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WHY ARE THEY FAILING?

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF ACADEMICALLY CAPABLE

AT-RISK SENIOR SECONDARY STUDENTS

by

Kenneth R. Ponsford

B.G.S., Simon Fraser University, 1990

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF EDUCATION

in

COUNSELLING

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THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN BRITISH COLUMBIA

April 1998

Canada

APPROVAL

Name: Kenneth R. Ponsford
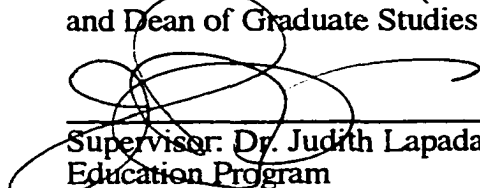
Degree: Master of Education

Thesis Title: WHY ARE THEY FAILING? A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF
                   ACADEMICALLY CAPABLE AT-RISK SENIOR SECONDARY
                   STUDENTS

Examining Committee:

Dr. Max Blouw,
Associate Vice-President (Research)
and Dean of Graduate Studies

Supervisor: Dr. Judith Lapadat,
Education Program

Dr. Anne Lindsay,
Education Program

Dr. Jim Bell,
Learning Skills Centre Co-ordinator

External Examiner: Dr. Fred Egglestone,
School District #57 (Prince George)

Date Approved: April 24 / 98

ABSTRACT

A sub-group of learners among at-risk students is becoming familiar to teachers of senior secondary grades. It consists of students who are apparently academically capable and who do not exhibit most of the identifying characteristics of at-risk students, chronic underachievers or dropouts. However, these students become at risk of not completing their secondary school education, or of inadequate preparation for post-secondary education or rewarding careers, in spite of demonstrated academic capability. Following academic success in the elementary and junior secondary grades, they perform at failing or near-failing levels in core subjects in senior secondary grades. The goal of this study has been to understand these students better and to suggest ways in which they migh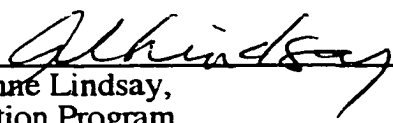t be supported within the school system. Three students who fit criteria describing academically capable at-risk senior secondary students were interviewed extensively and the information they provided was coded into 17 descriptive categories. The data were then compared across all three students and across descriptive categories and organized into three overarching pattern categories.

This research examines the students' schooling experiences as described in interviews and their notions of how those experiences have influenced them to make the learning behaviour choices they have made, and it relates those behaviour choices to achievement motivation theory. Analysis of the students' perceptions of their schooling experiences has identified educational practices and factors which the students believe have significant impact on their achievement. These student perceptions are consistent with findings reported in the achievement motivation research literature. Directions for establishing curriculum, instruction and administrative routines informed by student perceptions and supported by achievement motivation literature conclude this study.

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Introduction

There is a solid body of research literature concerning identification of students at risk of leaving school prior to graduation, and students who are chronic underachievers, and initiatives have been designed and implemented to address the needs of those students. However there appears to be a sub-group of students who do not exhibit all the characteristics of those typically at-risk of dropping out and who are not chronic underachievers but who are nevertheless becoming educationally at-risk. This sub-group of at-risk students has had relatively little attention in the literature but is familiar to teachers of the senior secondary grades. It consists of students who are apparently academically capable and who do not exhibit most of the identifying characteristics of at-risk students or dropouts, yet become at risk because they perform at failing or near-failing levels in core subjects in the later years of their secondary schooling. They share some of the attributes of students labelled underachievers in the research literature, yet their overall history of school performance precludes identifying them as underachievers according to generally-accepted definitions. They are simply capable students whose performance takes a downturn. As a result of failing or near-failing grades, the future for these students is jeopardized. Their poor academic performance places them among students typically at risk of dropping out, but even if they do not drop out, their low level of achievement results in inadequate preparation for post-secondary education or desirable careers. The goal of this study is to understand these students better, examine their perceptions and performance in terms of achievement motivation theory, and suggest ways in which they might be supported within the school system.

<center>From the Academic Literature</center>

At-Risk Learners

The students about whom this study seeks to gain understanding constitute a subset of the larger group of at-risk students as described in the research literature. The literature contains a wide range of descriptions of at-risk students. However, what is commonly addressed in the literature is the concern that these are students at risk of dropping out of school. The components of their state of being at risk include some or all of poor academic performance, deficient social skills, inadequate support systems, personal crises, antipathy towards school, out-of school demands on their time and energy and risk behaviours.

In an effort to establish whether "at-risk students" are significantly different in some measurable way from their peers who function well in school, Martin and Murphy (1993) compared three selected sub-groups of students using the 1966 Jesness Inventory of personality characteristics. They selected high achievers, those "at-risk", and those who had effectively dropped out by having been assigned by the courts to a provincial training school. The attitudes of the three groups were compared and contrasted to determine whether and, if so, how the at-risk students differed from their more successful peers so that ways might be found to support them within the school system. For Martin and Murphy's study, high achievers were those with good grades, who were generally perceived to be strong academic students and who rarely if ever presented discipline problems. At-risk students were those who "live on the fringe of school life, . . . are always in conflict with their teachers and often their peers . . . can't or won't function successfully in a normal classroom situation . . . and frequently end up in the in-school suspension room" (p. 38). Many have repeated at least one grade, and almost half have been referred to in their school records as having some kind of learning disability. Approximately 45% came from single parent families and many were reportedly on some kind of social assistance. Martin and Murphy found that the at-risk group, like those in the training school, showed notably higher degrees of social maladjustment (defined as not meeting environmental demands in socially-approved ways), autism (defined as a tendency

to distort reality according to one's personal desires or needs), and manifest aggression (defined as reflecting an awareness of unpleasant feelings and the tendency to react readily, especially with anger and frustration) than those in the high-achieving group.

The negative personality characteristics Martin and Murphy (1993) attribute to the group of at-risk students are not surprising given the descriptive profile of the students. School failure, learning difficulties, poverty and family stress are hardly conducive to the development of positive personality characteristics. What is more surprising is that in spite of their poor performance, most of these at-risk students speak of wanting to finish school and even go on to college or university. According to the author, "these students have fallen off the academic treadmill and are falling through the cracks of the system" (p. 47). For them school needs to be less punitive in terms of peer reactions to them, adult reactions to them, and unrealistic academic expectations being placed upon them. Martin and Murphy claim that these students, despite their appearance and behaviour, still have a vested interest in schooling. The authors suggest that schools can cater to that vested interest by providing a non-punitive environment and experiences of success. They advocate providing respite for these students, in the form of "time-out" rooms and plenty of counselling time to help them unlearn their maladaptive coping strategies. The authors also advocate coupling these students with nonjudgemental peer and adult role models rather than punishing them when they act out their negative personality characteristics. While these strategies will no doubt assist the students in the immediacy of the school context, they do little to mitigate against the effects of a homelife typified by poverty and fractured families. Societal support for the families may also be necessary if these students are to be supported adequately in their schooling.

The reasoning behind Martin and Murphy's (1993) study--to identify measurable distinguishing characteristics between successful and at-risk students--seems sound. However in seeking to identify common traits between at-risk students and other sub-groups, the choice of comparison groups is a poor one. It represents extremes of student performance which are too far removed from the at-risk students. Students removed from school and placed under court supervision do not truly represent dropouts. Neither do the

school's highest achievers truly represent the large body of well-functioning students. Martin and Murphy fail to include a means of comparing at-risk students with average-achieving students. It is possible that had they done so, they might have found characteristics of at-risk students common to average achievers, suggesting less of a disparity between at-risk and successful ones. It is possible that practices which are already in place could be expanded or modified for the benefit of the at-risk students.

Yard and Vatterott (1995) offer a behavioural model tailored to address the needs of behaviourally at-risk students described by Yard & Puricelli (1989, as cited in Yard & Vatterott, 1995), as "dissimilar learners". "Dissimilar learners" are those students who typically do not qualify for special education services, yet are not completely successful in the regular classroom and school environment. There is a mismatch between the student and the environment which exacerbates the learner's behavioural and learning problems. A profile of dissimilar learner characteristics includes: concrete thought processes, direct confrontation, visual learning style, high word usage-low word meaning, aversion to written language, preference for group work, low sense of self-security, negative reaction to rigid order, emotional fragility, and slowness to bond coupled with strong loyalty . These are students who need special approaches in the classroom if they are to be successful in their academic achievement. The authors describe the Intervention with Dissimilar Learners Model to use in addressing the learning needs of these students. The Intervention with Dissimilar Learners Model incorporates a series of escalating monitoring procedures, teaching strategies and learning environment modifications which involve the student in decision-making,

This model addresses at-risk classroom behaviour and discipline rather than at-risk academic achievement, but certain of its strengths also suggest directions for dealing with academically at-risk students. A strength of the approach is its movement away from the deficit view of student performance to one recognizing mismatch between the services offered by the institution and the needs of the student. Performance problems are not seen as internal to the student, but as having multiple roots. Another strength is the recognition that approaches which focus only on the child have the effect of producing in the child a

sense of powerlessness, in that something is being done "to" him or her, rather than "with" her or him. This model includes the child in the decision-making, affording her or him a sense of empowerment.

Sapp and Farrell (1994) describe the at-risk student as "1 or more years behind his or her age or grade level in mathematics or reading skills...[or subject to]...any factors that put a student at-risk for academic failure, such as being adjudicated delinquent, becoming a parent, or thinking about dropping out of school" (p. 20).

Without suggesting the direction of cause and effect, Sapp and Farrell (1994) report that Sapp (1990) concluded that academic self-concept coupled with self-esteem provides significant psychoeducational predictability of achievement. Sapp (1990) found that at-risk students have difficulty studying and have low academic self-concepts. Addressing these issues through cognitive-behavioural interventions assumes that the student cognitions, affect and behaviour are overlapping and cannot be treated separately. Sapp and Farrell (1994) outline a number of cognitive-behavioural interventions for teachers to utilize in helping enhance academic self-concept and self-esteem with at-risk students. Relaxation and anger control procedures, study skills training and academic self-concept exercises including guided imagery are offered as classroom and counselling strategies to enhance both cognition and self-concept with at-risk students.

Fitzpatrick's (1984) description of at-risk students closely parallels Yard & Vatterott's (1995) description of dissimilar learners. Fitzpatrick calls them "Underachieving Average Ability Students" and describes them as students who do not perform poorly enough to qualify for special education services, yet are not sufficiently motivated to be successful in most regular programs. They are characterized by poor self-concept, lack of basic study skills, and a history of "barely getting by". They become adept at surviving in school without acquiring adequate academic or social skills, and fall continually behind. Ultimately, many drop out of school, following this general progression: lowered grades resulting from low interest in school; truancy problems leading to disciplinary referrals; disruptive behaviour resulting in removal from class or suspension from school; parental involvement and increasingly negative attitude; and finally, a decision to quit school.

Fitzpatrick describes an intervention for grade nine students, the Secondary III Core Program, which features placement in smaller classes and several classes per day in a mentoring relationship with one teacher, and includes study skills and field trip components. Fitzpatrick reports positive results from the first year of the program: students involved had improved marks and increased self-concept at the end of the year, and continued success in grade 10. None of the students had dropped out at the time of reporting, and only three out of fifteen had failed the first semester of grade 10. The author does not specify whether the failures were by single subject or by grade.

Fitzpatrick (1984), like a number of other writers on the subject of students at-risk, attributes the causes of risk to student motivation without reporting factors which might have prompted the lack of motivation. However, the program he describes does work towards enhancing motivation by addressing underlying issues such as the need to belong, flexible timetabling, variety and novelty in content presentation and a mentoring relationship with a positive adult role model. A strength of this program is student choice to join or not, parent choice to have the student join or not, and the commitment of both student and family to fulfill the requirements of the program.

In spite of the multiplicity of definitions of at-risk students, there are some overall common descriptors. Most frequently included are that at-risk students have failing grades, poor interactions with most aspects of the school system, poor self-concept and low self-esteem. They show escalating disaffection with school parallelling disciplinary problems and a real likelihood of failing to complete graduation requirements.

Dropouts

School dropout studies provide a picture of those students who have gone beyond simply being at-risk to having left the system without acquiring school-leaving credentials. Neilson and Ward (1991) report that the most current definition of the school dropout, and that used in Employment and Immigration Canada's Stay-in-School Initiative, START, is a student who was enrolled in school some time during the previous school year, but was not in school at the start of the current school year (p. 15). This, of course, excludes those

who have graduated in the interval. Although this definition may provide for questionable statistics because it does not distinguish students who leave school and re-register in the same year, or those who transfer schools, it does include all those students who according to school records should be in school but are not. Neilson and Ward quote Statistics Canada's common features of school dropouts: a sense of alienation from school, alcohol and/or drug use, and lack of support for remaining in school. This description of dropouts is augmented by Baker and Sansone (1990) with the addition of these characteristics: poor attendance, poor or failing grades, and abundant disciplinary problems. Coleman (1990) adds those students who are one year or more behind in school, of low socioeconomic status, and facing social and school-related pressure. Downing and Harrison (1990) include those who have experienced pregnancy during the school year, suffered the effects of bigotry, or who perceive themselves as being of low social status in the school setting. Tanner, Krahn and Hartnagel (1995) include those in lower academic streams, those who work an excessive number of hours while attending school, and those from single-parent families. Tanner et al. (1995) also report that children of poorly-educated parents are also more likely to leave school before graduating.

Barrington and Hendricks (1989) studied high school graduates, dropouts and non-graduates to identify early indicators of each group. They concluded that future dropouts show clear indication of academic problems by the third grade, with poor attendance and underachievement increasing into the middle grades and failing grades present by seventh grade. By the ninth grade the pattern of high absences, failing grades and low overall GPA is well established and it continues until the student drops out of school. The results of this study indicate that dropouts could be differentiated with 66% accuracy in the third grade and with 85% accuracy by the ninth grade. Non-graduates, those students who remain in school to the end of grade twelve but fail to graduate, could be identified with 77% accuracy by the ninth grade. Barrington and Hendricks found that potential nongraduates could be differentiated from potential graduates in the elementary grades by negative teacher comments.

These studies suggest that indicators that students will need help if they are to avoid

dropping out are observable early in their schooling: family characteristics, socio-economic status, attendance, frequency of discipline referrals and declining grades are all known to the school. The implication is that they are not being acted upon early enough or adequately in the case of some students.

Contributing factors to dropping out

Tanner, Krahn & Hartnagel (1995) in their reporting on interviews with 157 Canadian high school dropouts ranging in age up to 26 years, identify three main areas of consideration into which students' decisions to drop out fall. These main areas of consideration are school-based, jobs/money -related, and personal reasons. School-based considerations include disliking school, boredom, truancy, not getting along with teachers, and other negative comments about school and teachers. Jobs/money-related considerations include wanting to find a job or wanting or needing to make some money. Personal considerations include not getting along with parents, being kicked out of home, friends who drop out, abuse of drugs or alcohol, trouble with the law, and pregnancy. Not yet mentioned in the research literature, but suggested in the media and accepted as "common sense" contributions to dropping out are involvement in the perceived increase in youth violence and gang activity.

Dropout prevention programs

Dropout prevention programs have often taken the approach of addressing the obvious: attempting to improve student attendance and achievement by having the student change. However several authors make the case that if the environment in which the student functions can be changed, at-risk students will respond more favourably.

Baker and Sansone (1990) describe how schools can examine their current practices and redirect resources to improve service to all students, especially those at risk of dropping out. Such strategies as special groupings of students with mentoring teachers, inclusion of parent and volunteer adults in programs, weekly monitoring meetings, program and expectation flexibility, and community involvement were suggested.

Downing and Harrison (1990), in an approach they call "Small Wins", pragmatically advocate teaching at-risk students and their teachers to accept reduced levels of academic success in order to achieve a high-school diploma if not a high-school education for certain of the at-risk students. They suggest counsellors should help at-risk students face the various hurdles between them and graduation and cope with them by setting achievable goals, meeting them with least effort, and succeeding at a minimal level. The hurdles they are encouraged to address in this manner include graduation requirements, teaching approaches, competency exams, expectations of attempting post-secondary education, school rules, isolation and bigotry. The counsellor functions as an ally and mentor, helping the student identify goals which are limited in scope and promising in outcome.

While such an approach can result in the students' acquiring a high-school diploma, it does not result in their acquiring education adequate to proceed to further training or to function well in a competitive workplace. Rather than reducing student expectations, the school should be focussing on ways to encourage the students' efforts towards achieving at an acceptable level, as discussed in the following programs.

Mayer, Mitchell, Clementi, Clement-Robertson, and Myatt (1993) describe a program consisting of peer consultation among teachers, changes in teaching styles, abundant tutor availability for students, and a strong summer school component including educational field trips. The primary focus of the program was to increase student attendance and make classroom environments less punitive.

Blum and Jones (1993) focus on identifying potential dropouts in the elementary school and providing tracking and support as these students move into the secondary system. This is accomplished through a weekly support group and daily contact with an adult mentor upon arrival in the secondary system. The goals of the counselling group are to help members gain a clear awareness of their strengths, to monitor and improve academic performance, to improve study habits, and to improve interpersonal skills. The mentoring relationship includes helping the student fulfill academic responsibilities and attendance with the student at extracurricular activities.

Neilson and Ward (1991) recommend a six-point program for addressing dropout

issues under the auspices of Employment and Immigration Canada's START initiative. The program includes many of the features described in the foregoing discussion of dropout prevention programs. Its six points consist of: establishment of a student peer helpers/ teacher peer coaching program; integration of multicultural topics, especially First Nations information, into the curriculum; expansion of work experience opportunities, especially for grade ten students; development of alternate programs and flexible schedules for transition from elementary to secondary grades; a focus of attention in grade eight on strategies for transition into later secondary grades; and a mentoring system for identification, intervention, tracking and monitoring of at-risk students.

In summary, students who drop out of school do so for a wide variety of reasons, culminating with a disaffection for school and its processes. Exemplary dropout prevention programs address that disaffection and work to make the school a place where at-risk students feel they can function effectively to overcome the factors which have resulted in their being at-risk. Programs that serve to make school such a place include those which involve active student participation in learning and positive personal relationships between students and teachers; provide both challenge and experiences of success for a wide range of students; provide curriculum which students see as relevant to their world; and minimize barriers for at-risk students.

Achievement Motivation

Poor academic achievement is common to all the definitions of at-risk students and students who drop out of school before completing graduation requirements. Such poor academic achievement ranges from minimal passing grades in one or several subjects to the failing of those subjects or whole grades. This section of the chapter provides a review of literature addressing student underachievement and theory and practices for motivating students to satisfactory achievement.

