category scheme. The most important implication is that additional empirical evidence based on student perspectives was provided for what was previously based largely on opinions of experts working with students. Scholars have indicated a number of areas that might be useful in facilitating completion of high school, which were confirmed in the study. Those factors are

emotional support and guidance, respect from teachers, opportunity to participate and get help, setting goals for the future, autonomy/responsibility, recognition, and participation in the arts and sports, and an aspect of reward.

Conceptualized together, these categories at first glance suggest overlap and contradictions. For example, the concept of autonomy and self-responsibility seems to be in opposition with reward, recognition and guidance, which comes from others. However, interpretation from a counselling perspective, particularly one that utilizes a Person-Centred or empowerment approach makes clear sense of this apparent contradiction. A closer look at the contents and description of these categories reveals that the reward, recognition and guidance which participants found useful were incidents that led to feelings of control and positive self-concepts. This suggests that the helping incidents, that made up the categories recognition, guidance and reward were of nature that led to empowerment and self-determination. This concept needs to be explored and applied to a broader theory to determine its interaction with a number of areas in academic achievement, in addition to the affect on high school completion. Teaching and guidance that facilitate independence, control and self-determination is emphasized in

Western counselling approaches. The overlap confirms previous findings indicating that dropping out is a complex process and suggests the need for a wholistic, integrated approach. Once again, it appears that counsellors may be in an ideal position to research the question of what facilitates completion of high school.

It is noteworthy that several categories were well endorsed, despite being novel concepts without previous research to support their validity. It is possible that the lack of student perspectives and solution-oriented, counselling-based research can account for the novelty. A replicated study that includes the voices of stakeholders will be necessary to confirm or disconfirm these categories.

With regard to participation in arts and sports, it was clear that the not just any extra-curricular activity facilitated completion. Participants spoke of feeling a sense of accomplishment, opportunities to be themselves, and to achieve in an area where they felt they had talent. They also spoke in appreciation of the looser structure of arts classes, which provided opportunities for autonomy, mastery, and expression of the self.

Researchers have noted that some underachievers are in fact gifted and creative students (Borthwick, Dow, Levesque, & Banks, 1980). Indeed, Mcree (1987) suggested an

unconventional attitude is a common trait of creative personality. In a review of creativity measures, Hocevar and Bachelor (1989) suggested that simple, straightforward inventories of past creative achievement and activity are appropriate to identify creativity. The self-reported interest and involvement of the participants in this study in the arts suggests the possibility that these participants were creative individuals.

Eysenck (1993) argued that creative achievement depends on many factors, including educational factors. If environmental factors regulate creativity, as suggested, care must be taken to maximize the achievement potential for creative students whose needs may not be met by a conventional curriculum or teaching style. Since creativity, by definition, involves contribution it may be important to look closer at the idea of experiential learning environments, which allow students to question and participate. This content emerged in the category opportunity to participate and get help. 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). These ideas and suggestions were

represented in the categories of recognition, autonomy/responsibility, and reward, further developing the theoretical link between creative individuals and those who have difficulties completing high school.

Some of the incident categories that emerged were novel in terms of research, yet were reliable, and validated by professionals' expert opinions. These warrant further research. One of these categories was identity development through social comparison. According to Erikson, the main task of the adolescent stage of life is identity development (1968), and research has indicated that identity development is largely influenced by peers during adolescence (Meeus & Dekovic, 1995). However, the idea that identity development through social comparison can facilitate high school completion is novel. From these preliminary findings questions emerge. Do students who experience the risk of early leave struggle with identity development to a greater extent than their peers? What specific kind of social comparison, and which type of social group include factors that influence completion? Can counsellors encourage or facilitate identity development by encouraging social comparison, and how exactly will doing so help students to stay in school? What leads to the desire to fit in with a

group that is successful versus belonging to a group of early leavers?

If early leavers are over-represented by creative individuals, is the identity development for creative individuals a greater challenge? It makes intuitive sense that a creative personality might be more complicated to negotiate and develop than a more conventional one. Rogers (1976) conceptualized the creative individual as a psychologically open person, in contrast to people who defensively protect themselves from new, disruptive experiences. Perhaps this explains why many students who have difficulty in high school report problems with affect, boredom and loss of meaning. These questions should be addressed in future studies.

