SUPPORTS AND BARRIERS THAT IMPACT ON

HIGH RISK GRADE 12 STUDENTS

by

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PROJECT

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Abstract

Two gender-based focus groups were conducted to delve into the perceived supports and barriers that impact on at-risk grade 12 students. The findings suggest that grade 12 female students experience different barriers to graduation than do the male students. The female group members list the following barriers to graduation: stress, low self-esteem, family and relationship issues, and fear of graduation. The male group members list death of significant other, low skill level, the "party" lifestyle, and poor attitude toward school as barriers to graduation. The issues that support their successful graduation are more mutual. Both groups list self-respect, parental support, and friends as an inducement to graduation. Included is a literature review of the at-risk student, an overview of focus group methodology, an extensive reference list, and added appendices. The project concludes with the recommendation to apply this knowledge to a group format intervention to assist and support these students in their graduation year.

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RATIONALE

A sub-group among the at-risk population in the high school setting can be described as chronically at-risk students. These students struggle academically throughout their high school years, often investing 6 - 7 years rather than the allotted 5 years to obtain the Dogwood diploma.

The population that is of concern here is grade 12 students who have been chronically at-risk of dropping out of school but still remain in the system. In their last year, or even in the last semester of their last year, their graduation status remains uncertain.

These students appear to have characteristics and behaviours in common. All have exhibited a perseverance to stay in school, all have endured a consistent lack of academic success, and all have jeopardized their graduation in the final months.

This project proposes two research questions, introduces available research that pertains to, or relates in some way to the at-risk student, offers an overview of focus group methodology, details a project that interviews two focus groups on the topic of interest, and presents the findings as well as their applications.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What issues explain or contribute to an understanding of the grade 12 at-risk student? In other words, what are their perceived barriers and supports to successful completion of high school? If their stumbling blocks are identified, can they be more easily overcome? If support systems or success patterns are recognized, can more of what works be done by the student and in support of the student? On the other hand, if

all behaviour is purposeful action, perhaps the goal of these students is to delay graduation for reasons that make sense to them. The research questions are:

- What qualities/attitudes or support systems underlie the perseverance exhibited by at-risk grade 12 students?
- What are the perceived barriers or issues that hinder the academic success of at-risk grade 12 students in their graduation year?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much has been written about the at-risk student from varying perspectives. Little has been recorded specifically about the grade 12 student. This section will present an overview of the literature that examines the at-risk student from the points of view of different authors, most of whom discuss the issue in terms of consequences, characteristics of dropouts for identification purposes, and retention through alternate forms of schooling. Some researchers approach the task from the school perspective, others from the student perspective. Still other authors focus on specific issues such as vocational education and retention. One resource by Farrell (1990) will be discussed separately because of its unique approach and relevance. All shed light on the dilemma of the at-risk student.

Historical Background

The first American publicly supported high school was opened in 1821. Two years later, a 43% dropout rate was noted and, by the turn of the century, only 11% of all school-age youth actually attended school (Smith, 1990).

With the introduction of compulsory education, the problem of school dropouts

began. Ruby (1987) tells us that in the p-5, 90% of the male population did not graduate. By 1920, this figure fell to 80% and by the 1950s, the rate dropped below 50%. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Kaplan and Luck (1977) state that 80% of students graduated with their class. The dropout rate remained relatively constant at approximately 20% throughout the 1980s and it has ranged between 20% and 30% in the past decade.

Certainly, from a historical perspective, the attendance figures and graduation statistics of today are higher and the dropout rates are lower. Why, then, is there tremendous concern over the dropout rate? Why the intense 'stay in school' initiatives? The answer is addressed in the section titled Consequences of Dropping Out, but first, who are The Dropouts?

Definition Problems

There is an ambiguity in the terminology used to describe at-risk students that is problematic. It is not unusual to find the following terms used interchangeably: "at-risk," "dropout," "potential dropout," "early school leaver" and "non graduate." For an area of research that has been studied for over a century, it is surprising to note that there is still neither a consensus on the conceptual definition of the behaviour nor a standardized method of operationally defining it. Therefore, the results of different studies may be confusing and misleading or used in a subjective and manipulatory fashion (Ruby, 1987). Using Education U.S.A. (1986) Statistics, Ruby states that the absence of an agreed-upon definition may cause "national dropout figures to vary by as much as 14%" (p. 4). He cites examples to exemplify this point: Dropouts in New York are "9th to 12th graders no longer enrolled in school, including special education students"; in Los Angeles, dropouts include only senior high students, i.e., grades 10 to 12, and the term dropout has been replaced by "early school leavers"; and in Boston,

the dropout is "any student over 16 years who leaves school regardless of grade" (p. 4).