Underachievement

Student underachievement is acknowledged to be a significant problem: "My 30%",

one principal calls his school's underachievers (Griffin, 1988, p.ix); "Underachievement Syndrome is epidemic," (Rimm, 1986, p.xii); "The problem of underachievement has become a national emergency of the first order." (Tomlinson & Cross, 1991); "Underachievement is a widespread problem in the United States, with prevalence estimates ranging from 15% to 50%" (Carr, Borkowski, & Maxwell, 1991). Definitions of underachievement and descriptions of underachieving students vary somewhat. While most definitions include some reference to students' achieving below expectation, various authors expand on the basic definition in various ways.

Griffin (1988), upon reviewing a number of articles on underachievement, and failing to find a common definition among them, offers the following:

> At present, there are large numbers of adolescents with talent who are somewhat flat, disengaged, or distracted in school. Academically they drift along at a mediocre level, if that: far below, it seems what they could be achieving if they put their minds to it. Likewise, there are significant numbers of well-intentioned young people who, despite good potential, just do not get off the mark in their classes. I grope for a label to use in referring to students of this sort. Underachievers seems as good as any. (page ix)

Rimm (1986) suggests that many underachievers begin as apparently bright and verbal pre-schoolers but their satisfactory performance changes, sometimes gradually, sometimes abruptly. The most prevalent indicator that they have begun to underachieve is communication from the teacher that they are not working up to ability. They may be very creative or verbally or mathematically precocious, yet overall they do not do well in school.

Carr, Borkowski, and Maxwell (1991) argue that the origins of a student's underachievement can be found in dysfunctional motivational and affective states. Underachieving students generally have low self-esteem and external attributional orientations. These dysfunctionalities cause underachievers to appear as "helpless students," who fail not because they lack strategic knowledge but because they have inappropriate strategic beliefs, expectations and achievement goals. They do not choose appropriate strategies and they are not sufficiently diligent to modify strategies to suit task demands.

Carr et al. (1991) attribute underachieving students' poor performance to low self-esteem and external attributional orientations. However, it seems possible or even likely that the low self-esteem and inappropriate strategic beliefs result from the students' educational experiences. Students who have not experienced success in school are not likely to have high self-esteem or to believe that they can make a difference to their achievement.

Bruns (1992) provides a definition for student underachievement and focuses on a particular group of underachievers, those he calls "work inhibited." Bruns concurs with the underlying theme of all definitions of underachievement: that a discrepancy exists between the performance expected of the student and the performance which actually occurs. Performance predictions arise from measurements of student ability, student past performance, and expectations based upon the age and grade of the student. When such indicators suggest a student should achieve well but he or she does not, the student is considered to be an underachiever. When the student's underachievement results from failure to do work and complete assignments, Bruns considers the student to be work inhibited. Bruns excludes from his definition those students who have a problem with a single discipline, or who have had a bad term, semester or quarter and subsequently rebound, or those who suffer a severe emotional experience. He also excludes those who give up due to placement in classes beyond their present skills.

Bruns correctly identifies the students' failure to work as causal to their underachievement, the implication being that such failure to work is indicative of student laziness. Indeed, some students do not work because of laziness, but Bruns fails to investigate other underlying causes, such as learning disabilities or inappropriate or irrelevant learning activities.

Stipek (1993) describes underachievers as those students whose performance in class is below the level that would be expected from their performance on aptitude tests. However, she stresses that standardized tests alone do not provide sufficient diagnostic information, and careful teacher observation is also necessary, as students achieve

differently on different tasks in different settings.

Just as different researchers define underachievement somewhat differently, so they ascribe it to different causes. Underachievement is accounted for by Griffin (1988) as a result of interplay among three broad themes: deficits in academic skills; deficiencies in behavioural self-control skills; and interfering affective factors such as over-dependence, poor motivation, or lack of self-confidence. Family interaction patterns and attitudes toward education are also cited as factors which contribute to underachievement, as is socio-economic status, with underachievers more likely to come from homes which provide few social-educational opportunities, such as encouraging recreational reading, ensuring regular, supervised homework time in a suitable environment, or discussion of current events.

Rimm (1986) suggests some early indicators and possible causes for underachievement. She suggests all the following as being possible causes for underachievement: (a) the "overwelcome child," that is, a child born or adopted into a family that has waited a long time for a child; (b) children with early health problems; (c) particular sibling combinations such as close-aged same-sex siblings, younger siblings of gifted children, youngest in a family of older siblings and siblings of the physically or mentally disadvantaged; (d) specific marital problems, such as early broken marriage or only-child-single parent, families characterized by pervasive oppositional relationships, or divorced parents; and (e) early giftedness. According to Rimm, all these conditions result in one of two traits in the child: dependence or dominance, both of which contribute to underachievement. Rimm's list of characteristics and combinations leading to underachievement is wide-ranging to the point of including almost any child, and her determination that all such children can be categorized as either over-dependent or dominant does not correspond with other researchers' view of the phenomenon. She also fails to account for the influence of any factors other than family constellations in describing underachievers.

Tomlinson and Cross (1991), reporting on the U.S. Office of Educational Research and Improvement 1990 conference on academic effort and academic motivation, offer four

causes for student underachievement. First, most schools deliver the majority of their rewards, in the form of high grades, to high-achieving children; therefore students of low or moderate ability, those who need to work hardest, have the least incentive to do so. Second, educational policies and practices designed to provide "educational gratuities" in the form of modified courses and adapted graduation requirements to boost the progress of the neediest students are used to advantage by able students as well. Third, peer pressure can and does influence students to work towards meeting the expectations of the crowd rather than of parents and teachers. Fourth, school personnel's perceptions of the academic limits of some children and fear for their self-esteem lead many teachers to excuse them from hard work and higher expectations. (Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1991).

Although Bruns (1992) does not ascribe cause, he indicates which students are likely to be work-inhibited underachievers. Unlike Griffin (1988), Bruns does not attribute underachievement to socio-economic status, and unlike Rimm (1986), he does not attribute underachievement to birth order or family configuration. Bruns identified underachievers in all socio-economic groups and across the spectrum of students' academic abilities and skills. His study showed that nearly 20 percent of the school population, primarily boys, were work-inhibited, that is, underachievers who do not do their school work. He does not explain this gender imbalance even though he stresses that with most other variables work-inhibition is evenly distributed.

While definitions of underachievement vary, as do ascriptions of cause, descriptions of underachievers show similarities. Rimm (1986) provides a wide-ranging list of descriptions of those students she terms underachievers, then presents thirteen prototypical underachievers, to whom she gives names such as "Hyperactive Harry," "Perfectionist Pearl," "Taunted Terrance," "Rebellious Rebecca," and so on, indicative of their behaviours resulting in underachievement. Generally, in Rimm's view, underachievers are disorganized and forgetful, they daydream, don't listen and don't stay on task. They may be slow and perfectionistic or quick and careless; they may be lonely and withdrawn, teased and tormented or bossy and of quick temper. By and large they don't like school.

Virtually all underachievers are manipulative, according to Rimm. They have innumerable defences for their lack of achievement, among them boredom, perceived irrelevance of school, and feelings of absence of control over their educational success. They have denied themselves the opportunity to build self-confidence because they have little experience of success. They aspire to be winners but they are poor losers. They are competitive, internally pressured children who have not learned to cope with defeat and so often choose not to try rather than risk failure.

Bruns (1992) identified four themes in establishing a profile of the under-achievers he calls work-inhibited. They showed dependency, low self-esteem, negative attitudes toward school, and passive-aggressive behaviours. Personality tests given to these students and their high-achieving peers revealed the work-inhibited underachievers to be guilt-ridden about their poor performance, more sensitive to criticism, and more fearful and apprehensive than their peers. Interestingly, in Bruns' study, most work-inhibited students were not disruptive to the instructional process.

Both Rimm (1986) and Bruns (1992) offer descriptions of underachievers which portray them as unhappy, malfunctioning, negative individuals. Given the degree to which both these writers suggest underachievement pervades schools, one would expect a preponderance of maladjusted students everywhere. This is clearly not the case, and it might be wise to view these writers' claims with caution. Such caution should not result in failure to address the needs of underachieving students, however.

Suggestions for meeting the needs of underachieving students cover a broad spectrum including both the affective and cognitive domains. Griffin (1988) reports that the diversity of explanations for the condition requires a diversity of remediation strategies, namely: (a) efforts to improve academic skill deficits, particularly study skills; (b) programs focusing on personality and attitudinal variables such as motivation, self-confidence, and self-esteem; (c) self-control programs focusing on self-monitoring, self-reinforcement, and stimulus control; (d) anxiety reduction techniques; and (e) rational problem-solving strategies.

Rimm (1986) suggests parenting techniques to help prevent or overcome the traits

which feature in underachievement, and then describes a program, the TRIFOCAL MODEL, for curing the underachievement syndrome. This model involves parents and teachers working separately or jointly to help the underachiever learn achieving behaviours. The program consists of Assessment, Communication, Changing Expectations, Role Model Identification, Correction of Deficiencies, and Modifications of Reinforcements directed towards Dependent, Conforming Dominant or Non-Conforming Dominant traits, depending on the needs of the child.

Tomlinson and Cross (1991) suggest that if student achievement is to be significantly improved, changes in schools must be accompanied by changes in the level and quality of effort that students invest in learning. Minimum competencies required for graduation must be set and students, with the help of their teachers, must master them. The connection between learning and academic effort needs to be made evident to all students and proper support provided to motivate students to achieve the first through the second.

Bruns (1992) outlines initiatives the school can undertake in order to encourage work-inhibited underachievers to achieve at more appropriate levels. Screening is required to eliminate other causes, such as inability, attention deficits, fine-motor control, or psychological issues. When a student has been identified as an underachiever, the school can help the student by building nurturing relationships and providing emotional support, not only with the classroom teacher, but also perhaps with mentors, cross-grade or peer tutors, or parent volunteers. Classroom teachers can foster cooperation, not competition in the classroom, empower the student through including him or her more in the decision-making process, provide opportunities for the student to take on responsibility and receive recognition for doing so successfully, and help the student recognize that making mistakes is a valuable part of learning.

There is agreement among those who study underachievement that behavioural changes have to be made by the students themselves, whether of their own volition or with the impetus, guidance and support of adults. This leads to the consideration of questions of motivation. Understanding what it is that motivates students to change their behaviour helps educators provide that impetus, guidance and support.

Goal Theory

Many current writers on the subject of achievement motivation begin with goal theory and relate that theory to achievement behaviour. Goal theory focuses on three types of goals which motivate student behaviour: learning goals, the pursuit of which is to enhance learning or mastery; performance goals, the pursuit of which is to provide evidence of one's ability; and social goals, the pursuit of which is to enhance one's position in the group. While the basic definitions of the goals are common, the various writers augment those definitions in various ways.

Dweck and Leggett (1989) discuss how individuals' implicit theories orient them towards particular goals and how these goals set up patterns of behaviour which are followed in meeting challenges in the cognitive, affective and behavioural spheres. Dweck and Leggett suggest that performance goals flow from an entity theory of intelligence, and learning goals flow from an incremental theory of intelligence. They suggest that students working from an entity theory believe that intelligence, or ability, is a fixed characteristic, whereas students working from an incremental theory believe that intelligence or ability is malleable and can be increased. Students who believe that their ability is fixed, especially those who do not do well academically, tend to pursue performance goals, which permit them to establish the adequacy of their ability, and then protect their image of adequacy of ability by avoiding practices which reflect badly on it. Since trying hard is seen by these students as an indication that their ability is inadequate, they avoid effort or make excuses why such effort as they do employ does not result in changes in their achievement. By not trying, they do not test their ability to the limit and therefore the adequacy of their ability is not questioned; only the adequacy of their effort is questioned. On the other hand, students working from an incremental theory tend to pursue learning goals. They believe that ability can be enhanced through efforts to learn. Even if it does not result in immediate desired changes in achievement, effort enhances their self-perception of adequacy because they are making improvements in their ability.

Ames (1992) reviews studies of achievement goals she labels mastery and performance goals. Mastery goals are also referred to as learning goals or task-involvement goals. Central to these goals is the belief that effort and outcome covary; one's sense of efficacy is based on the belief that effort will lead to success and a sense of mastery. With mastery goals, individuals are oriented toward developing new skills, trying to understand tasks, and/or improving their level of competence. Such individuals achieve a sense of mastery based on self-referenced standards. In contrast, performance goals, which are also referred to as ego-involvement goals, centre around a focus on one's ability and sense of self-worth: ability is demonstrated by outperforming others, surpassing normative-based standards, or by achievement with little effort. Public recognition that one has done better than others is especially important. Consequently, learning itself is valuable only as a means of achieving high performance. In pursuit of performance goals, resorting to effort threatens the self-concept of ability, especially if effort does not result in success. Mastery goals elicit motivational patterns most likely to result in achievement behaviour, whereas performance goals foster failure-avoiding motivational patterns.

Stipek (1993) advocates treatment of motivational problems through understanding students' goals, whether they be learning goals (alternatively called "mastery" or "task" goals by some researchers), which are intrinsic, or performance goals (also called "ego" goals), which are extrinsic. In understanding students' goals, Stipek advises, teachers should also be aware of the goals of the student's parents, which will also vary between learning and performance goals. The messages parents give their children will influence the children's goals. Stipek holds that the teacher has a powerful effect on students' goals and motivation and can provide positive influence through maximizing intrinsic motivation in the classroom. She suggests teachers should help students shift to a task focus by rewarding effort and de-emphasizing normative comparisons of performance and ability.

Maehr and Anderman (1993) differentiate between task-focused and ability-focused goals, and posit that a school that stresses learning (task-focused goals) is more conducive to cognitive engagement and motivation than one which emphasizes performance (ability-focused goals). They present a program for emphasizing task-focused, or learning, goals.

These writers label "task-focused" those students who are primarily concerned with learning for the sake of learning, who are genuinely interested in problem solving, and attribute their success to effort. Those who define success as doing better than others and make the demonstration of their ability their purpose for undertaking learning are considered to be ability-focused. The goal orientation that students adopt is reflected in the nature and quality of the effort they put forth. Mayer and Anderman report that when students adopt a task orientation, they will likely use effective learning strategies such as self-monitoring, relating new material to that previously learned, and trying to understand conceptual relationships. When students adopt an ability orientation, on the other hand, they are more likely to use surface-level strategies such as memorization and rehearsal, learning shortcuts and quick payoffs.

Urdan and Martin (1995) offer the view that achievement goals represent students' perceptions about the purposes of academic achievement. While they do not necessarily affect the amount of motivation a student has to perform in a given situation, they affect the quality of the motivation, which affects the behavioural, cognitive, and affective outcomes. Urdan and Martin augment the discussion of task goals and ability goals with an examination of social goals related to academic achievement. They define social goals as the perceived purposes for trying, or not trying, to achieve academically. Certain social goals, namely social approval goals, such as seeking approval of peers or teachers, social solidarity goals, such as bringing honour to one's family, and social compliance goals, such as demonstrating that one is a good person, have direct impact on a student's motivation. The student whose perceived purpose to achieve academically is to gain social approval will be motivated to achieve as do those students whose approval is sought. If those whose social approval is sought are task goal-oriented, the seeker is motivated to perform as a task goal-oriented individual; if those whose approval is sought are ability goal-oriented, the seeker is motivated to perform as an ability goal-oriented individual; if those whose approval is sought are low achievers, the seeker is motivated to perform as a low achiever. The same pattern holds true for students pursuing social solidarity and social compliance goals.

Raffini (1993) also discusses task goals, ability goals and social goals, and suggests ways teachers can apply goal theories to classroom structures which foster student motivation for learning or task goals. He describes ways to develop a classroom which exhibits a motivating ethos, or "personality". He discusses teachers' beliefs about learners, learning and teaching, organizational patterns, goal orientation, and Target structures. The reader is provided with an outline indicating which goal orientation is reinforced by which type of classroom characteristics as exhibited toward five dimensions of achievement: success, mistakes, what is valued, evaluation criteria, and focus of attention. For instance, in the classroom where success is defined by high normative performance and grade competition, performance goals are reinforced, while in the classroom where success is defined by improvement, progress and competence, mastery goals are reinforced.

Cognitive Theories of Achievement Motivation

Cognitive achievement motivation theories have roots in learned-drive theory, based on the work in the 1950s and 1960s of McClelland (1965) and Atkinson (1957, 1964), and Atkinson and Raynor (1977). These theories build on earlier drive theories that established the fulfillment of basic physical needs such as hunger and thirst as being the most influential of behaviour drives, but include psychological motives such as needs for approval, belongingness and achievement. Fulfilling the need for achievement gives rise to a fundamental conflict between attempting success and avoiding failure. Different individuals attempt to resolve this conflict in different ways. For instance, success-oriented individuals prefer to attempt tasks for which they have approximately equal probability of achieving either success or failure, assuring sufficient successes to sustain effort and interest without achieving such easy success as to cheapen its rewards. Failure-avoiding individuals, however, often choose tasks which are either too easy or too difficult, creating situations of easy reward or impossible success, which carries no loss of honour.

Cognitive attribution theories, through which Weiner (1972, 1974) and Weiner et al. (1971) reinterpret learned drive theories based on the principles of attributive theory,

include individuals' perceptions of the causes of success or failure as motivational influences on the quality of their future achievement. Weiner et al. proposed that individuals' perceptions of the roles of ability, effort, luck and task ease or difficulty featured in their attitudes toward achievement. Generally, success-oriented individuals tend to attribute success to ability and lack of success to lack of effort. In contrast, failure-avoiding individuals tend to attribute success to external factors such as luck and attribute failure to inability. Individuals who ascribe their success on a task to sufficient ability are motivated to undertake like tasks in the future. Those who believe success depends on external factors are less likely to strive; they perceive themselves as being powerless to control success. Cognitive attribution theory holds that perceptions of ability can be enhanced, and student effort thereby encouraged, by teacher actions. Students whom teachers perceive as trying hard are rewarded more in success and punished less in failure than students who do not try hard. Under these circumstances, students learn to value effort as a main source of personal worth, and to the extent that students do not comply with this work-ethic, they experience self-devaluing, such as guilt and remorse.

Covington's (1984) self-worth theory incorporates aspects of both learned-drives theory and cognitive attribution theory and augments them with a motivational component. From learned-drive theory is drawn acknowledgement of the pervasive need to approach success and to avoid failure and from cognitive attribution theory, recognition of the role of self-perception. Society recognizes that personal worth depends largely on one's accomplishments. Ability is perceived to be a critical component of success and inability is perceived to be a prime cause of failure. Not only does success have its immediate rewards, but success also aggrandizes one's reputation of ability. Thus, self-perceptions of ability or lack thereof become significant in one's self-definition. Self-worth theory stresses one's perception of ability as a prime motivator of one's achievement behaviour. In cases of lack of success, individuals, in an effort to protect their self-worth, act to minimize the implication that the failure is attributable to inability.