Also a novel category which emerged was the opportunity to take time off to think or deal with emotional issues. Perhaps taking this time to be with oneself offers an opportunity to engage in the creative activities which facilitate positive development of self-concept, an opportunity that may not be available in school. Zelinger (1990) warned that blockage of the passage through creative process may result in an impoverishment of the personality. Participants in this study who took time off read books about art and wrote fiction and poetry. They spoke of having "me

time". This finding suggests the importance of opportunity to participate in the arts or similar activities for the purpose of self-expression, working through emotions, and identity development. If students had opportunities to do these things in school, perhaps they would not require time away from school to focus on the needs that are not being met there.

Change of environment also emerged as a novel concept. While program evaluations exist with regard to alternative schools, the concept of change of environment as a high school completion helping factor unto itself has been largely overlooked. In this study, whether the change of environment had to do with a new school, a change of social circle, or a move out of the parental home, all participants indicated that a the opportunity for a fresh new start was the motivating variable. Incidentally, preference for novelty is also a descriptor of the creative personality (Costa & McCrae, 1985). One descriptor of the creative person is a striving to maintain and avoid static equilibrium. Relaxation and balance for a creative individual is found in constant change and action (McNiff, 1981).

Expectation or perceived pressure to graduate might be conceptualized as a challenge variable, or be examined in the light of theory on adolescent identify development. It is

possible that participants require an optimal level of pressure or expectation in their social environment in order to achieve. Ishiyama's (1989) suggestion that group inclusion is a social reinforcement variable that contributes to self-validation, and self-worth. Living up to society's expectations, including those of family may be rewarded with recognition, which may lead to a sense of security and acceptance. Given this explanation, it seems likely that the perceived expectations and so-called pressure to graduate may be serving as a motivator based on an internalized idea of the reward of recognition and acceptance.

With regards to the emergent theme of lessened workloads, it remains to be explored whether change in the quality or style of teaching and learning has similar effects to change in the quantity. Several participants either complained that school was meaningless, irrelevant, boring and too broad, or suggested that links be made to the real world with regard to curriculum. The idea of a lessened workload being a motivator might change if details on the quality of the schoolwork were explored more carefully. Recall that participants reported being motivated in certain areas, namely the arts and sport. Perhaps if academic subjects can be taught with more creative flair, including opportunities for questions and contribution, the need for a

lessened workload might not be a factor necessary to motivate them towards achievement.

The category of fictional role models is new, however the concept of using role models is not. The Western practice of mentoring draws strongly on the principle of role modeling (McCormick, 1995). There is some evidence that live role models can be effective in promoting completion of high school (Richardson, 1987; Sosa, 1990), but the literature tends to be descriptive rather than empirical, and the focus is on role model programs for minority youth at-risk in American schools. It will be up to future research to empirically confirm or disconfirm whether fictional role models facilitate completion of high school. Overall, the categories seem to suggest a promising framework from which further theoretical development can take place.

Implications for Practice

The points raised in this study have important implications for the practicing of counselling. According to Gaskell (1995), special programs can be used to respond to particular needs, but can also exclude and marginalize. While a dilemma exists regarding whether to minimize or maximize differences, the special programs to support students who are having difficulties are viewed as critical

to success. This confirms what was highlighted in the literature review with regards to the detrimental effect of labeling an individual. The emphasis in terms of research and practice should be the education system with regard to the experiences and needs of the clients it serves. This is in line with stakeholder informed program development paradigms (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). All program initiatives and research need to include the perspectives of students with regards to their concerns and expressed needs.