The two major sources of American dropout statistics use different definitions. Ruby (1987) explains that the U.S. Census Bureau defines dropout as "any person who has not graduated and who is not currently enrolled in regular school" (p. 3), and The National Center for Educational Statistics [N.C.E.S.] uses a "comparison of the number of high school graduates with the number of students enrolled as freshman four years previous" (p. 4).

Other definitions are more oblique: The Austin Independent School District Study (1982) defined the term "dropout" as "students who left school and for whom we could find no evidence that they entered another school or school district where they could receive a high school diploma" (p. 3). Alternatively, McKinlay (1989) quotes the Institute for Educational Leadership (1986) to define dropouts as "at-risk children who never complete high school and do not gain either the social or academic skill necessary to function well in this society as workers, parents, or citizens" (p. 9).

Closer to home, Ponsford & Lapadat (1998) report that "the most current definition of the school dropout, and that used in Employment and Immigration Canada's START program (Stay In School Initiative) is a student who was enrolled in school some time during the previous year, but was not in school at the start of the current school year" (p. 2).

Others cite definitions aimed specifically at the at-risk student or potential dropout as opposed to the student who has already left the school system. Martin (1993) describes at-risk students as those who "live on the fringe of school life, ... the misfits who can't or won't function successfully in a normal classroom situation . . ." (p. 38). Yard & Vatterott (1995, p. 44) describe at-risk students as "those students who are not successful in the regular classroom and school environment yet do not qualify for special education services." Fitzpatrick's (1984) definition is very similar to this but he

referred to at-risk students as "Underachieving Average Ability Students" (p. 94). Sapp and Farrell (1994) describe at-risk students as "... one or more years behind his or her 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).

Whatever the definition, one aspect seems to be consistent: Students are leaving school without the basic skills to establish "positive prospects for their future" (McKinlay, 1989, p. 9).

The Extent of the Problem

Because there is no consensus on a universal definition that allows for reliable and valid data collection across districts and over time, only approximations of dropout figures can be cited (Smith, 1990; McKinlay, 1998). These estimates span from a low of 15% to a high of 85% for specific groups and locales. Smith (1990) states that 25% to 30% of students in grades 9 to 12 do not complete their schooling although these numbers vary widely according to location and ethnic group. Rumberger (1986) places the 1984 dropout rate between 15 and 30 percent for 18 and 19 year olds. Barber and McClellan (1987) note dropout rates in the 40 to 50 percent range for urban settings, and the Institute for Educational Leadership (1986) reports "dropout rates as high as 85% for particular ethnic populations" (p. 10).

The above-noted American studies suggest that the average dropout rate is between 20 and 30 percent. Weber (1987) translates this average into 800,000 to 1,000,000 young people per year. McKinlay (1989) also translates percentages to real numbers. Using the Current Population Survey for October 1989, he establishes that "as many as 4.3 million 16 - 24 year olds were neither high school grads nor enrolled in school" (p. 10). It's also noted that some students graduate but "leave undereducated

without constructive plans for the future" (p. 10).

On a more positive note, McKinlay concludes, " . . . potential dropouts do finish high school, others finish later with help from employment and training agencies, and some at-risk students make successful transitions to post secondary institutions or employment" (1989, p. 10).