School Initiatives to Promote Achievement Motivation

Covington and Teel (1996) stress that classrooms in which students succeed by doing better than others destine certain students to failure, no matter how much effort they make. According to self-worth theory, these students will resort to maladaptive behaviours such as apathy, excuse-making or cheating in order to prevent the appearance of lack of ability. In a classroom where success can be achieved through effort, regardless of how well or poorly others perform, the playing field is leveled and all players can strive confidently; their ability will not be questioned, their self-worth will not be threatened.

While teachers punish failure least if it has been accompanied with high effort, it is upon failing after putting forth high effort that students suffer the greatest damage to their self-image of competence. This motivation on the part of students to protect self-image rather than strive for success creates a conundrum for teachers. Covington and Omelich (1979) address this conundrum by suggesting alternative classroom reward systems that feature individual student goal-setting and criterion referenced evaluation as opposed to normative grading. Covington (1992) and Covington and Teel (1996) point out that this approach is one of motivational equity. The motivational equity approach is rooted in the idea that all students can experience feelings of resolve and a commitment to think more and dare more, and feel caught up in the drama of problem-solving, being prepared to learn and ready to take the next step in learning. Fostering motivational equity combined with fostering goal-oriented cognitions helps students learn to view ability as a resource rather than a static, finite trait. Helping students understand that knowing how to learn and learning how to think fosters self-discipline and freedom, which enhance present and future success. In a program describing how teachers can change their classrooms from operating an "ability game" to operating an "equity game", Covington & Teel (1996) outline five steps: (a) ensure equal access to rewards, for example by setting criteria that can be met through effort as opposed to ability; (b) reward mastery which can be achieved through persistence and curiosity; (c) reward multiple abilities as opposed to strictly verbal, logical or abstract reasoning; (d) offer alternative incentives, in the choosing of which the students themselves have been involved; and (e) make assignments engaging, novel and

relevant. Classrooms operated on these premises, the authors advise, address the students' need to protect their self-worth and yet provide the means for them to do so while making successful efforts to learn and achieve in school.

According to Ames (1992), in order to foster mastery goals and the attendant motivation to achieve in school, teachers can structure classrooms in the students' favour. In such classrooms, attention is paid to designing tasks and learning activities, evaluation practices and use of rewards, and distributing authority and responsibility so that students perceive their value and how they can be affected by effort. Tasks that involve variety and diversity, that focus on developing understanding, and that emphasize personal relevance are most likely to facilitate interest in mastery goals. Such diversity and personalization provide less opportunity for social comparison; therefore performance differences are less likely to be attributed to differences in ability. Willingness to exert effort is enhanced by setting specific and short-term goals, which also provides increased opportunities for self-regulatory strategies such as planning, organizing and monitoring. How a task is presented and how it interacts with other tasks and structures in the classroom also influence how it is perceived by the students, so the teacher needs to be aware of student strengths, preferred learning style, and social interaction in setting tasks.

Stipek (1993) suggests that any student, even a high-achieving one, may have motivational problems, or may have motivational problems in some circumstances but not others. Stipek suggests observing students suspected of motivational problems in different subjects, in a variety of contexts, and performing a variety of tasks. She stresses that such observation should be supplemented with discussions, both individual and small group, to discover what the students report about their motivations. Students' responses to questions about their thoughts during time supposed to be spent on task predicts their achievement better than observers' judgments regarding their level of attention, as motivational problems can arise from such unobservable thoughts and feelings as levels of self-confidence, expectations for success, interest in subject matter, feelings of autonomy, achievement anxiety or fear of failure. Stipek explores how characteristics of tasks, as well as other aspects of instruction such as external evaluation, assistance, use of rewards, student

autonomy and social context affect intrinsic motivation. Tasks must be matched to students' skill levels. They should be difficult enough that the learner achieves a sense of growing competence in accomplishing them, yet not so difficult that the learner gives up. Tasks should involve novelty, surprise and varied complexity, and they should have a high level of personal meaningfulness to the learner. The environment in which the tasks are to be performed should be one of positive social context that fosters feelings of security and self-worth. Students should be afforded sufficient autonomy in performing their tasks that they can take responsibility for their success.

Students who fail to achieve may appear unmotivated, but in fact may be motivated to underachieve. Kaplan, Peck, and Kaplan (1994) offer, in their study of data collected in 1971, 1972 and 1973, the idea that school failure is motivated behaviour. What other writers (Ames, 1992; Covington, 1984; Dweck & Leggett, 1989) have suggested to be protection of the student's self-image in ability-goal orientations, Kaplan, Peck & Kaplan (1994) view as an adaptation to previous self-devaluing experiences in the school context. Students forestall further opportunities for self-rejection by withdrawing effort or rejecting the school's evaluative standards. Such students engage in behaviours they can control, such as nonparticipation, minimization of effort, and procrastination, to which they can attribute their lack of success, and with which they can screen their perceived lack of ability, which they feel they can't control. They may also employ self-handicapping strategies such as adopting the role of underachiever, thereby communicating to themselves and others that it is inappropriate to apply normal standards of success to their efforts. While these strategies may serve to protect the students' self-image, they exacerbate the problem of lack of academic success.

Raffini (1993) recommends the TARGET system, which he credits to Epstein (1989), for organizing schools to enhance student motivation. The acronym is taken from the six structures in school culture the authors suggest need to be targeted in reinventing the school: Task, Authority, Reward, Group, Evaluation, and Time. Raffini builds on the TARGET system by providing specific strategies for enhancing each of student self-esteem, student autonomy, competence in all students, students' need for relatedness and

student involvement and enjoyment in learning.

Maehr and Anderman (1993) take the position that school context can determine, or at least heavily influence, the goals its students pursue. They suggest a variation of the TARGET program, called TARRGET, and credit to Ames (1990), for reinventing a school's culture to increase students' pursuit of task goals. The expanded acronym stands for Task, Autonomy/responsibility, Recognition, Resources, Grouping, Evaluation and Time. Maehr and Anderman (1993) advise schools to enhance the intrinsic attractiveness of learning tasks, provide optimal freedom for students to make choices and take responsibility, provide opportunities for all students to be recognized for their learning, encourage the development and maintenance of strategies to enhance task-goal emphases, broaden the range of social interaction, particularly that of at-risk students, reduce elements of social comparisons of student achievement, and allow the learning tasks and student needs to dictate scheduling.

Kaplan, Peck and Kaplan (1994) stress the importance of early intervention to break or prevent the cycle of failure/self-devaluing/intentional failure. Regular instruction and remediation should be planned to provide success for students who exhibit lack of achievement motivation so that their self-perception can be based on positive results of positive efforts rather than on deviant efforts to limit the implications of low achievement. Frequent opportunities for self-enhancement are needed, as well as means of helping such students not feel defensive in an environment that through experience they have found hostile. Without referring to specific programs, the authors recommend that programs for enhancing both self-esteem and academic achievement be implemented.

While Urdan and Martin (1995) do not suggest ways the school can motivate students toward social goals which enhance their academic achievement, they do provide a framework of questions which need to be addressed in attempting to design a learning environment to do so. The authors advise schools to examine what types of social goals promote student motivation and achievement, how teacher and school practices influence the social goals students pursue, what current practices promote students to adopt maladaptive social goals, and what teachers or the school can do to help students coordinate

social and academic goals to promote investment in academic learning.

Ames (1992) suggests that in performing evaluation and providing recognition of student performance, teachers should be aware that over-emphasis on product shifts orientation from a learning goal to a performance goal. Social comparison such as posting or charting student grades for public view, announcing highest and lowest scores, and ability grouping seem to have the effect of producing performance goals, with their attendant maladaptive efforts on the part of performance goal-oriented students to protect their self-image. Superficial learning strategies, avoidance of risk-taking, failure-avoiding (e.g., cheating) and failure-accepting (e.g., refusal to try) and negative affect toward the self are among these maladaptations. Rewards, too, can be seen by students as impetus to pursue performance goals. If rewards have little relevance to the behaviour in question, or if they are given for product rather than effort, they can be seen as implements of control rather than encouragements to strive. However, if grades are accompanied by an opportunity to improve, effort, rather than ability is stressed and additional effort becomes worthwhile. Where effort is valued, students perceive it is worthwhile to use effective learning and problem-solving strategies. When evaluation is perceived as an attempt to control rather than inform, students see performance goals rather than mastery goals as efficacious and they avoid metacognitive processes. If rewards are made contingent on student effort, or progress in relation to short-term goals, or meaningful aspects of performance, they can enhance achievement-directed behaviour.

Ames (1992) also stresses that implementation of classroom interventions designed to encourage mastery goals must be congruent with each other. If mastery-goal tasks are set, they must be evaluated on mastery-goal criteria and acknowledged with mastery-goal rewards. Students will not pursue mastery goal tasks if evaluation will be given for performance-goal products or if their efforts will be subject to social-comparison reward systems.

The degree to which teachers involve students in decision-making relative to their learning is related to positive motivational patterns. When teachers provide choices between equally valuable tasks and provide for student interest when those choices are

offered, students can enter into mastery goals rather than performance goals. They can engage themselves in learning activities rather than product-producing ones. Learning or identification of effective strategies can become an integral part of their task, rather than being incidental to completing a product.

In short, student achievement has been shown to be predicated on achievement motivation, which has its roots in the student's attribution beliefs and goal orientation. Students who function with the attribution belief that their effort plays a greater role in their success or lack thereof than does their ability are more likely to pursue learning, or mastery, goals. Their motivation towards mastery goals results in their adopting metacognitive learning strategies, which result in stronger achievement. Schools can enhance task goal-orientation among students by rewarding effort, curiosity and improvement rather than product.

Key to schools' ability to enhance goal-orientation among students is a clear understanding of the perceptions the students hold in regard to achievement and their motivation to achieve. Understanding the students' perceptions offers the school additional options for identifying strategies to use in supporting those students. The academic literature provides direction for supporting highly at-risk students and chronic underachievers but does not address students such as those identified for this research: the academically capable senior secondary students who become at risk because of failing achievement as they approach the end of their public schooling. An understanding of their particular perceptions, experiences and motivation may help the school support them through their period of being at risk.

Students studied in this research project share some of the characteristics of those defined as at-risk, dropouts or underachievers in the research literature, yet they are not a congruent set with any of those groups. Students studied in this research have failing grades, but do not share all of the other characteristics of those defined as at-risk in the literature; they are at-risk of failing to complete their education, but they do not share all of the other characteristics of drop-outs; they fail to achieve as expected, but they do not share all of the other characteristics of underachievers. They remain a subgroup of at-risk,

underachieving students. They have shown themselves to be academically capable, yet they have become at risk. It is important to design a study to lead to a better understanding of them in order to support them through their period of being at-risk.

Principles Underlying the Choice of the Research Paradigm

A research paradigm which elicits a holistic understanding of the multiple realities forming the students' experience offers the means of developing policy and practice to support students through their state of being at-risk. The research paradigm should seek to understand the students in their own context, investigate the interweaving of cause and effect, and be sensitive to the students' own values. Academic literature discussing the naturalistic paradigm offers such a form of research.

The Naturalistic Paradigm

The paradigm chosen for this research is the naturalistic paradigm as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The naturalistic paradigm is rooted in five axioms: realities are multiple, constructed and holistic; the knower and the known are interactive and inseparable; only time-and context-bound working hypotheses are possible; it is impossible to distinguish cause and effect; and inquiry is value-bound (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 37).

Open-ended questions that lead to explanations of "what?" and "why?" provide the grounding information which leads to the understandings sought in this study. The Grounded Theory approach as presented by Glaser and Strauss (1967), Hutchinson (1990), Lincoln and Guba (1985), and Lindsay (1996) provides a useful means of pursuing these types of questions. Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that grounded theory follows from data as a necessary consequence of the naturalistic paradigm and its dealings with multiple realities.

Hutchinson (1990) states that the notion of discovery of theory includes first discovering the world as seen through the eyes of the participants, and then the basic social processes or structures that organize that world. The data gathered are analyzed contextually because the subjects are studied contextually--in naturalistic settings by means

of researcher participation through observation or conversation. The notion that an observer can be objective and totally aloof is recognized as unlikely if not impossible. Rather, the researcher and participants acknowledge the role of the observer as being intrusive, and perform their duties cognizant of the degree of intrusiveness. The researcher engages in a process of "bracketing", or being aware of his or her personal values and preconceptions and takes precautions to limit their impact on the research. Interviews and resubmission of the analysis of their contents to the interviewees permit the researcher to verify, clarify and alter her or his perception of what has been observed with the intent of achieving a full understanding of the lived experience of the participants.

In summary, this research, with its goal of understanding the perceptions, experiences and motivation of a particular sub-group of at-risk students seemed best served by a research paradigm which would facilitate the acquisition of a depth of information through personal interaction between researcher and participants. A process which would allow data to emerge from the participants' interaction with the researcher, not one constrained by presupposed content or organization and one in which the participants could feel they were equal partners in research with the researcher would facilitate that acquisition of knowledge. The naturalistic paradigm using a grounded theory approach fulfilled these requirements and a process of interviewing, reviewing and re-interviewing was expected to offer the best means of collecting data in the pursuit of that grounded theory.

Interviewing

An understanding of the purpose and strategies of qualitative interviewing is central to conducting valid research in the naturalistic paradigm. Rubin and Rubin (1995) describe interviewing as a qualitative research technique:

> Qualitative interviewing is both an academic and a practical tool. It allows us to share the world of others to find out what is going on, why people do what they do, and how they understand their worlds. With such knowledge you can help solve a variety of problems. (p. 5)

Lincoln and Guba (1985) liken interviewing to conversation with purpose. The purposes include investigating persons' present constructions, their reconstructions of the

past, and their projections into the future. Triangulation and member checking (Guba & Lincoln, 1982) are considered essential to this process. Triangulation refers to verification of data by cross-checking it through different perspectives, for example by comparing a participant's verbal messages with his or her non-verbal ones. Member checking involves verification of the researcher's interpretation of the data collected from a participant by continually checking it with the participant.

Qualitative interviews fall into three main categories: unstructured, structured and semi-structured. In unstructured interviews, the researcher suggests the subject but has few specific preplanned questions in mind; rather, he or she will work from one or more open-ended questions and allow the subject's responses to set the direction of the interview. In structured interviews, the interviewer poses questions designed to elicit specific information from the interviewee. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) the unstructured interview is concerned wholly with the individual viewpoint of the interviewee and the interview follows the interviewee's lead. In contrast, the structured interview is directed by the interviewer to address a problem defined by the researcher prior to the interview, within the researcher's framework and using preformulated questions. There is little flexibility in the structured interview to adapt to the interviewee's perspectives or initiations. Rubin and Rubin (1995) describe a third type of interview, the semi-structured, in which the interviewer introduces a topic and guides it by asking questions based on the interviewee's responses. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that in naturalistic inquiry, unstructured interviews are most useful in the initial stages of research, and at later stages more structured interviews will be introduced. The less structured interviews elicit quantities of data and the structured interviews provide a form of triangulation, or verification of analysis of the data. Rubin and Rubin (1995) concur that most interviewers will utilize various degrees of structure, and add that qualitative interviewers do not impose a set of answer categories, such as "agree" or "disagree".

Interviewing well is difficult. Kvale (1996) lists six criteria for an interview of quality. These include: (a) the quality of information elicited from the interviewee, (b) the amount of time spent talking by interviewer versus interviewee, (c) the degree to which the

interviewer follows up on information offered by the interviewee, (d) the degree to which interpretation of data occurs throughout the interview, (e) the degree to which the interviewer attempts to verify his or her interpretations during the course of the interview, and f) the degree to which the interview content requires additional description or explanation. Kvale (1996) also provides ten criteria of a qualified interviewer. He or she must be (a) knowledgeable about the interview topic; (b) competent at designing the interview; (c) gentle in probing for information; sensitive to nuances of meaning; (d) open to sensing the interviewee's priorities; (e) able to speak clearly, succinctly, simply and free from jargon; (f) able to steer if the interview strays from its purpose; (g) able to hear critically and question inconsistencies; (h) able to remember from session to session what the interviewee has provided; and (i) able to interpret the content of the interview in order to seek clarification and extend meaning while the interview is in progress.

Even the well-qualified interviewer may encounter difficult interviewees. Weiss (1994) cautions that certain types of difficult interviewees may be encountered: the unresponsive participant, the participant determined to present a particular picture, participants whose feelings are raw, and participants who feel they are important only because they are a member of the group being studied. Weiss suggests that with the former two, the researcher can expect to gain only minimally useful information. With the latter two, useful information can be extrapolated from their interviews, but the interviewer must maintain an empathic sensitivity towards their situations without being drawn into the role of therapist.

Weiss (1994) also raises the issue of how completely a respondent will be truthful and suggests that a researcher will obtain information which is reliable, and information which is more readily interpreted, by asking questions about concrete incidents rather than about general states or opinions. He advises that richly detailed accounts or accounts of vividly remembered events are likely to be trustworthy, but for the most part, the interviewer must rely on the quality of his or her interviewing technique to ensure validity of the data gained. He stresses that careful, concrete-level interviewing within the context of a good interviewing partnership will provide the best guarantee of validity of

information.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) outline five steps which, while not necessarily followed in a particular order, must be accounted for somewhere in the completed interviewing process. Some of the steps may occur more than once as reiteration and triangulation are undertaken. Lincoln and Guba's steps are: (a) deciding whom to interview, (b) preparing for the interview, (c) initial moves, (d) pacing and productivity, and (e) terminating and gaining closure. Preparing for the interview involves acquiring background about the topic of the interview and the interviewee. Initial moves involve establishing an interviewing relationship within which both interviewee and interviewer are comfortable, and beginning the interview with general, warm-up type questions. Pacing and productivity refer to ensuring that the interviewee does most of the talking, with the interviewer ensuring the interview is kept focused on the topic under research. Terminating and gaining closure consists of the interviewer's summarizing the main points of the interview, establishing whether and when a follow-up interview will be required, and providing means for the interviewee to make contact again should she or he think of further pertinent information to add.

The competent interviewer avoids dominating the interviews or imposing his or her own world view on the investigation. Kvale (1996) suggests the interviewer manage this and other ethical issues in interviewing by considering five questions: (a) what are the beneficial consequences of the study? (b) how can informed consent of the participating subjects be obtained? (c) how can the confidentiality of the interview subjects be protected? (d) what are the consequences of the study for the participating subjects? and (e) how will the researcher's role affect the study?