The emergent categories and implications with regard to creativity, or simply participation in the arts and sports, indicate that an abundance of resources exist for facilitating completion of high school. Most schools already have curriculum which include art education, or extra-curricular opportunities to participate in the arts and sports. Whether or not students who experience difficulties completing high school are creative individuals, encouraging involvement in these programs can be useful. Researchers have indicated that art programs, for example, can foster self-awareness, personal growth, and a sense of mastery over the environment (Buckland & Bennet, 1995; Lawlor, 1992; Teirstein, 1991). Mastery and self-awareness are necessary components of the development of a positive self-concept, which has been shown to contribute to completion and motivate

students to achieve. Creative activity has also been related to resourceful coping (Foster, 1992). Again, whether or not the students who are struggling are particularly creative individuals, participation in the arts, and perhaps sports, can be utilized in preventative programs to keep students in school, provide them with an outlet for expression, identity development, and adjustment.

Another factor that emerged with implications for practise was the category of medicine. The relationship of particular medications to overall school performance has not been studied, however having an undiagnosed emotional problem is one factor that has been identified as having a negative effect on student motivation to perform well in school (Astin, 1985). Less specifically, but likewise supportive of the category, Morris Pawlovich, and McCall, (1991) indicated that students at risk should have the opportunity to have counselling address the issue of management of anxiety. Counselling programs need to be developed to help students deal with emotional issues. A more multi-disciplinary approach, including medical and social services, with communication among team members might be useful.

Practical help with a drive to school in the morning is a novel idea and has not been explored. Morris, Pawlovich, and McCall (1991) in a review of literature and consultation

with experts recommended that varied school environments and flexible scheduling can help schools meet the needs of students with problems. Others have also indicated that a flexible learning schedule can be helpful with students who are at risk of early leave (Franklin & Streeter, 1995; Morris, Pawlovich, & McCall, 1991). More attention and flexibility with regard to scheduling for students experiencing difficulties might be helpful. Proximity of the school and ease with which students travel to the location might also be considered in terms of improving attendance.

With regards to the facilitating identity development through social comparison, certain implications for practice arose. Educators in exemplary schools have recommended and utilized peer counselling for students at risk of dropping out (Morris, Pawlovich, & McCall, 1991). This kind of programming is likely based on an understanding of the identity development stage of adolescence, however it is not clear whether developmental theory is incorporated into the design of peer counselling programming. The results of this study suggest that programs utilizing peers may be an existing resource that can be further developed. Future peer counselling programs should be in part founded on the principals of identity development.

This research also suggests that interventions for students who experience difficulties include teachers as a resource. Teachers need to express recognition for effort and achievement, offer support, guidance, and praise. Overall, this research suggests strongly that educators must begin to recognize the value of a multi-dimensional, wholistic approach to education. It is evident that intellectual development can not be separated from emotional and personal growth, at least in adolescent education. If the responsibility of the education system is indeed to teach youth to become contributing members of society, their unique

contributions and expressions of self must be recognized and encouraged. They must be recognized for their unique contributions, encouraged and supported emotionally, provided with guidance and opportunities for self-directed, future oriented exploration of interests. Teachers must treat students with respect, like responsible adults, if they want to teach responsibility. Likewise, scheduling must be flexible and options must be available to accommodate and include students with needs that may not be met by conventional programming. Perhaps most importantly, opportunities to participate in the arts and sport activities must be available to all students. As well, the style of teaching, and structure of arts and sports programs might be utilized to design creative approaches to teaching academic subjects.

Implications for Further Research

Additional research needs to be conducted if counsellors and educators wish to use the category system presented here, particularly to confirm or disconfirm the novel concepts that were presented. It will be necessary to also evaluate the effectiveness of such practice and programs to see if a theoretical map can be created and refined from the categories.

Future research might involve replicating this study with a larger number of participants, to determine if new information and categories will be obtained, or to revise these categories to further an understanding of what facilitates completion. Studies might include students who are about to graduate, rather than recruiting volunteers, as opinions those who might not otherwise volunteer for a study will also be included.

A focus for future research should be to explore whether, in fact, a large percentage of students who have difficulty in high school are potentially high achieving or creative individuals. The next stage would be to explore whether participation in the arts would facilitate greater retention rates and achievement for this group.