The British Columbia Ministry of Education (1999) reported on the performance of Aboriginal students as compared to non-Aboriginal students for the province of BC. Their findings tell us that 3.7% of the BC population is Aboriginal and that one in fifteen children make up this population. Ministry findings on completion rates of the 1992 cohort state that 26% of non-Aboriginal students did not graduate as compared to 64% of Aboriginal students (see Figure 1).
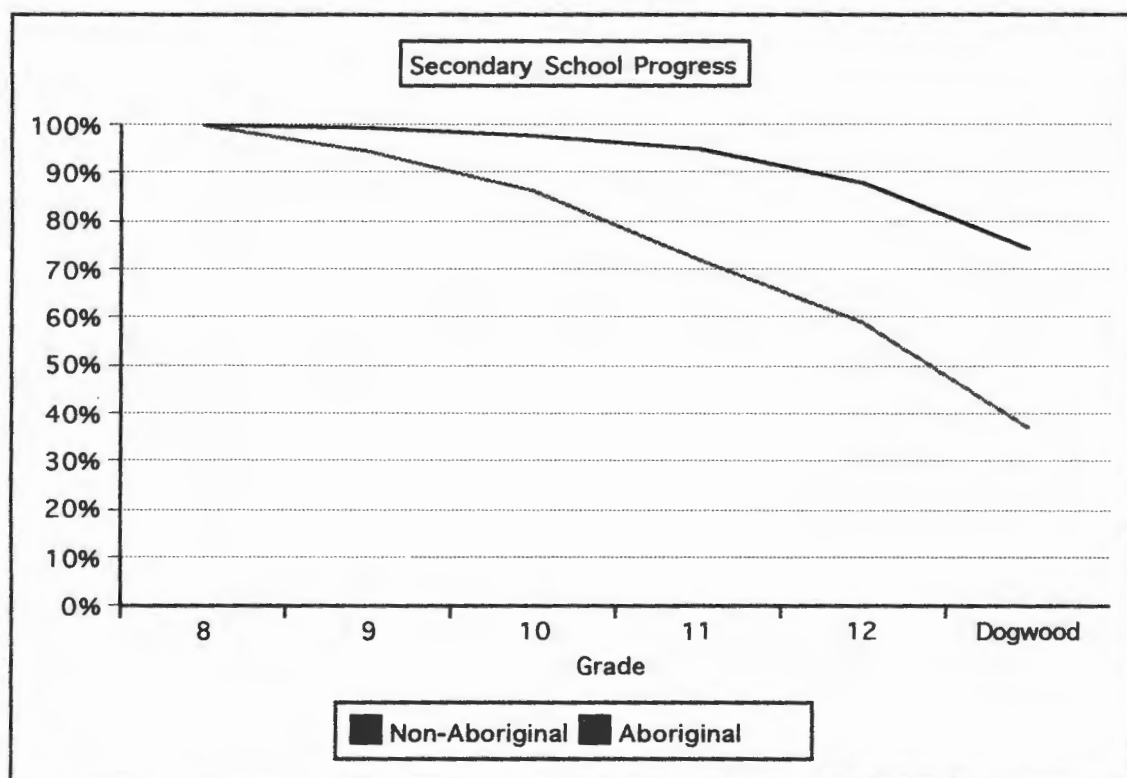
Adapted from BC Ministry of Education Report (1999, p. 6).

Figure 1. School-leaving rate of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

The BC Ministry of Education Report (1999) shows that Aboriginal students start leaving school at a markedly high rate beginning at age 14. In contrast, non-Aboriginal students leave at a relatively low rate and leave later, typically beginning at age 16. It is also noted that a slightly higher percentage of males than females leave school prior to graduating. This difference is greater for non-Aboriginal students than it is for Aboriginal students.

In 1995, Statistics Canada, on behalf of Human Resources Development Canada, conducted the School Leavers Follow-Up Survey. The initial 1991 School Leavers Survey interviewed nearly 10,000 young people aged 18 to 20 to document their characteristics and the circumstances of school leavers. Four years later, the 1995 School Leavers Follow-Up Survey re-interviewed about two-thirds of the same respondents, by then aged 22 to 24, to explore the school-work transitions of young people beyond high school. The survey examined the variety of movement that can occur between education, training and the labour market. Their findings include:

- In 1991, the school leaver rate of 20-year-olds was 18% (many of those aged 18 and 19 were still in school);
- By age 24, only 15% of youth had left high school without graduating;
- One-quarter of the youth who were high school leavers in 1991 had completed high school by 1995;
- Young women aged 22 to 24 in 1995 were more likely than young men of the same age to have completed high school.

Judging by these findings, it appears that the dropout phenomenon is not as severe as it has been presented in the research noted above. In fact, it would seem that many supposed dropouts may only be on a longer time line to graduation.