Lincoln and Guba (1985) stress that ethical practice requires interviews to be fully overt; that is, the interviewee must know that he or she is being interviewed, for what purpose, and to what use the resulting information will be used. Ethical considerations of interviewing focus on openness and honesty with those being interviewed, and ensuring that no form of harm comes to them as a result of their taking part in the interviews. Informed consent must be obtained from participants, and specific consent should be

obtained if the interviews are to be recorded. Participants must be aware that they may withdraw from the process at any time, and if participants wish to retract statements or have certain of their comments excluded from the data being collected, the ethical interviewer will honour their request.

In summary, the development of grounded theory through data gained in qualitative interviewing using the naturalistic research paradigm offers a valid means to explore student perceptions. It facilitates the identification of means of supporting students, in this case academically capable senior students at risk of failing, according to their particular circumstances. I chose this approach because I expected that understanding the students' perceptions concerning their schooling experiences would help the school and the students understand their goal orientation and plan supportive policies and practices to direct their motivation towards improved academic achievement.

From professional practice: The setting for the study.

The school from which students were interviewed for this research project has implemented many of the recommendations cited for drop-out prevention as well as other programs and initiatives which have been developed to enable at-risk students to advance through school and even through senior levels of school. These initiatives include both locally-developed and Ministry of Education-mandated programs such as alternative program delivery, work experience, mentoring, course modifications, the "In Progress" notation on report cards, and many of the learning outcomes and teaching activities from the *Personal Planning K-7* (Ministry of Education, 1994) and *Career and Personal Planning 8-12* (Ministry of Education, 1995) curricula. In spite of these initiatives, classroom teachers at the senior grades report instances in which students, those exhibiting the at-risk characteristics identified in the literature and others who do not exhibit those characteristics, continue to be at risk of failing a year because of failing grades in core academic subjects. Although apparently capable of doing so, these students do not demonstrate attitudes of motivation or practise skills for acquiring course content or information-processing sufficient for achievement beyond minimal passing levels in key

subjects or minimal fulfillment of graduation requirements. They achieve less than they seem capable of achieving, and less than is required for success in post-secondary education or desirable careers. While students who exhibit identified characteristics of being at-risk, and those who fit the profile of underachievers have been addressed in the literature, those who do not exhibit those characteristics and yet achieve at only minimal levels appear to constitute a new group of at-risk students who have yet to be studied— those who are academically capable but who nevertheless become at-risk of not completing their secondary education as a result of failing or seriously underachieving in important courses. I propose that greater understanding of this subset of at-risk students may point to ways to reduce the degree to which they are at risk.

This research undertakes to gain a greater understanding of this subset of at-risk students. The research addresses three research questions:

1. How do academically capable at-risk senior secondary students describe their school experience?

2. What particular educational practices do academically capable at-risk senior secondary students believe enhance or inhibit their achievement?

3. Are there factors outside the school which academically capable at-risk senior students believe enhance or inhibit their academic achievement and which the school can support or mitigate?

The methods for investigating these questions are presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO: METHOD

Aim and Focus of the Study

The aim of the study is to gain a better understanding of those senior secondary students I describe as academically capable yet seemingly at-risk and to support them by identifying directions for establishing curriculum, instruction and administrative routines which are informed by commentary from the students themselves. The focus of the study is the students' perceptions of their school experiences, those educational practices which the students believe enhance or inhibit their academic achievement, and factors outside the school which the students believe enhance or inhibit their academic achievement and that the school can support or mitigate. In order to achieve a thorough understanding of such perceptions, an investigation employing a process of dialogue, review and verification of meaning with a few participants offers a more promising process than does large survey research with its attendant breadth-for-depth trade-offs, low return rates and impersonal nature. I required information which was more likely to be forthcoming if sought intimately from sources with some vested interest in providing it, confidence that it would be respected, the opportunity to ensure that it would be recorded accurately, and the expectation that it would be reported honestly and put to good use. This research design allows individuals to report their experiences and perceptions and reflect their own values in their own context.

Research Design

My study was designed to elicit information for greater understanding of academically capable at-risk senior secondary students and to provide means to apply that information by suggesting education practices to provide better support for those students. It provides a venue for such students to describe their schooling experiences and their notions of how those experiences influenced them to make the learning behaviour choices they had made.

The research design provides means for data derived from the students' interviews to be analysed to identify educational practices and other factors which the students believe had significant impact on their academic achievement.

A design employing multiple-case sampling was selected over single-case design in order to enhance stability, validity, and precision (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Maximum variation sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was also attempted in making the final selection of participants.

My rationale for utilizing this paradigm for this research is that the information sought arises from individuals' experiences and attitudes in a real-life setting. I seek to observe behaviour which results from an interplay of experiences of certain students and to describe relationships between and among experiences and behaviours. In order to identify and describe such experiences and relationships, I adopt an approach in which analysis is primarily inductive, in that the research design allows the priorities of data collection and analysis to emerge from previous data as the study progresses. Its process facilitates establishment of connections among categories of data so that understanding, or a hypothesis, may emerge. Data collection and data analysis are interwoven. Analysis of one stage of data provides direction for the collection of subsequent data.

Although the study is primarily inductive, certain aspects of the deductive approach do occur, namely with the use of some a priori analysis categories arising from professional observation and the findings of other researchers as reported in the research literature. From professional observation I anticipated certain categories for, and coded for, such factors as perceived irrelevance of school subjects, family disinterest and adverse effects of peer pressure. From the literature, I anticipated additional categories for, and coded for, disaffection with school, lack of prior knowledge and inadequate support systems. During analysis it became apparent that these a priori categories did not match well with what was reported by the participants, and that categories established inductively were more germane to the participants' perceptions.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) describe grounded theory as theory discovered from data systematically obtained from social research. Theory, they state, must fit the situation

being researched (that is, be readily, not forcibly, applicable to the data under study) and it must work when put into use (that is, be relevant to and explain the behaviour under study). The theory which arises from this study fits the situation being researched: it relates directly to the data gained in a particular situation, and contrasts with certain expectations put in place by both professional observation and the research literature. As to its "working" when put into use, this study suggests certain directions for decision-makers to consider in meeting the needs of students such as those studied.

Demographics

The study was conducted at a small elementary-secondary school in a rural community in northern British Columbia, where I am the Teacher-Librarian. The school serves a population of approximately 1500 people. The main industries are forestry, mining and agriculture. The school offers a subsidized lunch program, which indicates a high percentage of the population is eligible for some form of income assistance. There are three First Nations communities within the catchment area of the school. Overall, approximately 18% of the school population is First Nations students, with a higher proportion at the elementary levels and a lower proportion in the senior secondary grades. At the time when the data were gathered, the school population was approximately 450 students, some 250 of whom were in the secondary grades, with approximately 80 in grades 11 and 12.

Participants

For the purposes of the study, academically capable senior secondary students were defined as those with a GPA in the B range in previous years; who had previously achieved success in most subjects; whose academic program had not been modified to accommodate physical or learning disabilities, and whose teachers of the specific subjects expressed a belief in the student's ability to be successful in those subjects. These academically capable students were identified as being at-risk if they had achieved failing or near-failing grades in two or more core academic subjects in the previous school year, that is: F, "In

Progress," or C- in Math, English, Science, Social Studies or French, in spite of a record of academic success in elementary and junior secondary grades.

Table 1: Criteria for Academically Capable and At-risk

Academically Capable	At-risk
• "B" range GPA in previous years • previous success in most subjects • academic program not modified to accommodate physical or learning disabilities • teachers for the specific subjects express a belief in the student's capability in that subject.	• failing or near-failing grades in two or more core academic subjects, i.e.: "F", "In Progress" or "C-" in two of Math, English, Science, Social Studies or French.

In recruiting participants for the study, I introduced the project to the grade eleven and twelve students of the school early in the fall of 1996, and asked that any students who fit the criteria and were interested in participating in the study contact me. As the initial request for volunteers failed to attract students who met the criteria, I sought referrals from the school counsellors, senior subject teachers and administration, based on the criteria outlined to the students. From the grade 11 and 12 student population of approximately 80 students, some 15 potential participants were identified through these means. I made a final selection of 3 participants after reviewing how closely potential candidates fit the criteria, and whether they were sufficiently at arm's length from me in my role as Teacher-Librarian at the school. I then spoke with the three selected potential participants and invited them to take part in the research.

The selected potential candidates, Renée, Brandon, and Neil (all pseudonyms), agreed to participate in the research. All three were grade 12 students who had had failing or near-failing grades in two core academic subjects in grade 11 following academic success in grade 10 and earlier years. Brandon had dropped to C- in Math 11, Physics 11 and Biology 11 after having a GPA of 2.47 and achieving C in math and B in science in grade 10; Neil had failed both Math 11 and Physics 11 after having a GPA of 2.24 and achieving C- in math and C in science in grade 10; Renée had dropped to D in Math 11 and

C- in Chemistry 11 after having a GPA of 3.4 and achieving C in math and B in science in grade 10 (see Table 2). All three had been suggested as potential candidates as all were deemed by their teachers as being capable of higher achievement in the courses in which their grades had dropped. Thus all three met the criteria established for academically capable at-risk senior secondary students.

Table 2: Grades Chart

Name: Grade	Math	Science	Socials	English	French	GPA Sem. 1	GPA Final
Brandon: Gr. 8	**B**	**B**	**B**	**B**	**A**	**3.3**	**3.0**
Brandon: Gr. 9	**C+**	**C+**	**C+**	**B**	**B**	**3.1**	2.8
Brandon: Gr. 10	**C**	**B**	**B**	**B**	**C+**	**3.0**	2.9
Brandon: Gr. 11	*C-*	*Bi: C-; Ph: C-*	**B**	**C+**	**B**	2.8	2.4
Neil: Grade 8	**C+**	**B**	**C**	**C**	**B**	**3.1**	2.8
Neil: Grade 9	**C**	**A**	**C**	**B**	**C+**	**3.6**	**3.1**
Neil: Grade 10	*C-*	**C+**	**C**	**C+**	*IP*	2.4	*1.9*
Neil: Grade 11	*F*	*Ph: F*	**C-**	**C**	n/a	2.2	*1.6*
Renée: Grade 8	**B**	**B**	**B**	**B**	**A**	**3.2**	**3.1**
Renée: Grade 9	**B**	**A**	**A**	**A**	**A**	**3.6**	**3.9**
Renée: Grade 10	**C**	**B**	**A**	**A**	**B**	**3.6**	**3.2**
Renée: Grade 11	*F*	Bi: C; *Ch: C-*	**C+**	**C+**	**C**	2.6	2.1

Note. Bold-face letter grades and GPAs indicate academically capable; italics indicate at-risk. GPA Scale: 4 = A; 3 = B; 2.5 = C+; 2 = C.

Ethical Considerations

As mentioned by Kvale (1996) and Lincoln and Guba (1985), there are important ethical issues to consider when conducting research with human participants: obtaining informed consent of the participants, protection of participants' confidentiality, protection of participants from harm, openness and overtness with the participants, provision of opportunity for participants to withdraw, and pursuit of beneficial results. Steps were taken to ensure that these and other ethical requirements were met.

This project was approved by the Ethics Review Committee of the University of Northern British Columbia. Upon receiving Ethics Committee approval, I obtained written permission from the school district and school principal to recruit student participants and to have access to their school records.

I made provision for informed consent, parental and institutional permission, adherence to all institutional protocols, and secure handling of tapes, transcripts and records. Copies of the documents used to obtain consent and permission are included in Appendix 1 of this paper.

I maintained confidentiality and anonymity by using pseudonyms for the participants in all interviews, transcripts of the tapes and reports of the research. Nothing the students divulged in the research interviews was available for use directly by the school, such as in assigning grades or in disciplinary hearings, nor were comments they made about specific individuals or situations shared except anonymously in the final research report.

The project was overt in that it was described to all senior students and to the staff of the school prior to my selecting participants. When final selection of the participants was made, I spoke personally with each potential participant and her or his parents, describing the project and how the participant met the criteria for taking part. When verbal agreement for participation had been obtained, a written description of the project was prepared for each participant and his or her parents and written consent to participate was obtained from participants and their parents. Participants and their parents were provided with written assurance that a request to withdraw from the project at any time would be honoured. Participants and their parents were advised how to contact the school principal, the district superintendent and my thesis supervisor should a participant feel uncomfortable with any aspect of the interviewing, analysis or reporting. I advised the participants and parents that I was obliged by law to make appropriate reports if the participants disclosed physical or sexual abuse or indicated the potential to harm themselves or others. It was made clear that if these or other issues requiring counselling therapy should arise, I would not act as counsellor but would assist in obtaining appropriate counselling.

<u>Special Considerations</u>

As mentioned previously, I am the Teacher-Librarian in the school from which research subjects were drawn. However, in my role as Teacher-Librarian, I was not responsible for evaluating student progress, assigning grades, dealing directly with discipline, or officially counselling those students whom I interviewed for my research. I do not believe conflicts arose between my role as researcher and my role as teacher-librarian.

However, certain other issues also arose in this situation and had to be dealt with in conducting the research. These issues included: (a) the possibility or perception of coercion arising from an imbalance of power between me, as both a teacher and the interviewer, and the students, as interviewees; (b) the manner and degree to which the my prior knowledge of the students might influence my data collection; and (c) the manner and degree to which my knowledge of other teachers' interactions with the participants might influence my interpretation and reporting of the research. The manner and degree to which my professional relationships with other teachers might influence both my data collection and my interpretation and reporting of it was another issue that had to be acknowledged in the research design.

These issues were addressed with a combination bracketing and building in safeguards. I addressed the issue of imbalance of power by making a clear commitment that participants could withdraw from the project at any time and by providing information enabling the participants to contact authorities if at any time they felt uncomfortable with the direction the project was taking, as mentioned previously. I incorporated two other safeguards against the effects of the imbalance of power by offering each participant control over the location and time of the interviews and by sharing ownership of the research with the participants. Such sharing of ownership was fostered by inviting the students to be partners in the research project and by offering each transcript back to the interviewee for triangulation and member checking before proceeding with successive stages of the research.

Dealing with the manner and degree to which an interviewer's preconceptions (in this

case my prior relationship with the participants, my knowledge of the participants' relationship with the teachers, and my own relationships with the participants' teachers) affects the research is an issue addressed in the literature concerning qualitative research. A qualitative researcher is less concerned with achieving neutrality and freedom from bias than with recognizing his or her own subjectivity and making research decisions to take that subjectivity into account. Hutchinson (1990) refers to this process as bracketing, stating, "'Bracketing' refers to being aware of one's personal values and preconceptions and transcending them during the research in an effort to see a situation with a new perspective" (p. 130).

For this project, I had to bracket for a series of preconceptions and potential complications. As a long-term member of both the school and community, I brought a great deal of "insider" knowledge to the interviewing and analysis processes as well as a certain degree of pre-established rapport with the participants, their parents and their teachers. While possession of insider knowledge enhanced and facilitated understanding between me and the participants, and pre-established rapport decreased feelings of discomfort during the interviewing, both also presented difficulties. At first, the participants' insider knowledge about me made them try to be very careful with their language and their references to problems with teachers. As I sensed this and gave them permission to use language that was normal for them, and assured them that my commitment to confidentiality made it acceptable for them to be specific in referring to staff members, their narratives became more relaxed. A special consideration arising from their frankness is a problem in reporting without identifying colleagues and the natural hesitancy to include findings which reflect badly on the school or individual teachers. I face the problem mentioned by Lapadat and Janzen (1994), that of collaborative researchers' difficulty in dealing with findings that seem to betray their collaborators.

I have made efforts to bracket for these complications. In order to focus on the students' own perceptions, rather than draw on my insider knowledge of them, I rooted my structured questions and probes in information the students themselves provided. At all times I avoided contradicting or debating with the participants. I stressed from the outset

that my purpose was to listen and interpret so that it if the students sensed I was debating or contradicting, their role as research partners gave them the power to draw my attention to it. In keeping with the confidentiality provisions of the interviewing process, I purposefully did not seek information about the participants from their teachers beyond the initial nomination procedure, and if information concerning my participants became available through normal professional interactions, I did not bring it to the interviewing or analysis processes. I found that such strict bracketing, while it served to focus on the students' perceptions and bring them forward to the analysis and reporting stages, was a hindrance to obtaining well-rounded data as it precluded having the students examine their perceptions in light of others' reported dealings with them.

In reporting, I use the students' words or paraphrasing the students have approved but maintain confidentiality and collegial anonymity through the use of pseudonyms for the participants, and gender-neutral references to teachers and I avoid making links among comments about subjects or teaching practices with particular teachers.

Finally, I address the ethical requirement to pursue beneficial results by designing the study to produce information useful to individuals and the community from which it was taken. The study is designed to produce suggestions as to how the school or educational practitioners can work to reduce these and similar students' degrees of being at-risk.

Process of Data Collection

The data for this study were gathered in two stages of semi-structured interviews between October and March of the 1996-97 school year. During this time I interviewed each participant four or five times. Data from Stage One were reviewed and used to determine the focus of Stage Two interviewing. Participants were asked where and when they preferred to be interviewed. Although locations away from the school were available, all participants opted to meet in a small seminar room in the elementary wing of the school. Most interviews took place after school, but two interviews took place at lunch time. The interviews took place on days agreeable to the participant and me.

Stage One consisted of one interview of approximately one hour per student,

establishing an interviewing relationship as suggested in Lincoln and Guba's "initial moves" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The goal was to obtain descriptions of the participants' schooling experiences as well as their perceptions concerning how those experiences influenced the type of student they had become. I used three probes to focus the conversation:

1. "How do you describe yourself as a student?"

2. "Please tell me about your school experiences."

3. "How do your experiences relate to your development as a student?"

As required, additional concrete-level probes as suggested by Weiss (1994) prompted the participants to describe significant events and persons in their educational careers in terms of those they remember having enjoyed and those they remember having disliked. For these probes I asked questions such as: "Could you please tell me about people or activities you especially remember from your primary (intermediate, junior high) grades?", "What were the things at the various school divisions that you especially liked or disliked?" and "How do you think (such-and-such an experience) affected your learning or your attitude?"

Stage Two consisted of three or four interviews of approximately forty-five minutes per participant. I sought verification of the participant's meaning and intent as a form of triangulation at each interview by reviewing the transcript of the previous interview with him or her. This review also provided the basis for additional probing. Questions focusing the subsequent interview were based on salient themes which arose from the previous interview. This process continued until informational redundancy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was achieved with each participant, in that no new information seemed to be surfacing. Prior to the participant's final interview, I provided each with a print copy of the initial analysis of all previous transcripts arranged in the theme categories which had been identified to that point. Participants were given a few days to peruse the printout and then in the final interview were asked to comment on the overall accuracy of the interpretation presented and how well it reflected their responses to the research questions. Preparation of the transcript of this final interview provided the final step in data collection.