Future research might use the results of this study to develop a test to evaluate the availability of helpful resources for a particular student at a time of need. This kind of measure would focus on solutions and helping, and as such would be more appropriate for use in counselling than identifying someone as being at-risk for failure. For example, a counsellor might give a student a test to see what areas are lacking in terms of support, in order to help that student find or develop resources in that area. Likewise, a group of students could be administered such a test and

results could be utilized to make changes in school programming, or counselling services. Any further examination of what facilitates completion for students who experienced the risk of early leave, which draws on student and counselling perspectives should prove to be extremely useful to both research and practise.

Conclusion

This study explores the facilitation of completion of high school for students who experienced the risk of early leave. The purpose of the study was to develop a reasonably comprehensive scheme of categories that would describe what facilitates completion from the perspective of former high school students. The research method involved interviews with individuals who were in a position to observe what facilitated their own completion in the face of adversity. The Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954) was utilized to elicit 142 incidents from 16 participants. Sixteen categories emerged from an analysis of the incidents reported. The soundness and trustworthiness of the categories was tested with a number of procedures. Results indicate that completion can be facilitated by emotional support and guidance, respect from teachers, opportunity to participate and get help, goals setting for the future,

encouragement of autonomy and responsibility, recognition, participation in the arts or sport, and an aspect of reward. What remains to be confirmed are the novel helping categories that emerged in the study. They include time off, medication, change of environment, expectation or pressure to graduate, lessened workloads, practical help getting to school, identity development through social comparison, and the use of fictional role models.

Anecdotal information that was consistently observed in the contents of the interviews and considered important by the researcher in terms of implications, were included and discussed. Participants made suggestions on what might help other students struggling to complete high school. Their suggestions included having opportunities to set goals and to participate in the arts and sports, teachers treating students with more respect, having opportunity to participation and get guidance, lessened workload or self-expectations, and more meaningful curriculum. Most participates indicated that they had personal problems leading to emotional needs not being met. Many reported either having been high achieving prior to these difficulties, or at the time of the study, having achieved success in post-secondary educational pursuits. Almost all indicated that they felt they did not fit in, and some

reported attempted to fail on purpose to fit in with a particular peer group. Most of the participants indicated that they were interested in the arts during high school, and/or were working towards a career in a creative area such as design or theatre at the time of the study.

The findings of this study contribute to the field of counselling psychology by providing reasonably comprehensive scheme of categories that describe from the perspective of former students, what facilitates completion of high school. This study suggests promising developments in high school completion that has implications for research, practice and curriculum design.

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APPENDIX A: INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

APPENDIX B: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

The following descriptions are included to describe some characteristics of the participants, however, the descriptions are by no means exhaustive, and details have been excluded to maintain confidentiality. As mentioned, the present research findings and implications extend beyond demographic variables, since the aim was a qualitative exploration based on a common experience. The reader is therefor advised not to make assumptions about the data based on these brief demographic descriptions.

Participant #1: Caucasian female, 19 years old at the time of the study, who graduated from a high school in Surrey in 1999, where she reported seeing a counsellor and having a positive experience. Currently working as a waitress, with a goal to attend college. Was a high achiever who remembers purposely trying to fail to get attention from teachers. In high school, she experienced family problems, living on her own, and was diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

Participant #2: Caucasian female from Hamilton, Ontario who was a 21 year old university student, planning to transfer to art college in Ontario, at the time of the study. She graduated in 1997 in Hamilton, after an experience of consciously attempting to fail. She reports that she was a

high achiever who became depressed and had problems fitting in. She writes creatively, and uses writing to deal with emotions.

Participant #3: Caucasian female, 27 years old, working as an Interior Designer with some college education. She graduated from a school in Markham, Ontario after dropping out for a short while. She reported feeling depressed, and a negative experience with her high school counsellor. She had difficulties fitting in.

Participant #4: Caucasian male, completed an alternative high school in Montreal after dropping out with a large peer group, then re-entering school with the same peer group. Currently works as an actor/comedian. Had a very positive experience with both counsellors and teachers in the alternative school. He expressed regret at not having the opportunity to do theatre during high school. He reported depression, and having been a high achiever who attempted to flunk in order to fit in.