Consequences of Dropping Out

Why is it important that students complete high school? The adverse personal, economic, and social consequences of dropping out of high school are well documented.

Personal Consequences

Farrell (1990) asserts that there are few jobs available for the at-risk student and those positions for which they do qualify are predominantly minimum wage, service jobs. As society moves away from a manufacturing base to a technological and service producing one, the availability of low-skill work diminishes, leaving only one in six jobs suitable to the dropout. Smith (1990) submits that this trend will continue.

Earnings of high school dropouts cannot compare with those of students who graduate from high school. It is estimated that by age 25, employed dropouts earn only two-thirds of the income of graduates. Future prospects appear even less optimistic: Far West Laboratories (1989) indicate that the earnings of high school dropouts diminish over time, earning as much as 42% less than do their dropout counterparts of 15 years ago (Smith, 1990).

If this future looks dismal for the employed dropout, what of the unemployed? Ruby and Law (1987) tell us that 21% of all dropouts remain unemployed, and the Austin Independent School District Study (1982) reports unemployment rates for dropouts that are at least twice those of graduates.

Although Ekstrom, Goertz, & Rock (1986) found that dropouts did not experience lower self-esteem, these results were not measured over the long term. In fact, Smith (1990) maintains that the long term detrimental effects of dropping out of school override any initial increase in feelings of control over their own lives. Ultimately, dropping out of school "augments the sense of alienation, frustration and

disappointment felt by early school leavers" (p. 11).

Health-related consequences are also documented for the individual. Weber notes that half of the dropouts and the potential dropouts studied by Harris had seriously considered suicide and that half of the group had attempted suicide (1987). There also appears to be a higher incidence of stress-related disorders among dropouts than among graduates as expressed by high blood pressure and increased incidents of heart attack. Smith (1990) suggests that this may be related to not being able to secure or maintain successful employment. Rumberger recognizes the usefulness of studies that reflect on the personal and social consequences of dropping out of school and he encourages researchers to "once again examine this large body of literature to try to ascertain (more recent) social consequences of dropping out" (1986, p. 12).

Economic Consequences

A pattern of broken, unskilled work history takes its toll on both the individual and on society. The cost to American society in lost revenues from welfare, unemployment, and reduced tax revenues is in the billions of dollars. Citing the 1985 Digest of Educational Statistics, Ruby and Law (1987) calculate the loss to be in the neighbourhood of 75 billion dollars. Smith (1990) refines these numbers by suggesting that "a conservative estimate of the costs of the dropout problem nationwide to be $20 million per school class cohort. Depending upon assumptions made about future earnings and loss projections, the estimates rise to $200 billion for each class and $200,000 per dropout" (1987, p. 11).

Legal Consequences

The staggering financial losses aside, the costs in human suffering and overall quality of life are additional consequences of dropping out. As well, a high incidence of

crime and imprisonment is also associated with not completing high school. Smith (1990) relates that dropouts are "6 to 10 times more likely to be involved in criminal acts than are those who are enrolled in school" (p. 11). He reports that a disproportionate number of dropouts end up in juvenile correctional facilities. Weber (1987) attaches a numerical value to this: Over 80% of inmates in state prisons are school dropouts.

Educational Consequences

The educational consequences seem to be self-perpetuating. Many dropouts come from families where a parent dropped out of school and is underemployed. School is either not valued, or if it is, the related discipline problems of truancy, alcohol and drug abuse, and teenage pregnancy obstruct the positive behaviours necessary to succeed in school. The school dropout compounds the problem of functional illiteracy. The literacy skills of dropouts are significantly lower than are those of graduates (Weber, 1987). Ekstrom et al. also noted that "staying in school positively impacts one's gains in achievement" and that "females, and to a lesser extent, minorities, are relatively 'bigger losers' when they drop out of school as they fall further behind in the language development areas of vocabulary, reading, and writing when they leave school early" (1986, p. 370).

The Austin Independent School District Study (1982, p. 15) provides an apt conclusion to the consequences of dropping out of school:

> The low level of competence in basic skills possessed by the average dropout coupled with the expectation of a high level of unemployment and a low level of income presents the picture of an individual ill-prepared to meet the challenges of our increasingly complex society, an individual disposed to failure and frustration. The prospect from the point of view of the dropout is dismal.