An aside to the process of data collection, but an occurrence that became part of it was

the payment of a small stipend for the students' time. Although no stipend was available or offered at the time of selecting participants, during the course of the research, funding for the project was granted. As a result I was able to show my appreciation for the students' time by paying them at the conclusion of the interviewing process. While the students accepted their stipends, each of them stressed that payment was not necessary, that they were pleased to have taken part in the project and that they appreciated having been heard.

Form of Data

Interviews were audio-taped and I prepared brief field notes immediately following the interviews. Field notes included descriptions of the participant's demeanor and other non-verbal signals as well as comments on any aspect of the interview which might have influenced its direction, such as technical problems, interruptions, time constraints or other unusual circumstances. The interview recordings were fully transcribed into text and these verbatim transcriptions were then offered to the participant for verification of his or her intent in them.

Process of Analysis

I conducted inductive analysis of the data in three stages. The first was on-going during the interview process in order to shape subsequent interviews. The second, establishment of preliminary coding categories based on idea units, took place when informational redundancy had occurred in the interviewing process and following the final member checking interviews. The third, pattern coding within categories across students and finally across categories, was undertaken following analysis of the descriptive categories.

My analysis was based on the "unitizing, categorizing, filling in patterns and member checks" procedures described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). It was inductive analysis in that both theory and variables emerged in the analytic process. When informational redundancy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was achieved with each participant, in that no new information seemed to be forthcoming, I reviewed the verbatim transcripts to identify "idea

units," or units of information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These idea units were coded into descriptive categories and, ultimately, pattern categories from which I drew out responses to the research questions.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), a unit of information should have two characteristics. First, it should be aimed at some understanding that the inquirer needs to have; that is, it should be heuristic. Second, it must be interpretable in the absence of any additional information other than a broad understanding of the context in which the study is carried out. It must be the smallest piece of pertinent information that can stand by itself. For this research project, idea units ranged from a self-explanatory phrase or sentence spoken by the interviewee to several episodes of turn-taking between the interviewee and me.

In initiating analysis for this project, I descriptively coded each idea unit in each transcript (Miles & Huberman, 1994), using a label that described its theme, for example: *Family Consideration*, *Peer Consideration*, *Out-of-school Demands*, *Motivation*, and so on. Following the assignment of descriptive labels, idea units excerpted from the transcripts were sorted by coding category by participant, using the labels as category names. I refer to these initial coding categories as "Descriptive Categories". Certain descriptive categories, namely *Subject Relevance*, *Adequacy of Prior Knowledge*, *Pressures* and *Rigour* were anticipated a priori from findings reported in the research literature or from professional observation. As the interviewing progressed, few of these a priori categories were addressed in depth by the participants, and other categories emerged as themes surfaced which demanded unique categorization.

At the conclusion of the initial stage of analysis, I had identified seventeen descriptive categories representing important themes from the interviews. Individual participants' idea units were compared for overlap of meaning within each category, and where such overlap was evident, meaning was synthesized and the overlapping idea units were paraphrased into one idea unit. I presented these compilations of each participant's categorized and paraphrased idea units back to that participant as a form of "member checking," or verification of the researcher's interpretation of the participant's meaning and intent

(Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The transcripts of the member-checking interviews were then analysed, new idea units were identified and coded into the existing categories, and a print copy of the revised compilation of each participant's categories was offered back to the participant for an additional member checking. In a final interview with each participant, I reviewed the revised compilation with the participant for final verification of accuracy of meaning. When these compilations were offered for the member checking, I also asked the participant to review the three research questions to ensure that the final compilation of themes provided an accurate and complete reflection of their responses to the research questions. All three participants were satisfied that the final compilations of their interviews provided an accurate report of their conversations and their intent in those conversations.

Finally, I undertook a comparison of idea units within categories and across participants to identify perceptions and explanations common to the three participants. To effect this identification of commonalities, I reviewed one participant's idea units within one category, reducing each idea unit to a short descriptive phrase which expressed its key theme, or core idea. I then reviewed the same category of the other participants, tabulating occurrences of their idea units described by those key themes. For example, under the category *Support Systems,* Renée mentioned family as a source of support in some way; perusal of the same category for Brandon and Neil revealed they both also mentioned family as a source of support in some way. "Family" therefore was considered a key theme in the support systems for all three participants. If a subsequent participant's category revealed additional unique key themes, these were added to the list. This process continued through all seventeen descriptive categories. Commonalities were deemed to exist if key ideas occurred in the categories of two or three of the participants.

Finally the key themes were collected across categories and grouped into three overarching "pattern categories" (Miles & Huberman, 1994), or categories which reflected patterns among the data rather than simply describing the data. The pattern categories are groupings of data which relate to major factors influencing the participants' decision-making. The pattern categories were labelled **Academic Factors, Social/Family**

Factors, and **Peer Factors** (see Figure 1, Page 49).

The processes of data collection and data analysis, although reported separately here, were largely conducted concurrently. The "unitizing, categorizing, filling in patterns and member checks" (Lincoln & Guba (1985), represented in this case by identifying idea units, descriptive coding, presenting back to participants, synthesizing and paraphrasing, re-presenting back to participants, analyzing and pattern coding, resulted in data organized into seventeen descriptive categories and three overarching pattern categories. These categories and the interpretation of the data are presented in the following chapter.

CHAPTER THREE: ANALYSIS

Reporting and Interpretation of the Analysis

In this chapter I describe the establishment of descriptive categories and pattern categories. I draw individual participant profiles from the descriptive categories and interpret them, then present and interpret common themes across participants, and follow with interpretation of the pattern categories, which were established after sorting for key themes across categories (see Figure 1).
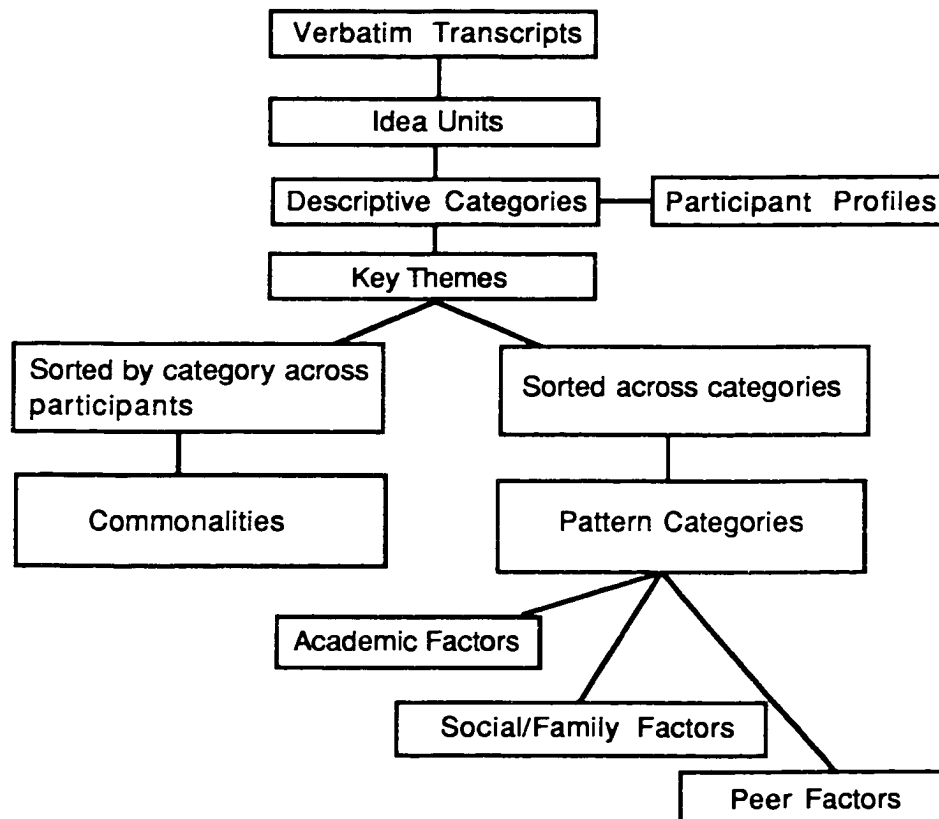

Figure 1. Stages of Analysis

<u>Descriptive Categories</u>

Upon completion of the unitizing, categorizing and member checking conducted in the process of analysis, I assigned the idea units from the verbatim transcripts to seventeen descriptive categories. These initial seventeen descriptive categories were: *Motivation, Support Systems, Relationship with Teacher, Teaching Practices, Peer Considerations, Subject Relevance, Attribution of Responsibility, Learning Practices, Self-description, In-class Behaviours, Family Considerations, Out-of-school Demands, Degree of Rigour, Prior Knowledge, Course Load, Pressures,* and *Health Considerations* (see Table 3, Page 51). Some of the seventeen categories were thick with data arising from frequent mention of the topic in a variety of contexts, implying an indication of its importance to the participants; some were sparse, indicating infrequent mention, implying that the topic was relatively less important in the eyes of the participants. For all participants, the *Motivation* category was heaviest with data, in that the greatest number of idea units were coded to it. Next fullest categories, although ranked differently for the three participants, were *Support Systems, Relations with Teachers,* and *Teaching Practices.* The least full categories, again ranked differently for each participant, but overall leanest in data for all participants, were *Health Considerations, Course Load* and *Prior Knowledge.*

The *Motivation* category contains idea units which related to the student's reasons for choosing to behave in a certain way. The *Support Systems* category contains those which related to where the student turned for support. The *Teaching Practices* category contains those related to teacher actions that the student perceived to be pertinent to the learning experience. The *Relationship with Teachers* category consists of those idea units concerning how the student related to teachers. *Peer Considerations* contains those idea units which related to how the student behaved towards school in the face of peer actions or expectations. *Subject Relevance* contains idea units in which the student described how valuable he or she viewed a course or parts of a course to be. *Attribution of Responsibility* deals with whom the participant considered responsible for various aspects of her or his academic achievement. *Learning Practices* contains those idea units that described how the student conducted himself or herself as a learner. The *Self-description*

Table 3

Descriptive Categories

Motivation:	student's reasons for choosing to behave in a certain way
Support Systems:	where the student turned for support
Teaching Practices:	teacher actions that the student perceived to be pertinent to the learning experience
Teacher Relations:	how the student related to teachers
Peer Considerations:	how the student behaved towards school in the face of peer actions or expectations
Relevance:	how valuable the student viewed a course or parts of a course to be
Attribution of Responsibility:	whom the student considered responsible for aspects of her or his academic achievement
Learning Practices:	how the student conducted himself or herself as a learner
Self Description:	the student's general description of herself or himself over the course of his or her schooling
Out-of-school Demands:	the student's priorities outside of school, including such risk behaviours as use of tobacco, alcohol or drugs
In-class Behaviour:	how the student described her or his actions and reactions in class
Family Considerations:	those aspects of home life that affected the student's school life
Pressures:	factors which caused the student to feel stressed with regards to her or his schooling
Degree of Subject Rigour:	the student's beliefs about the level of performance expected in a subject
Health Considerations:	rest, diet, exercise and general health as they influenced the student's school experience.
Course Load:	student's references to how evenly she or he felt his or her academic load had been distributed.
Prior Knowledge:	student's references to how well previous experiences had prepared him or her for current academic demands.

category is the student's general description of herself or himself over the course of his or her schooling. *Out-of-school Demands* are the student's priorities outside of school, including such risk behaviours as use of tobacco, alcohol or drugs. *In-class Behaviour* contains those idea units with which the student described her or his actions and reactions in class. *Family Considerations* are those aspects of home life that affected the student's school life. *Pressures* are those factors which caused the student to feel stressed with regards to her or his schooling. *Prior Knowledge* is the category which contains the student's references to how well previous experiences had prepared him or her for current academic demands. *Course Load* contains the student's references to how evenly she or he felt his or her academic load had been distributed. *Degree of Subject Rigour* is those idea units which describe the student's beliefs about the level of performance expected in a subject. *Health Considerations* contains references to rest, diet, exercise and general health as they influenced the student's school experience.

Participant Profiles

As described previously, one female student and two male students took part in the study: Renée, Brandon and Neil. All three were in their first semester of grade 12 at the time the interviews were conducted. Their failing or near-failing grades had occurred the previous spring, during their second semester of grade 11 when they were enrolled in math, two science courses and one elective course. It was in math and one or more science courses that each achieved his or her failing or near-failing grades.

All three participants in the study described their schooling experiences as positive to some degree. None of them reported ever having considered dropping out of school, even when achieving unsatisfactory grades, although the literature indicates such grades are frequently precursors to dropping out (Baker and Sansone, 1990; Barrington and Hendricks, 1989; Fitzpatrick, 1984). All participants reported a history of good attendance and eagerness to be at school. Two reported generally good relationships with teachers, while one was less positive on this topic. The participant profiles which follow describe how the students view themselves and various aspects of their schooling experiences, and

how those self-images relate to goal theory. In constructing the participant profiles, I reviewed the descriptive categories for the idea units which most clearly reflected the way the participant described his or her experiences and attitudes. It should be noted that in quoting the students, I have randomly substituted 'brother' and 'sister' where siblings were named or refered to in order to shield the anonymity of both the participants and their siblings. The participants reviewed these profiles and approved them as part of the final member checking of the data analysis.

<u>Renée</u>

Renée described herself as "polite, and things like that, but . . . not really, really smart in my academic courses. I like more things like art and woodwork." This was in spite of a grade point average in the B range, and A's and B's in all core academic subjects until grade 11. In grade 11 she failed Math 11 and achieved C- in Chemistry 11, placing her at risk as defined in this study. In her elementary and junior high years she had a positive attitude towards school. "I liked it a lot. I always wanted to go to school. If I was sick, I was disappointed that I couldn't go." "I just liked it. And thought if I did really good I could be what I wanted when I grew up." Her peer group was supportive: ". . . everybody was nice to everybody, but we just knew some people better than others. . . . we had a group of best-best friends. We always had birthday parties together...and we all did our homework together." Her family was also supportive: ". . . my parents . . . if I got a good mark on something, they'd stick it up on the fridge. And if I did really, really good they'd take us out for supper . . ., my brothers and I."

Renée moved to her current community between grade 7 and grade 8, and found the double adjustment to high school and a new community somewhat frightening at first. "I was a bit scared in grade 8 to do anything bad whatsoever . . . But I just did all my homework and everything so nothing went wrong." "I was a bit nervous at first because I thought I wouldn't make it [from class to class] on time . . . but it all worked out that it wasn't really that big a deal." "It was good to make friends here." She continued to enjoy school and her classes, except she did not enjoy math. "I didn't look forward to going to math at all. Throughout everything I didn't like math." Her perception that the arts were

her strength began to solidify in her high school years and she began to recognize that having choice was important to her. "I enjoyed doing my art and my woodwork and things but when I had [academic classes] I didn't like it all that much because I couldn't do what I wanted."

As Renée progressed through junior high, her parents accorded her increasingly more freedom in her social life, but until grade 11, this did not interfere with her school work. Renée described grade 11 as a year when she underwent major changes in attitude. "I didn't like school quite as much as I had before. I thought homework was boring. Didn't feel like doing it all the time. And my parents let me go out, like all the time, so I didn't get my homework done anyway." ". . . math got harder. And, uh, sciences . . . just . . . got boring for me. . . . I didn't like the teacher."

Although she still recognized school as important in grade 11, Renée was motivated by other considerations: rebellion, pleasure, and her self-concept as a young adult. "At that time I didn't care, I just wanted to rebel. School was getting boring and I thought I was becoming a young adult, so I thought I could do what I wanted and it didn't matter." "As long as I was happy, that was all that mattered, and not doing my homework made me happy. I'd just leave it at school or something."

She no longer relied on her earlier support systems : "I was rebelling at the time, so what my parents said didn't matter to me. They were bugging me to get my grades up, but I just didn't want to so I wouldn't listen." "One teacher wouldn't give me help when I needed it, like at lunch because I have to catch a bus after school. That disappointed me." "When my marks were dropping and my attitude was changing, I thought the teachers would notice and say something, but they didn't, so it seemed they didn't care about it. I don't think I would have changed much if they had, maybe if I got in a lot of trouble, but I don't know." "I don't think counselling or a reward system or anything like that would have helped me last year. Just if I had been able to take different courses . . . I would have liked that better."

Her relations with teachers were generally positive, "I think I've been treated fine. Nobody has treated me really bad. Some teachers get mad at the way I act or something,

but that's understandable." "In grade 11 I just didn't think I needed to have as much respect for them as I had before, just trying to be more grown up than I was . . . ." "When I got in trouble for bad marks, I would be angry with the teacher. I didn't feel I had to respect them as much because I didn't feel they respected me by giving me such low marks."

Certain teaching practices appealed to Renée: "I think teachers can make classes more interesting by giving activities and projects, and for me, more drawing activities or diagrams and things that I can draw can help me understand." "Since I like to work independently, I like it when the teacher lets me do that."

In terms of Goal Theory, Renée exhibited an incremental theory of intelligence and pursued learning goals (Dweck & Leggett, 1989). This can be seen in her self-description which is predicated on the notion that through effort she can enhance her achievement. At the time of her failing grades she pursued social goals (Urdan & Martin, 1995) rather than task goals. Although she engaged in some maladaptive behaviours, she did so as a form of motivation to achieve her social goals rather than to avoid damage to her self-image, as would be the case with failure-avoiding performance-goal oriented individuals (Ames, 1992).

Brandon

Brandon's GPA through junior high was in the B range, occasionally dipping to high C+. Until grade 11 he achieved mostly C+'s and B's in core academic subjects. The 'at-risk' designation for Brandon resulted from his near-failing grades (C-) in Math 11, Biology 11 and Physics 11. He described himself as a good student who learns quickly but is easily bored, which results in acting out behaviours. "I just get really fidgety and start talkin' and makin' noises and stuff. Which gets me into trouble usually." If he could give advice to a new teacher about how to deal with him, he would "Probably tell them that I'll probably bother them with the things I do, but I can't really help it . . . and just realize what I'm like and understand that and . . . if they're mean to me, then I'm not going to cooperate with them at all but if they cooperate with me, I'll cooperate with them."

Brandon did not like to miss school. "I always figured that they'd be doing something . . . really important or really fun in class or something would be happening that

day, with my friends or something, that I'd end up missing out on something. I'd always come, usually." Brandon considered marks and his placing in the class important: ". . . I always like to have a good mark, and being up in the top of the class. I don't like really having a low mark. Unless I know that I've been trying my hardest and if that's the only mark I can pull off, then I'm fine with that."