Participant # 5: Jewish female, 19 years of age, graduated in 1997 from a regular high school on Vancouver Island, although she was originally placed in a special program for learning

disabilities. After placing herself back in a mainstream program, she was heavily involved in theatre at school. She currently attends acting school and works as a waitress.

Participant #6: Caucasian male, 24 years old who dropped out then returned and graduated with honours from a school in Surrey. He did equally well in the sciences and arts. Currently completing a degree in Fine Arts. He reported having been a high achiever who attempted to fail in order to fit in. He paints professionally and plans to attend graduate school. He reported having had positive experiences with counsellors in high school.

Participant #7: Caucasian female, 21 years old, currently working as a pastry chef, with plans to open a store. She graduated from a regular high school in Saskatchewan in 1995. She reported being successful in sciences and arts. She then attended a Marine Biology university program but did not complete. She reported family problems and depression, as well as problems fitting in, and active involvement in visual arts.

Participant #8: Caucasian male, 23 years old at the time of the study, who had completed high school in Vancouver in

1995, as well as some post-secondary at the college level, and vocational courses through a community mental health agency. In high school, he was diagnosed with manic-depression, and this illness led to many absences as well as school changes. He felt he had difficulties fitting in. At the time of the study, he was looking for work and planning to return to college. He felt that counsellors were helpful, particularly with regard to getting him involved in sports and extra-curricular activities.

Participant #9: Chinese male, 23 years old, attending university courses at the time of the study. He graduated from a high school in Burnaby in 1994 after difficulties with emotions. Counselling was helpful. He remained heavily involved in theatre during high school, even when he was missing a great deal due to depression. At the time of the study, he reported doing very well in university, and aiming to continue in acting.

Participant #10: Caucasian female, 28 years of age, attending college for university transfer in the area of law and psychology. This participant graduated in 1988 from a high school in Prince George where she was involved in Music. She dropped out temporarily because school had lost meaning, she

did not feel she fit in, and no one was listening. A counsellor convinced her successfully to return.

Participant #11: Chinese male, 22 years old, graduated from a Vancouver secondary after problems with the law and family of origin. He felt he did not fit in but found much validation and recognition through participation in sport. He reported that a counselling intervention with regard to his anger problems was highly effective. At the time of the study, he was completing his last year at university and considering a career in policing.

Participant #12: Korean female, 24 years old, graduated from a Vancouver school after dropping an I.B. program to take only the necessary regular courses. At the time of the study, participant was completing a B.A. in music. She reported family problems, depression, and feeling that she did not fit in.

Participant #13: East-Indian male, 29 years old, studying Commerce at college with the goal of attending university. This participant was living on his own when he dropped out of school and was not in contact with social services. He reported that problems at home were related to his sexual

orientation and not being accepted. He returned to school when a friend offered to support him financially, and graduated with honours. His experiences with counsellors were positive.

Participant #14: Latino male, 23 years old, graduated from a school in Downsview, Ontario after leaving for a short time to work and take a trip to South America. He attended a vocationally focused college program and worked as an electrician prior to being hurt at work. At the time of the study he was contemplating the direction of his career. He indicated that he was a high achiever before school lost meaning, and he felt he lost momentum. Time off to set goals, and the opportunity to complete credits at night school facilitated completion for him.

Participant #15: Caucasian female, 20 years old, studying to be a Child and Youth Worker at a Vancouver College. She graduated from a Vancouver high school after some difficulties related to depression and grief. She indicated that she writes poetry and does photography. Graphic arts as well as poetry in the English curriculum kept her attached to the school. Her experience with counsellors was generally

positive, although she felt they did not treat her like she was capable of taking responsibility for herself.

Participant #16: Caucasian female, 22 years old, graduated in 1995 from a Vancouver high school after a bout of depression. At the time of the study she was attending general college courses, with an interest in International Relations. She reported that she was heavily involved with theatre, and that kept her coming to school. Her counsellor was also very active and helpful. She indicated that she would be pursuing a career in theatre if she did not fear following in the footsteps of her parents, who are involved in the business.

APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT POSTER