For Brandon, teachers' treatment of him was pivotal in his performance: "If I got along with them . . . I'd try hard because they're doing their best to get me through it, so I'll try for them too. But if they have a bad attitude toward me, then I'll just do the same thing back to them." He felt that teachers formed early judgments about him and were resistant to changing their judgments: ". . . there's just some teachers that have built up an attitude towards me that, like it doesn't really matter what I do, they're still going to treat me in the exact same way." He also felt that his reputation in the school was based partly on the actions of his older sibling: ". . . I've heard people say it to my face, that, that, 'Oh boy, another [one from that family] in our class.' Just things like that. Just sarcastic comments or whatever." Family honour has been an important consideration for Brandon. "I'm kind of trying to get things good for my sister and kind of fix my older sister's trail. [My parents] knew my sister didn't try very hard . . . I guess you could say they were disappointed . . . they knew she could be doing better . . . I knew exactly how they felt about her attitude and work, so I didn't want them to have the same attitude towards my work."

Math was not a strong subject for Brandon and he entered grade 11 with trepidation towards math: ". . . just before the end [of Math 10 an administrator] came and told us how much different Math 11 is from Math 10, . . . I already wasn't doing that well in Math 10, so if Math 11 is . . . even harder, then I sure, God, there's no way I'm going to be able to do that! I just figured as long as I could pass the thing, that would be fine, I think." When asked if the school system had worked as hard as it should have for him, Brandon replied, ". . . it's kinda up to me. It's not up to them. If I would have wanted to really have a lot of extra help, then I could have . . . done something."

Brandon reported that he is motivated by his own drive and interests: "I don't like to

keep being told that I have the ability to do better. I think I know what I can do, it's just that I don't want to, so I don't think they should keep telling me that. If I don't want to learn how to do something, then it's kind of up to me." "If I can't think how I'll use something later in life, I get bored and tune it out." "I like to be in the top 30% of the class. If it's a class I really enjoy or need, I'll work hard to learn what we're learning so I can add to class discussions, but if it's just a class I'm taking to fill in my timetable, I'll just get through it." Brandon considers his parents, not the school, his primary support system. "I usually get good support from my parents. If my marks are low but they know I've been keeping up and trying, they'll accept it . . . ." "The school can encourage a student with low marks, like ask them about it, but not really try to get into their life and ask what's going on. That's not the school's place." "If a student's marks are slipping because their life has changed a lot, for instance if they went from total prep to skater over the summer, the school could, not necessarily give up on them, but not expect them to change back either. The school could say something once, but after that it is up to the student." "At some point the school should back off and let the student sink if they're sinking."

Brandon does not report very positive relations with some teachers. "I just don't get along with teachers in certain courses, so I wouldn't want to spend extra time with them for extra help." "Sometimes when I go in for extra help, it seems like the teacher doesn't want to be there or help me." "Having teachers congratulate me for doing a good job, even if it's not in their class, like when I do well in sports, makes me think they want to be on my side and maybe get along with me." Brandon reports that he responds well to quite a degree of personalization in teaching practices: "Teachers have to realize that not all students can learn at the same pace. They are going to have to take time with certain students to make sure they understand." "In the courses I was doing badly in, I could get the things we'd spend a while on, but if we had to move on to something new right away, I couldn't understand it and I'd get behind and the next day there'd be something new and I'd be even further behind and not able to catch up." "I'm able to stay on task and concentrate for a teacher who is more free-flowing because they don't sit you down and tell you to work or get out. If you work, you'll do good, and they don't care if you get off topic for a second." "I think

how hard a teacher tries to get along with me shows how hard they are trying to teach me."
"I think when a teacher is angry with me over discipline, they don't seem to care whether I
learn or not." "Activities make learning more fun sometimes . . . but they're not always
necessary. For some subjects, like physics, it would help more than others."

Brandon's self-image incorporates aspects of an entity theory of intelligence (Dweck
& Leggett 1989), at least in terms of math and sciences. He expresses doubts about his
ability to perform above minimal levels in those subjects. However, like incremental-
theory individuals, he also acknowledges that he can make a difference in his achievement
through effort. So, unlike typical entity-theory individuals, he is prepared to pursue
learning goals. On the other hand, having a good mark and being in the top of the class,
both characteristics of a performance-goal oriented individual, are important to Brandon.
Social goals feature highly in Brandon's hierarchy of goals at least in terms of peers and
family as shown by his references to family honour and his view of school as a place for
meeting with friends; social compliance goals in relation to teachers and school do not
feature highly for him, though. Brandon shows strong feelings of self-worth and adopts
learning goals when he decides achievement is important.

Neil

Neil said of himself, "I have a bit of drive, but I'm not a scholar. I think most
teachers think I'm smarter than I think I am. It makes me feel good when teachers tell me I
can do better even if I'm doing well." Through grades 7, 8 and 9, Neil's GPA ranged from
high C+ to high B. His marks in the core academic subjects ranged from C to A. His
marks had begun to slip by the end of grade 10, notably in Math, yet his teachers continued
to express confidence in his capability to maintain good marks with a full academic load.
He fits the 'at-risk' designation because he failed Math 11 and Physics 11.

Neil reported that school is important to him: "It's a good place to meet people and it's
the way that you're going to get your life, basically." He wanted to do well in school for
his own sake and his parents' sake: " . . . I wanted them to be proud of me . . . I wanted
to impress them . . . to impress myself most of the time. That's the main thing." Neil
assumed he was doing well unless he saw otherwise on a report card: ". . . if I was

doing bad in a class I still didn't really care until I actually saw it on paper."

In grade 11, Neil became romantically involved and his marks and attitude toward school changed: "We were pretty much like we were married almost . . . had my mind on her all the time. That's basically what kept my marks down so low. Not concentrating on school." Neil also responded to influences of friends: "I've wanted to do what everybody else wanted to do . . . I was friends with everybody that was like a year or two older than me . . . I wanted to hang around with them . . . they were on spare, so I'd decide to go for coffee too, skip out and whatever." Neil's parents and an older sibling provided encouragement and advice when he realized his marks were slipping seriously: "my brother kind of gave up in grade 12. I'm lucky I did it in grade 11. He said, 'Don't, you better get doing it better cause you don't want to happen what happened to me.'" Neil felt that the school offered him help, ". . . the classes I failed last year were both the same teacher, and [the teacher] always said if you need help, come in. So it was up to me to go and do it. But I just thought it was pointless." However, when asked if a more personalized attempt to reach him, such as the offer of specific appointment times for extra help, would have made a difference, he replied, "Yeah, I would have [gone], 'cause that's an appointment, and . . . you don't miss a, a doctor's appointment or anything." He also supported the idea of having a mentoring adult: ". . . if you have a mentor, you're not going to let him down . . . if he's your mentor, and he's watching over you, you kind of probably want to please him."

Other people's opinion of him was an important motivator for Neil: "I'm concerned what my parents and the teachers think. I want to do well for their sakes, for what they'll think of me." "When I do badly, I feel that I've let myself down, but even more, I feel that I've let other people down." Neil sees education as important: "Right now school is my biggest priority . . . my goal is to leave here with good grades and go on to college or university." In his grade 11 year, though, he did not have the same attitude: "I changed a lot over the summer after grade 10. That's when my grades went down, in grade 11." "Last year when I wasn't trying, I got bad marks. I lost my confidence and I gave up." "Last year when my parents would tell me to try harder, I just didn't care. I just didn't

want them to lecture me."

Neil considered his peers to be an important support system: "If my friends had said something to me about doing better last year, I probably would have listened." "I think I would get the same advice from a peer as I would from a teacher, but in a way I could understand more. I can open up a lot more with somebody my own age, or I've been friends with for a while." He did recognize that support was available from the school: "If I wanted help I could have asked for it. My teachers always said they were available for help. If you never take that opportunity, it's your own fault." "Last year the teacher helped me quite a few times but finally just gave up, so I figured, okay, now it will be easier to skip out, 'cause the teacher doesn't care whether I'm there or not." Family also provided support for Neil: "My brother gave me advice about my situation last year because he had been in the same situation when he was in grade 12." "My parents like me to do my homework before I do anything else at home, but even if I don't do it right away, they don't bug me because they know I'll do it later." "My parents would always give me lectures about doing better last year but I'd just let it float by my head."

Neil described the sort of teacher to whom he relates well: "A teacher can establish a good relationship with a student by being able to take a joke and laugh with the student." "If the teacher has established a good relationship with me, I'll like it if he or she jokes around with me. I can accept it if that teacher uses sarcastic humour to keep me on task." "Last year one of my teachers helped me out quite a bit and got me back on track a couple of times, but after about the fourth time, [that teacher] had basically given up on me." "If a teacher has tried to get you to pass and you're just not trying, they shouldn't feel as if they've failed, 'cause they've tried to get you to pass."

Neil mentioned teaching practices that encourage him to try harder: "If the teacher can do something at the beginning of a new topic to make me feel confident, then I will be able to do better on it." "It makes it easier to learn and pay attention, for example, if they make a study situation into a game. That makes you try to find the right answer even if it is not your turn." "If a teacher is kind of up and giddy, really happy all the time, that makes me want to go to class. There is nothing worse than a teacher in a bad mood."

Neil can be described as a performance-goal focused individual (Ames, 1992). Demonstration of his ability to peers, family, and teachers is important to him, and when poor achievement threatens his sense of ability, he responds as performance-goal focused individuals do: with failure-avoiding behaviours such as truancy and giving up. At the time Neil's grades had fallen seriously, he was pursuing social goals with peers rather than learning or performance goals.

These differing profiles and the differences among the participants' school experiences suggest considerable disparity in the data gleaned from their interviews, and to some degree this was the case. However, commonalities were identified among participants within a number of categories. These commonalities are presented next.

<u>Key themes</u>

As described in the process of analysis, I established common themes by reviewing one participant's idea units within one category, reducing each to a short descriptive phrase which expressed its key theme, then reviewing the same category of the other participants, tallying occurrences of their idea units described by those key themes identified for the first participant. If a subsequent participant's category revealed additional key themes, these were added to the list. This process continued through all seventeen original categories. Commonalities were deemed to exist if key themes occurred in the categories of two or three of the participants.

Commonalities were identified among all three participants in seven of the initial categories: *Motivation, Support Systems, Teaching Practices, Teacher Relations, Peer Considerations, Relevance, Attribution of Responsibility, and Out-of-school Demands.* In addition to three-participant commonalities, two-participant commonalities occurred in five categories: *Learning Practices, Family Considerations, Pressures, Prior Knowledge, and Course Load.* This report on common themes within categories across participants deals with key themes which arise in those categories and are shared by at least two of the participants.

Categories containing three-participant commonalities.

In the *Motivation* category, all three participants reported that family expectations were a source of motivation and they expressed their desire to meet those expectations. In Renée's words, "I want the good grades for myself and my parents. They're really happy when I get good grades. I want to be a good influence for my [siblings] too." Brandon expressed it: "I like having good grades for my parents' sake, so they can see that I'm smart and see that I'm trying harder than [my sibling] did." Neil said, "I feel good when I get a good report card. I want my parents to be proud of me; I want to impress them, and impress myself."

A comment from Brandon was representative of the perspectives expressed by all three: "Education is really important. You have to have it to get out of a small town. If you ever want to go anywhere and try new things, you have to have it." All three recognized the importance of acquiring an education and of graduating from secondary school. All had hopes of attending post-secondary institutions at some time following graduation. All three also reported that being at school was important to them and had been since their elementary grades. Neil's comment reflects statements also made by Brandon and Renée: "If I didn't go to school, I don't know what I'd do. I'd never drop out. It's not a very smart thing to do ."

All three reported they felt a weakness in the subjects in which they had failing or near-failing grades. That general feeling of subject weakness left them with a sense of hopelessness when faced with difficulties in the subject. In Neil's words, "Last year in math I just had the attitude that I wasn't going to pass anyway, so I would just go to class to fool around sometimes."

Two of three participants, Renée and Neil, reported that friends and social demands motivated their behaviour. However, they also said that variety in classroom activities motivated them to be on-task. Neil and Brandon reported that achievement of success motivated them to try harder and that a desire to have a good reputation with parents and teachers was also a motivator for them.

In the *Support Systems* category, all three participants listed friends and family in

their support systems. Renée said, "Friends come over, like, we'll do our biology . . . so they help a lot . . . if I need help. . . I just ask one of my friends and then they'll help me out . . . so it's just my friends do a lot to help me." Brandon said, "I know when my parents or teachers ask me questions about my marks when they are low, they are trying to be supportive, but I don't like to talk about it." Neil said, "I would talk to people my own age rather than teachers or counsellors. People my own age would have more influence on me."

In the category *Teaching Practices,* all three participants cited variety of presentation as a positive teaching practice, while boring presentations with lecture as the main component were cited as negative teaching practices by all three participants. Renée said, "Some classes are just so boring. The teacher just talks so much that I get bored and block them out." Brandon said, "Activities make learning more fun sometimes." Neil said, "Teachers who are really into their teaching are enthusiastic with their hands and just talking--they [kind of] get away from themselves."

Negative singling out of students had been experienced by all three participants and all three condemned the practice. Renée said, "Some teachers put students down and just make some students feel really embarrassed or stupid in front of the whole class and . . . I don't think they should be able to do that." Brandon said, "I don't mind if they tell me to stop doing something . . .but don't make a public thing, giving me trouble in front of everybody." Neil said, "If you're not on task in [a subject], you're making a fool of yourself, 'cause the teacher will get you out of there. It doesn't make you feel good if some teacher kicks you out. Everybody laughs at you."

Two of the three, Renée and Brandon, cited projects and classroom activities as desirable teaching practices. Renée said, "Teachers can make classes more interesting by giving activities and projects . . . things that I can draw can help me understand." Both also mentioned that being able to adjust the time devoted to different topics within a course was important to them. Brandon said, "In the courses I was doing badly in, I could get the things we'd spend a while on, but if we had to move on right away, I couldn't understand it and I'd get behind and the next day there would be something new and I'd be even

further behind and and not able to catch up. Partly I think I would have had a better time if I had been able to take those courses over a longer period of time."

Neil and Brandon cited teachers' contacting parents with concerns over student performance as an important teaching practice, although Brandon felt that repeated contact, especially in reference to problems in the same course, was not helpful. He stressed that the school should make the parents aware of a problem and then leave it in the hands of the parents. In his view, repeated efforts on the part of the school to involve parents in their childrens' school problems constitute invasion of family territory.

In the category *Teacher Relations*, all three participants made the point that teacher awareness of students as individuals with individual learning styles, behaviour patterns, stresses and goals was very important. In Renée's words, "When my grades were dropping in Grade 11, they [teachers] didn't say anything about it, so it seemed that they didn't care about it." Brandon said, "When I do come in for help, I want the teacher not to judge me by the way I act in class. Don't keep that anger towards me while I'm getting help, because I'm trying to learn what they're teaching, so give me credit for that." A teacher's sensitivity towards students' individuality and a personalization of reaction to that individuality were seen as critical in fostering a good attitude toward the class on the part of the student, which in turn enhanced the student's efforts, behaviour and ultimately, achievement. In Neil's words, "If you're in a good relationship with a teacher you're going to want to come to class because they're basically like a friend and you wouldn't want to let them down."

Two of the three, Neil and Brandon, mentioned that teacher/student camaraderie was important to them and that they were more likely to attend class and make an effort when they felt a degree of camaraderie with the teacher. Again in Brandon's words, "The kind of teachers I like are the ones you can sit down with and have a conversation with. They're not always serious about everything. They don't intimidate me. They wouldn't try to control the conversation or judge me." Neil and Brandon also mentioned that teaching style and teacher personality were fundamental in their relationship with teachers, and that teacher gender was not a factor in the relationship.

Renée and Brandon expressed doubt that students truly have recourse when they felt unfairly treated by a teacher. In Renée's words: "If that happens [conflict with a teacher] the student can go to the counsellor but they really can't do anything 'cause they'll just get in trouble . . . from the teacher. They can't really tell a teacher off or something without getting in a lot, a lot of trouble." Brandon said, "A student can't really get help if they can't get along with a teacher because they would have to tell the administration and then the teacher would end up not liking you even more because you had told on them or something. . . they'd develop an even bigger grudge against me." Renée and Brandon also mentioned that a problem faced by students in a small school is the limited number of teachers, which results in students not having a choice among teachers for a given course. Brandon said, "If there had been a choice of teachers for the courses I had trouble in, I would have done somewhat better because I would have wanted to show [a new] teacher that I could do it and could get along with them because they didn't already have an opinion about me and not want to get along with me." Renée suggested, "I think that teachers should not stay for too long in one school. I think the district should switch them around every four years or so."

In the category *Peer Considerations*, all three participants made the point that although they often made unwise choices in order to do what peers were doing, none of them felt pressured by peers to make those unwise choices. All three participants stated clearly that the choices they made in regards to their behaviour vis à vis peer considerations were independent choices. Renée said, "I didn't really think of it as pressure. If they asked me to do something and I thought it was fun, I would do it, but if I didn't want to do it, I would just stay home." Brandon expressed it this way: "I don't buy into being cool by not working hard. If someone says, 'I'm stupider than you, but at least I'm cool 'cause I skipped out today.' that's just out of the question." From Neil's point of view: "I don't think they ever tried to really get me to go [skipping class]. I think it was just a decision I made on my own."

Two of the three, Neil and Brandon, commented on public attitude versus private attitude among their peers. They admitted that they and most of their friends present a

public attitude of not caring about doing well at school, and not wanting to be seen as trying to do well, whereas in private they would admit that doing well and trying to do well are important. Brandon expressed this clearly: "We talk as if good grades are not important because that's what is expected. We don't want people to think we're a dork or a suck-up. Some kids really think that [good grades are not important], but they or their families don't think education is important. They're never going to get past the small town or bush jobs. Certain things I would say I don't care [about the importance of school] but in private, or in a session like this I would say are important." Brandon's remark also stresses the point made by both males that it is important not to be seen as a "geek" or "dork," that is, someone who devotes time only to family and school.

In the *Relevance* category, all three participants reported that they considered relevant those subjects or that subject content which seemed utilitarian in the present or for the future. Renée said, "I think everything I learned in my courses was relevant. The courses in biology and chemistry helped me out. In art everything I learned was great, but then in math nothing stayed in my brain long enough to do anything." Brandon said, "I try to figure out how I will use something later on, and if I can't think of how, I just get bored and turn off or tune out or get angry." Neil said, "If a course is going to mean something in your further education you are probably going to want to think hard about it and try harder in that course."

In the category *Attribution of Responsibility*, all three participants accepted responsibility for their lack of achievement. In Renée's words, "In order for my marks to be better in grade 11, I don't think there was anything the teachers could do, it was just something I had to do, like buckle down and do my homework instead of going out all the time." Brandon said, "I get frustrated and mad at myself if I get low grades. It's my grades. Nobody else got them for me." Neil simply said, "I blame myself for not doing well." All three stressed that they were aware of making choices which would result in low marks, and all three were aware of what services were available to help them improve their achievement. As Brandon said, "It's up to me to do something if I have low marks. I could go for extra help or get a tutor or something." All felt that teachers or the school

generally should offer help to students in difficulty, but that it is incumbent on the students to take advantage of help that is available, or to seek help if none is offered. In Neil's words, "The school's responsibility in that situation should be just to try to get them [failing students] to do well or try and help them out and if they don't want to take that help it's up to them I guess."

In the category *Out-of-School Demands*, all three participants agreed that they found spending time with friends preferable to doing school work, and that had been a factor particularly during the semester when they had experienced their failing or near-failing grades. Renée said, "I like hanging out with my friends; it seems more fun than doing homework all the time." Brandon said, "My social life keeps me away from my school work quite a bit. I'll usually want to be doing something with my friends rather than doing school work. I usually go out Friday night and Saturday night and Sunday night too, if I can." Neil said, "I go out for coffee pretty often, and I don't do my homework till I get home."

Categories containing two-participant commonalities.

In the *Learning Practices* category, Renée and Brandon expressed the belief that effort results in academic success. Renée made the comment, "I think the top students have to work too . . . when you watch them working you see that they are working hard and getting good marks because they work for it." Brandon said it this way: "Sometimes I'll actually want to learn about things and sometimes I just have to learn it, so I will push myself . . . . " Neil and Brandon reported that for them, a positive outlook is important. Neil said, ". . . this year I go in with the right frame of mind and I sit right in the front row so I can listen." Brandon said, "If I have a real drive to do something, I'll do it. I'll try to learn and remember it."

In the *Family Considerations* category, Renée and Neil report a desire to please their parents with their marks. Renée said, "I like to get good marks for myself and my parents. They're really happy when I get good marks." Neil said, "I want them [parents] to be proud of me. I want to impress them." Neil and Brandon both report family expectations that they do well, and report that their parents had ways to influence them in

their school work. Neil said, "My parents started warning me quite early about how important it is to do well in high school." He also said "When I was skipping last year, the school should have phoned my parents, 'cause my parents would have persuaded me to go or made me go on." Brandon said, "My Mom knows I'm a pain in the ass to teachers. But she knows that I am really smart or whatever. She will see I have As and Bs and things and then all of a sudden there will be Cs and stuff like that so she kind of has it set in her mind that I should be staying with As and Bs." He stated, ". . . if I've been screwing around and not doing my work . . . they threaten not to let me go out for awhile."

In the *Pressures* category, Renée and Neil reported that they were pressured by their parents. Renée said, "The only other kind of pressure I felt was from my parents. If I didn't do well then they'd get kind of mad at me but that's about all." Neil said, "I didn't really like having my parents all over me and I knew they would be [when my marks were down]."

In the *Prior Knowledge* category, Renée and Brandon felt under-prepared for the subjects in which they had their failing grades. Renée said, "There was stuff that didn't seem familiar but the teacher said we already learned it in grade 10, but it didn't seem like we did." Brandon said, "When topics were introduced, there was no review of the material from grade 10. We were just expected to remember it and be able to apply it to grade 11."

In the *Course Load* category, Renée and Brandon both reported that course pacing had been too fast for them in the subjects they found difficult, and that their selection of courses had resulted in an overload in subjects in which they were not strong. Renée said, "[This year] I can do math at my own pace . . . I can do three or four tests in a day, or I can do one and the teacher doesn't get mad." and "It seemed like my course load in grade 11 was quite tough because . . . it was tough to do, say chemistry and biology and math in one semester 'cause I needed help with all of them so it was hard." Brandon said, ". . . If I had known how hard math was going to be, I would have taken it by Modules (a self-paced mastery learning program), because you get to work at your own pace, and you could get to understand it as you went along, because you can spend as much time as you need on a concept." "That semester I had so many hard courses that if I got behind in one,

I wouldn't have time to catch up without getting behind in another. I didn't have enough time to concentrate on one course at a time."

<u>Categories containing no commonalities</u>

There were no commonalities across participants among responses in the categories *Health Considerations, In-class Behaviour*, or *Rigour*. None of the participants mentioned health topics as significant considerations in their choices concerning schooling, nor did they identify subject rigour as significant to those choices. Points offered in *In-class Behaviour* form part of the Participant Profiles.

In summary, all three participants reported that they prefer teaching practices which provide a variety of learning activities; they felt it was important to have choices as to which courses they could register in, which teachers they could be assigned to, and what activities they could undertake in class. They preferred teachers whom they felt did not try to intimidate, overwhelm or judge them, but with whom they could relate on a personal level both in the formal setting of the classroom and more informally outside of class. They reported that it was important that teachers treat them with respect and tact even in disciplinary dealings and even when the student was in the wrong.

All participants were aware of the changes in their academic performance. Two participants, Neil and Renée, attributed those changes in performance to their own changes in priorities during their grade 11 year. For those two participants, school achievement became less of a priority at that time than exploring new-found freedom and social possibilities outside of school. For Brandon, the combination of math and two science courses was intimidating from the outset because his academic interests and strengths lie in the humanities sphere. He faced his course load that semester with little expectation of success and little intent to achieve well in those courses.

Although many interwoven factors and experiences combine to explain these young people's school performance, the participants in the study saw themselves largely as agents of their own academic achievement. Although certain practices and certain kinds of relationships indeed influenced that achievement and might be welcomed, these students clearly believed that responsibility for their achievement rested with them and so did the

means to exercise that responsibility. Each of them was clear on the following points: at that period in their schooling when their marks were falling, they were cognizant of what was happening; they were well aware what resources were available to support them and who was offering those resources; they were aware which of their behaviours were contributing to their failing performance, and yet they knowingly continued in those behaviours. All three insisted that it had been incumbent upon no one but himself or herself to do anything different from what had been done. When pressed on this point, the participants could provide suggestions that, if offered, might have encouraged them to change course, and these suggestions will be addressed in the next chapter. However, the students stressed that the responsibility to make changes was theirs alone.

Pattern Categories

Subsequent to the identification of common key themes category-by-category across participants, final analysis was conducted to identify common key themes across participants and across categories in order to identify overarching interpretive, or "pattern," categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 57). At this point in the analysis, the data could be seen to relate to Goal Theory, Achievement Motivation Theory, Cognitive Attribution Theory, and Self-worth Theory, but did not sort neatly into categories those theories engender. I sought pattern categories responsive to the framework in which the data were collected, and interpretable within achievement motivation theory. Three pattern categories relating to factors that influenced the participants' behaviour choices seemed to fulfil those requirements: **Academic Factors**, **Social/Family Factors**, and **Peer Factors**. **Academic Factors** contains those key themes from all categories which refer to factors that the participants relate to their experiences at school and their beliefs around academic achievement behaviour and choices. **Peer Factors** contains those key themes which refer to factors which the participants relate to the role of peers and social goals of interacting with peers as related to academic achievement behaviours and choices. **Social/Family Factors** contains those key themes which relate to wider social mores and familial values, attitudes and support, including those which have been adopted by the student, as they

influence academic achievement behaviours and choices (see Table 4, page 71).

Table 4

Key Themes Coded by Pattern Category

Academic Factors	Social/Family Factors	Peer Factors
- response to teacher - teachers as support - recourse - respectful, sensitive treatment - student-teacher camaraderie - fair consequences - reciprocal responses - preconceptions (student/teacher) - must like teacher to do well - acquire education/graduate - like school - preconceptions (subject difficulty) - content value - subject boredom - mark weighting affects assignment relevance - positive outlook is important - success engenders confidence - Ma/Sc overload - variety of presentation - teacher engagement with subject - projects, activities - time adjustment by topic - positive singling out - alternate learning settings - teacher explanation/ justification - choice is important - marks should reflect achievement	- family expectations - family as support - family rewards achievement - parental "power" to influence student - parental expectations as source of pressure - school-parent contact - teacher follow-up of contact - reputation withparents/ teachers - goals for future - study groups - involvement in sports - competition (athletic, personal, academic)	- friends/social demands - "prestige"/ "in" group - rebellion - hanging out with friends preferable to school work - increased freedom leads to decreased academic achievement - independent choices - copycat choices - public attitude vs. private attitude - "geekdom" - popularity

Salient key themes coded to **Academic Factors** are the importance to these participants of their relationship with their teachers, the importance of their own attitude toward their tasks, and the importance of educational practices, both institutional and at the classroom level. The motivating influence of a teacher they like was clear. Such a teacher is one with whom they have a relationship of mutual respect and share common interests, who is aware of their personal goals, fears and strengths and takes them into account in dealings with the student, can set aside preconceptions concerning the student's abilities and attitudes, and who withholds judgment. This importance of warm relations with teachers relates to drive theories which include psychological motives such as the need for approval and belonging (Atkinson & Raynor, 1977; Maslow, 1970; McClelland, 1965).

Positive self-regard, such as that which students develop in warm relations with their teachers, is a necessary component of the pursuit of success (Covington, 1984). Raffini (1992) outlines how, according to Maslow's (1970) heirarchy of human needs, students cannot address personal growth needs such as academic achievement if their needs for safety and security, love and belonging, and self-esteem are thwarted. Salutory relationships with teachers address these psychological needs of students. The importance participants of this study place on their relationships with teachers support theories which consider fulfillment of psychological needs crucial to development of achievement motivation.

The student's own attitudes towards their educational tasks also contribute to their academic achievement behaviours. For these students, facets of attitude were revealed in their references to several topics. Reasons for staying in school, like or dislike of a subject, preconceptions concerning the content or difficulty of a subject, preconceptions concerning a teacher's attitude or expectations, the perceived value of course content, the perceived value of the weighting of assignments, the effect of success or failure on future effort, response to course load, and attending behaviours in class provided an indication of the effect of the students' own perceptions regarding achievement. Covington (1984), Urdan and Martin (1995) and Weiner et al. (1977) cite student perception concerning

various aspects of their schooling experiences as an important component in their motivation to achieve. These writers posit that persons' perceptions of the causes of their success or lack thereof influence the quality of their future efforts. As these students perceived that effort on their part directed towards these topics resulted in improved achievement or failed to result in improved achievement, they incorporated the topics into their motivational behaviours, or abandoned them, or cited them as impediments to making effort.

Another key component in these students' academic achievement behaviours was educational practices, at both the institutional and classroom level. The provision or lack thereof for student choice was seen as salient. Choice in the following aspects of schooling was important: courses available, variety of learning environments available, variety of delivery options available, choice of teachers, and variety of learning activities. Also seen as important considerations were the need for flexibility in time allocation, the degree to which teachers provided rationales for course content and teaching/learning activities, and the degree to which marks reflected achievement or effort. Ames' (1990) TARRGET, Covington and Teel's (1996) "Equity Game" Classroom, and Epstein's (1989) TARGET programs also recognize the impact of these educational practices on student motivation, and offer suggestions for incorporating them in programs to achieve maximum positive effect.

Peer Factors related to the students' pursuit of social priorities. Only a few themes surfaced for this pattern category. Pursuit or possession of prestige in the peer group; avoidance of a one-dimensional, school-focused personality; exercising freedom to choose social over academic priorities; and making independent, not peer-pressured, choices to engage in social rather than academic activities were important topics in this category. Raffini (1993) makes the point that such social goals are equally as important to consider as task goals and ability goals when addressing student motivation, as students' desire to gain or maintain social approval influences their behaviour choices.

The **Social/Family Factors** pattern category included such themes as the role of family in mediating between academic goals and social goals; the student's plans for the

future; teacher contact with parents; and activities which overlapped school and social life, such as participation in study groups and sports teams and the role of competition. These themes focus on the congruence of the students' goals with those of their families and the social mores of their peer group. Goal theories such as Urdan and Martin's (1995) task/ability/social goal theory and need-to-belong theories such as Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of human needs provide insight into how these factors impact on student motivation to achieve. For example, Urdan and Maehr (1995) point out that if motivation is rooted in perceived opportunities, then we must understand what influences students' perceptions of opportunities before we can understand their motivation. These students' comments concerning the interaction of family, friends and school help illuminate their perceptions of opportunities.

In summary, the pattern categories served to identify broad areas for consideration in addressing the self-perceptions, goals, and achievement of academically capable, at-risk senior secondary students in relation to established theories concerning student achievement and motivation. The relation of the data derived from participating students to established theory points towards implications for practice in supporting these students through their period of being at-risk. The key implications for participants in this study are: their relations with teachers are fundamental to their attitudes towards school in general and specific classes in particular; their perceptions about school are central to their choices of achievement behaviours; educational practices make a difference to their efforts; and peers and family/community values rather than media-promoted factors such as youth disaffection, violence or substance abuse underlie their attitudes. I make suggestions for addressing these implications for practice in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION

In this chapter I address implications for practice to support those students I have identified as academically capable yet at-risk in their senior grades. Such implications for practice are informed by previous research and the perspectives of students who fit the description of academically capable at-risk senior secondary students. I also place this study in context by pointing out its contributions and limitations and suggesting directions for future research. I begin the discussion of implications by offering some interpretations of the patterns apparent in these data as they relate to the three research questions.

As previously discussed, the three achievement behaviour pattern categories are **Academic Factors, Peer Factors,** and **Social/Family Factors.** Each deals with factors the participants link to their academic achievement behaviour choices: **Academic Factors** relate to school experiences and practices; **Peer Factors** relate to peer-influenced behaviours; and **Social/Family Factors** relate to wider social mores and family attitudes and support. The research questions, through which the data interpreted, are: a) how do academically capable at-risk senior secondary students describe their school experiences? b) what particular educational practices do academically capable at-risk senior secondary students believe enhance or inhibit their achievement? and c) are there factors outside the school which academically capable at-risk senior secondary students believe enhance or inhibit their academic achievement and which the school can support or mitigate? The short answers to the research questions are reassuring to the school and to educators; however the longer answers to the questions indicate there is room to improve practices and policies with which the school can support these students better than in the past.

The participants in this study generally describe their school experiences in positive terms; they identify educational practices they believe enhance their achievement, many of which are currently in use, and they are forthright in accepting responsibility for their own academic situations; and they largely absolve the school of the responsibility of attempting

to enhance or mitigate factors outside the school. However, the participants also describe aspects of their schooling which have been less than positive and they identify educational practices which they believe have inhibited their achievement and point to others, which had they been in place, might have enhanced achievement. Much of the research literature concerning educational practice is corroborated by these students' perspectives and points to additional educational policies and practices which offer support for such students.

I undertook this study with certain biases and expectations in place concerning the circumstances of the students' being at risk, based on professional observation and reports in the research literature. However, as data were analysed, these prior expectations were shown to be inadequate both in describing the experiences of the participants and in addressing the priorities expressed by those participants. At-risk, dropout and underachievement theory did not describe well the situations of these students. For instance, it seemed reasonable to suppose that students at-risk as the participating students were would lack family support and encouragement (Neilson & Ward, 1990), would face serious personal issues such as racism, abuse or pregnancy (Downing & Harrison, 1990), would have had overwhelming demands placed on their time outside of school (Tanner, Krahn & Hartnagel, 1995), or would have had an overall negative attitude towards school (Fitzpatrick, 1984). Data focusing on the first research question bely these presuppositions. In describing their school experiences, each participant indicated he or she relied upon and received encouragement and support from family; each felt strong in the face of peer pressure; none had time-consuming duties outside of school, and all reported that education and school were important and that they looked forward to being at school.

Data focusing on the second research question and collected into the first pattern category, **Academic Factors**, provide a rich source of understanding of these students and point to suggestions that can be implemented in the schools to enhance their achievement. Some common threads emerge. For instance, students believe their relationship with their teachers is important, their goals and attitude toward their tasks is important, and policies and practices both at the classroom and institutional level are

important. However, each participant's contributions reveal individualized experiences relating to those threads and individual reactions to those experiences. Their conversation suggests that directions in modifying curriculum, providing instruction and setting administrative routines should be informed by students' own beliefs about their experiences and choices and should be personalized in light of those beliefs.

First, these students appreciate the efforts of teachers who take time to know them personally and who accord dignity to their perceptions of their current situation, not basing decisions on past performance or reports by others. There were expressions of disappointment and antipathy in the participants' conversation concerning teachers' not making a new semester the opportunity for a new start in their relations with a student, or not appearing to notice when a student's performance was flagging, or not taking into account a student's uniqueness in the face of other family members' school performance. There were also expressions of concern that students rarely had real recourse in the face of perceived unfair treatment by teachers. On the other hand, there were expressions of appreciation for teachers who made informal contact with students outside class time, and in relation to students' outside activities as well as in relation to their school progress. Teacher expectations and trying to fulfill them was important to these students. They made the point that it was important to them not to let their teachers down, especially if a teacher was going out of his or her way to personalize her or his dealings with the student. They also expressed appreciation for teachers who did not give up on them even when they seemed to be giving up on themselves. There was a special note of disappointment in their voices when describing situations in which they felt they had been given up on, and a special note of appreciation when describing situations in which they felt a teacher had refused to give up on them.

Second, these students appreciate the efforts of teachers who provide choice and variety in learning activities. The teacher's own obvious enjoyment of the subject, his or her willingness to adjust the introduction of new material to the students' having grasped previous material, to vary the ways in which material is presented, to give students choice in how to demonstrate knowledge, and to explain why a topic or subject is important

contribute to these students' motivation to perform well in the teacher's class. These students especially felt that it was important that teachers ensure they had mastered a difficult topic before embarking on a new one. The discouragement the students felt as they failed to understand material before new material was presented was often a contribution to their giving up in a course.

Third, these students appreciate efforts to personalize support procedures in the school. They are more likely to go to a teacher for extra help if that teacher invites, rather than commands them to meet and sets a particular time for the meeting rather than leaving it open-ended. They are more likely to perform responsibly in all subjects when involved in a mentoring relationship with some adult in the school. They also mentioned the importance of considering guidance from their peers, which points to the value of approaches such as peer counselling and peer tutoring. They appreciate the opportunity to exercise choice in what type of setting, from whom and when, in terms of academic load, they take a course, especially one in which they have difficulty. These students also accord considerable importance to teachers' being aware of and trying to understand the students' personal goals, attitudes and self-concepts rather than responding to preconceived notions or other teachers' reports of the students' behaviours and supposed motivations. The message from these students seems to be that those teachers who are self-reflective and purposeful in noticing the effect their interactions with students have on the warmth of their relationship with those students are the teachers the students want to learn from. Even at the senior grades, and even in difficult subjects, the students want to be respected by and to respect their teachers.

The significance of academic factors in the students' behaviour choices, coupled with the changes in those choices in the senior years, raises points to consider which the students may not have considered. For example, there may be something inherent in the structure of the senior secondary program, such as class size, streaming, transitions in curriculum focus to meet school exit requirements or post-secondary entrance requirements, or differences in teaching approaches which the school can examine for opportunities to enhance wise decision-making by the students. Even deeper structural

suppositions, such as the expectation, both institutional and societal, that capable students will proceed lock-step through thirteen years of public schooling and graduate with their cohort may need to be examined. As mentioned by Tomlinson and Cross (1991), it is possible that interventions introduced to support potential dropouts effect the programs of non-at-risk students, depriving them of the rigour needed to prepare them adequately for senior academic courses.

Data collected in the second pattern category, **Social/Family Factors**, indicate that these students view family support and family expectations as important to the choices they make regarding both academic achievement behaviours and social achievement behaviours. These participants believe that school-parent contact is important, and school follow-up of such contact is important. However, such contact should be limited to providing information about the student's performance, and should not be repetitive, especially from the same teacher concerning the same problem in the same course. Contrary to some indications that students from rural settings are more likely to devalue education and drop out (Tanner, Krahn & Hartnagel, 1995), these students and their families place a high value on education and academic achievement. The school could capitalize on these values by finding ways to support and encourage parents in their efforts to support and encourage their children, beyond simply reporting achievement or failure to achieve, as it is clear that these students really care about not disappointing their parents. Parental involvement in their children's goal-setting, course selection, and post-secondary planning are examples of providing such support.

Data focusing on the third question, and collected in the third pattern category, **Peer Factors**, was scant and contradictory. There was little in the students' conversation to indicate that they felt that for them, factors outside the school were within the sphere of the school either to support or to mitigate. The thrust of the comments from the participants was that there is a limit to how far the school should be expected to go on behalf of at-risk students, and into which spheres the school should venture in doing so. Although there may indeed be little the school can do to mitigate the effects of factors outside the school, such as time spent socializing rather than attending to school work, school personnel need

to recognize that students' meeting social goals has a direct impact on their achievement levels. For some students, school itself is a place for attending to social goals, and the school can enhance opportunities for those students to attend to those goals with policies and practices congruent to the goals. For example, in consultation with the students, the school could design and implement programs to build school pride, enhance the social desirability of effort and achievement, and link educational achievement with desirable social achievement.

The school might even question further its role as a facilitator of social interaction versus that of facilitator of academic progress. For each of the three participants in this study, the social aspect of school was mentioned as a strong motivator for regular attendance at school. Perhaps further research of this duality of the school's role would provide further direction for the support of students such as those studied.

Implications for Practice

The conversation of the participants results in broad suggestions for supporting students such as themselves, much of which is consistent with findings of research directed at understanding achievement motivation of students in general as well as those exhibiting greater degrees of underachievement or being at-risk. Such research offers an extensive body of organized, detailed and tested approaches, programs and techniques, much of which addresses the broad suggestions arising from these students. The research literature indicates that if students recognize that their effort plays a pivotal role in their success they are more likely to pursue task (also called learning, or mastery) goals. Their motivation towards mastery goals results in adoption of metacognitive learning strategies, which result in stronger achievement.

Covington (1992) describes metacognition as a three-fold body of skills and knowledge: self monitoring, conditional knowledge, and plans of action. The school can enhance student motivation towards mastery goals by teaching students self-monitoring techniques, the recognition of conditional knowledge, and formulation of plans of action by breaking tasks into manageable portions or developing analogies to explain what plan of

action will be appropriate. Covington offers *The Productive Thinking Program* (Covington, Crutchfield, Davies, & Olton, 1974) as a means for teachers to teach such thinking skills.

Epstein's (1989) TARGET program and Ames' (1990) TARRGET program provide direction for organizing schools so that students pursue task goals in an environment designed to enhance student self-esteem and autonomy, and provide flexibility in program delivery. The TARGET/TARRGET programs focus on Task, Authority, Reward, Resources, Responsibility, Group, Evaluation, and Time structures. Raffini (1993) provides detailed strategies tailored to meeting goals in each of TARGET areas. Covington and Teel's (1996) Equity Game Classroom program provides specific classroom strategies for setting performance criteria which can be met through effort, rewarding mastery which can be achieved through persistence and curiosity, rewarding multiple abilities, providing choice in performance incentives, and making assignments engaging, novel and relevant.

Programs directed at preventing student dropout and addressing underachievement also offer strategies which address the broad suggestions arising from participants in this study. Baker and Sansone (1990) and Blum & Jones (1993) advocate mentoring relationships with teachers or other adult volunteers; Bruns (1992) suggests building nurturing relationships and fostering cooperation, not competition in the classroom and empowering students through including them in the decision-making process. Rimm (1996) provides strategies for including parents in meeting the achievement motivation needs of the students.

Finally, in considering ways to support academically capable at-risk senior students, school policies and practices should be examined. Transition from junior secondary to senior secondary may need to be smoother; teaching strategies and evaluation and assessment procedures may need to be examined for congruency or transition; students may need better strategies for meeting school-leaving or post-secondary entrance requirements; students may require more personalized support as they undertake heavier academic loads.

None of these suggestions come as a surprise to sensitive teachers. Undoubtedly,

most teachers believe they already make efforts to relate to their students in the above ways, and to a large degree participants in this study would agree that they are successful. However, the perception of the participants in this study would appear to be that if those efforts could be made more often, more consistently and, somehow, more effectively, then academically capable at-risk students would feel more supported to perform at their level of capability.

Limitations

This study involved an in-depth focus on the educational experiences, and perceptions of those experiences, of a limited number of students in a particular setting. While some commonalities have emerged, the study is not meant to establish cause and effect in a broad population. The variety of experiences described by the participants and the variety of responses to those experiences suggest that for students such as these, personalization should underpin the implementation of programs and practices designed to support them.

Another limiting aspect of the study is that by chance or some other factor the participating students all experienced their failing or near-failing grades in the sciences and math. It is possible that course demands/prior knowledge, teacher practices or student area of strength/weakness specific to these subjects was central to the students' failure to achieve. Neither does the study facilitate consideration as to what extent these students' falling achievement in school is simply the result of normal adolescent attempts to balance social life, family life, increased academic pressures and personal issues. It is also possible that these students have reached the limits of their aptitude in the subjects in which their achievement fell. Whereas they had developed strategies which served them well in those subjects in earlier grades, it is possible those strategies no longer sufficed in the face of learning requiring higher level cognitive skills.

The data collected in this research provides information only about the students' perceptions. In order to fulfill requirements of confidentiality, I did not seek corroborating opinions about the participants' classroom behaviour, work habits, social priorities, use or

overuse of substances, or relations with others. In order to not to step outside my role of listener, recorder and analyst, I was careful not to debate or challenge information as it was offered by the participants. Thus this research provides valuable information about students' perceptions, but that information reflects only the student point of view.

Contributions of the study

This study identifies a sub-group of at-risk students: those who, though clearly capable, fail to achieve adequately in core courses at the senior secondary level, thereby placing themselves at risk of failing to complete secondary school or failing to achieve well enough to proceed to further education or rewarding careers, in spite of a good record of academic achievement in earlier grades. It differentiates academically capable at-risk senior secondary students from potential drop-outs and chronic underachievers. It examines the students' perspectives of their academic performance, its changes over time, and influences upon both their achievement and circumstances surrounding changes in it. It is interesting to note that the students were prepared and able to elucidate certain trends: awareness of their difficulties, willingness to take responsibility for them, and a broad sense of control over what they could do to make a difference in their own academic performance.

The participants in the study do not appear to have developed a generalized syndrome of underachievement, but rather they attribute their achievement behaviour choices to specific factors reflective of their goals at a particular time in their school lives. The implication is that if the school can provide interventions to mitigate against those factors, or modify those goals, the attendant damage to self-esteem and drop in academic achievement can be minimized. The study offers suggestions for supporting such students, arising from the students themselves and supported by academic literature. The participants suggest that personalization of attention lies at the centre of such interventions: practices that teachers already know and often employ, such as establishing a relationship with the students, providing variety of course presentation and learning activities, and dialoguing with students to understand their goals and motivations.

The study also reveals that education and achievement are seen as important to this

subgroup of at-risk students and their peers and families. They aspire to positive social growth and goals, unlike more drastically at-risk students with their ongoing disaffection with school, involvement with substance abuse, fractured family life, or personal crises. These students recognize their abilities and their potential to fulfill them. They report combination of hopeful attitudes which may be the result of living in the close-knit atmosphere of a small rural community or attending a small school, or may be the result of their general record of academic success.

The study also reveals that these students are aware of sources of support. They recognize and value the efforts made by the school, individual teachers, family and peers to support them in their periods of being at-risk.

Finally, this study points to positive outcomes for academically capable at-risk senior secondary students. These students see their being at-risk as limited in duration and remediable. They know they can access what teachers already know is important--a safety net of supports, caring and encouragement, and good teaching practices. The students have identified the components of the safety net and the academic literature has pointed to theories and practices for constructing it.

For Future Research

In order to place the presuppositions and findings of this research into the overall context of students' senior secondary and post-secondary experiences, a longitudinal study of these three students and their school cohort would be useful. Such a study should focus on the degree to which future performance in education or career seems to be different for these academically capable at-risk students compared to their peers. The participants of this study represent approximately 19% of the senior secondary students at their school. If indeed 19% of the peer group are at-risk as these students seem to be, there may be a need for more wholesale adaptations of policy and practice than suggested by this study. If, on the other hand, this period of being at-risk does not reflect long-term differences in future achievement of these students compared to their cohort group, the findings of this study may suffice to provide support for such students.

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Appendix A

1. Student-Researcher Agreement

2. Parental Permission

3. School Permission

4. School District Permission

Student-Researcher Agreement

Agreement between

Ken Ponsford, hereafter called "The Researcher" and
Johnny Doe, hereafter called "The Student",
concerning conducting interviews for the researcher's master's thesis.

We agree to the following:

The researcher will conduct a number of interviews with the student over several weeks in the fall of 1996. The interviews will last from forty-five minutes to one hour.

During the interviews the researcher will ask the student to describe his or her schooling experiences, and from these descriptions, the researcher will generate specific questions aimed at discovering which experiences have had the greatest effect on the student's education. Interviews will be tape-recorded, and following each interview the researcher will compile notes of the interview and transcribe the tapes into printed transcripts for analysis and coding of themes. The results of this initial analysis will be shared with the student to ensure accuracy before beginning the next interview. This process will take place at each interview stage and with the overall analysis. The final analysis will be offered to all interviewees for final verification prior to inclusion in the thesis.

In order to maintain anonymity, the researcher will conduct the interviews in private and use false names in all interviews, transcriptions of the tapes and reporting of the research.

Confidentiality will be maintained at all times. Nothing the student tells the interviewer will be available for use directly by the school, such as in assigning grades or in disciplinary hearings, nor will comments about specific individuals or situations be shared except anonymously in the final research report. The exception to this guarantee will occur should the student disclose incidents of physical or sexual abuse or threaten to harm self or others. By law such disclosures must and will be reported.

The student retains the right to withdraw from the project at any time. At the conclusion of the project, audiotapes of interviews the student will be turned over to that student. The researcher will retain written transcripts, research notes and analysis records, which will be kept in a secure, locked location. The information in the retained records may be used for further research or reporting, subject to the same guarantee of confidentiality as contained in this agreement.

If the student has any questions about this request, he or she is encouraged to contact the researcher at home (699-6457) or at school, or to contact the researcher's supervisor, Dr. Judith Lapadat, at UNBC (250-960-6667). The school district superintendent and school principal have both given permission for the researcher to conduct this research, and may be contacted should the student have any concerns about it at any time.

Signed by the Student:_____. Date: _____.

Signed by the Researcher:_____. Date: _____.

Parental Permission

To the Parents or Guardians of Johnny Doe:

In completion of the thesis for my master's degree in counselling at the University of Northern British Columbia, I am researching students who are academically capable but who nevertheless may be at risk of not completing their education because they have failing or near failing grades. Part of this research involves interviewing a small number of students who are in that position. Johnny has volunteered to take part in these interviews. The purpose of this letter is to inform you of the project and to ask your permission for Johnny to take part.

I plan to conduct interviews of approximately 45 minutes to an hour with each participant four or five times between mid-September and the end of November of 1996. During the interviews I will be asking the students to describe their schooling experiences, and from these descriptions, I will generate specific questions aimed at discovering which of those experiences have had the greatest effect on their education. Interviews will be tape-recorded and following each interview I will compile notes of the interview and transcribe the tapes into printed transcripts for analysis and coding of themes. The results of this initial analysis will be shared with the interviewee concerned to ensure accuracy before we begin the next interview. This process will take place at each interview stage and with the overall analysis. The results of the analyses of all the interviews with all the students will be combined in my master's thesis. This final analysis will be offered to all interviewees for final verification prior to inclusion in the thesis.

In order to ensure anonymity I will conduct the interviews in private using false names in all interviews, transcriptions of the tapes and reporting of the research.

Confidentiality will be maintained at all times. Nothing the students tell me will be available for use directly by the school, such as in assigning grades or in disciplinary hearings, nor will comments about specific individuals or situations be shared except anonymously in the final research report. The exception to this guarantee will occur should the students disclose incidents of physical or sexual abuse or threaten to harm themselves or others. By law, such disclosures must be reported.

The student retains the right to withdraw from the project at any time. At the conclusion of the project, audiotapes of interviews the student will be turned over to that student. The researcher will retain written transcripts, research notes and analysis records, which will be kept in a secure, locked location. The information in the retained records may be used for further research or reporting, subject to the same guarantee of confidentiality as contained in this agreement.

I am attaching a copy of the researcher-student agreement which Johnny will be asked to sign, indicating that he is giving his informed consent to take part.

If you have any questions about this request, please feel free to contact me at home (699-6457) or at school, or to contact my supervisor, Dr. Judith Lapadat, at UNBC (250-960-6667). The school district superintendent and school principal have both given permission for me to conduct this research, and may be contacted should you have any concerns about it at any time.

If you agree that I may interview Johnny for the purposes and as outlined above, could you please detach, complete, and sign the permission statement below and return it to me as soon as possible?

Thank you for your cooperation and assistance in this project.

Yours truly,

Ken R. Ponsford

_____

I, _____, give permission for my child, Johnny Doe to take part in interviews with Ken Ponsford for the purpose of conducting research as described in his letter of September 9, 1996. I have read the agreement between my child and Mr. Ponsford and find its conditions acceptable.

(Signed)_____. Date _____

School Permission

Principal,
XXX School

Dear Principal:

Will you please consider this request for permission to utilize students and student records at your school in research towards my master's degree at the University of Northern British Columbia?

I am researching students who are academically capable but who nevertheless may be at risk of not completing their education because they have failing or near failing grades. Part of this research involves interviewing a small number of students who are in that position. I would like to ask three or four students from grade eleven and twelve at your school to take part in these interviews. I propose to advertise for volunteers, stating criteria which I believe will describe academically capable at-risk students. Should this fail to generate a suitable sample, I propose to solicit participants I would choose based on student records or consultation with the school counsellors.

I plan to conduct interviews of approximately 45 minutes to an hour with each participant four or five times between mid-September and the end of November of 1996. During the interviews I will be asking the students to describe their schooling experiences, and from these descriptions, I will generate specific questions aimed at discovering which of those experiences have had the greatest effect on their education. Interviews will be tape-recorded and following each interview I will compile notes of the interview and transcribe the tapes into printed transcripts for analysis and coding of themes. The results of this initial analysis will be shared with the interviewee concerned to ensure accuracy before we begin the next interview. This process will take place at each interview stage and with the overall analysis. The results of the analyses of all the interviews with all the students will be combined in my master's thesis. This final analysis will be offered to all interviewees for final verification prior to inclusion in the thesis.

In order to ensure anonymity I will conduct the interviews in private and by use pseudonyms in all interviews, transcriptions of the tapes and reporting of the research.

Confidentiality will be maintained at all times. Nothing the students tell me will be available for use directly by the school, such as in assigning grades or in disciplinary hearings, nor will comments about specific individuals or situations be shared except anonymously in the final research report. The exception to this guarantee will occur should the students disclose incidents of physical or sexual abuse or threaten to harm themselves or others.

Students retain the right to withdraw from the project at any time. At the conclusion of the research, audiotapes of each participants's interviews will be turned over to the participant. I will retain the written transcripts, research notes and analysis records, which I will keep in a secure, locked location. The information in the retained records may be used for further research or reporting, subject to the same guarantee of confidentiality as contained

in this agreement.

I am enclosing copies of the parental permission letter and student agreement I plan to use with the participants.

If you have any questions about this request I would be happy to answer them, or you could contact my supervisor, Dr. Judith Lapadat, at UNBC (604-960-6667).

Thank you for your attention to this request .

Yours truly,

Ken R. Ponsford

District Permission

District Superintendent of Schools,

Dear Superintendent:

Will you please consider this request for permission to utilize students and student records at the school in research for my master's thesis at the University of Northern British Columbia?

I am researching students who are academically capable but who nevertheless may be at risk of not completing their education because they have failing or near failing grades. Part of this research involves interviewing a small number of students who are in that position. I would like to
ask three or four students from grade eleven and twelve at the school to take part in these interviews. I propose to advertise for volunteers, stating criteria which I believe will describe academically capable at-risk students. Should this fail to generate a suitable sample, I propose to solicit participants on the basis of student records or through consultation with the school counsellors.

I plan to conduct interviews of approximately forty-five minutes to an hour with each participant four or five times between mid-September and the end of November of 1996. During the interviews I will be asking the students to describe their schooling experiences, and from these descriptions, I will generate specific questions aimed at discovering which of those experiences have had the greatest effect on their education. Interviews will be tape-recorded and following each interview I will compile notes of the interview and transcribe the tapes into printed transcripts for analysis and coding of themes. The results of this initial analysis will be shared with the interviewee concerned to ensure accuracy before we begin the next interview. This process will take place at each interview stage and with the overall analysis. The results of the analyses of all the interviews with all the students will be combined in my master's thesis. This final analysis will be offered to all interviewees for final verification prior to inclusion in the thesis.

In order to ensure anonymity I will conduct the interviews in private and use false names in all interviews, transcriptions of the tapes and reporting of the research.

Confidentiality will be maintained at all times. Nothing the students tell me will be available for use directly by the school, such as in assigning grades or in disciplinary hearings, nor will comments about specific individuals or situations be shared except anonymously in the final research report. The exception to this guarantee will occur should the students disclose incidents of physical or sexual abuse or threaten to harm themselves or others.

Students retain the right to withdraw from the project at any time. At the conclusion of the project, audiotapes of interviews with the student will be turned over to that student. I will retain the written transcripts, research notes and analysis records, which will be kept in a secure, locked location. The information in the retained records may be used for further research or reporting, subject to the same guarantee of confidentiality as contained in this

agreement.

I am enclosing copies of the parental permission letter and student agreement I plan to use with the participants.

If you have any questions about this request I would be happy to provide a copy of my thesis proposal, or you could contact me or my supervisor, Dr. Judith Lapadat, at UNBC (250-960-6667).

Thank you for your attention to this request .

Yours truly,

Ken R. Ponsford