Purpose of Research

The concern about the dropout problem has increased. In 1986, Rumberger noted that more research had appeared on the problem in the last two years than perhaps the previous fifteen. Nevertheless, the concern is as valid today as it was then. The existence of various stay-in-school programs and alternate forms of education being offered as incentives to potential dropouts to remain in school or to return to school speak to this concern.

Various reasons to determine a reliable dropout profile have been presented:

• The incidence of dropout rates has remained relatively stable during the 1970s and 1980s but recent years have seen an increase, especially for some groups (Rumberger, 1986);

• As minority populations are attending schools in greater numbers, it is probable that this alone could drive up dropout rates (Rumberger);

• Many states have passed legislation to raise academic course requirements for high school graduation. This may prove to be too much for those at-risk students with a tenuous commitment to school (Rumberger);

• The educational requirements of the workforce have increased as new technologies have changed the composition of the workplace. High school dropouts will be more disadvantaged in the future job market than they have been in the past (National Academy of Sciences, 1984);

• A political move to initiate a series of "indicators" to monitor the nation's schools will serve to highlight each school's completion rate. This has prompted renewed interest in the problems of operationally defining and measuring dropout behaviour, and reducing its incidence (Rumberger);

• Programs developed for at-risk students must be able to identify those who will be served (Ekstrom et al., 1986; McKinlay, 1989; Rumberger);

• Identification of factors may suggest the particular types of intervention most likely to succeed (Ekstrom et al.; McKinlay, 1989; Rumberger);

• A reliable assessment of dropout rates is a prerequisite to the appropriation of funds and resources to address the problem (Ekstrom et al.).

Characteristics of the At-Risk Student

If no consensus is apparent in definition and methodology, at least there is general agreement on the identifying characteristics of the dropout. Numerous research studies and reports have examined the characteristics and factors that impinge on being at-risk of dropping out (e.g., Austin Independent School District, 1982; Britt, 1995; Diem, 1989; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; McKinlay, 1989; Ruby & Law, 1987; Rumberger, 1986; Smith & Ament, 1990). McKinlay (1989) wisely presents two cautions when considering these factors. The first caution is not to interpret factors related to dropping out as causes, and the second is that no one factor or combination of factors clearly leads a student to drop out of school. Factors merely place a student at-risk of dropping out. One student may display many of the identifying characteristics and complete high school while another with few of the traits, does not.

The next section will delineate these factors by the following categories: Demographic Factors, Family Background, Educational and School-Related Factors, Out-of-School Behaviours, Personal and Social Psychological Factors, Peer Group Influences and Self-Report Factors. All references are from the authors listed above except where noted. Appendix A lists the salient characteristics in point form.

Demographic and Background Factors

Low socioeconomic status, being a member of a minority group, and attending a public, urban school are strong indicators that a student will be at risk of dropping out

(Ekstrom, Goertz, & Rock, 1986; Smith & Ament, 1990). Male students are more likely to be early school leavers than are females (Ekstrom et al., 1986; Martin, D. 1981; Rumberger, 1986).

It is argued that more attention should be paid to the interaction of variables. For example, McKinlay states that when socioeconomic status is held constant, Hispanics and Black Americans are no more likely to drop out than are white youth (1989).

Family Background

All of the authors listed above agree on the following family factors as impacting on the potential dropout: Non-completers are likely to be from a single parent home, typically with mom working. There is low educational and occupational attainment of parents, and a corresponding low family income. Sometimes this leads to students feeling that they want or have to work to help out their families. A language other than English may be spoken in the home. Learning materials and opportunities are scarce with minimal parental supervision of students' activities. Infrequent discussions with parents regarding their child's future educational or employment plans are reported. Overall, little family encouragement for staying in school is expressed.

Educational and School-Related Factors

A commonality of school-related factors emerged from the research, the most common being that at-risk students have a history of failure. Their lack of academic preparation, poor basic skills in reading and math, and lower intelligence scores perpetuate their poor academic achievement. It is no wonder that potential dropouts exhibit a lack of interest in school and school work and express a negative attitude toward the entire school environment and learning in general. They experience school as boredom. Behaviour problems such as truancy, absenteeism, tardiness, and

suspensions for inappropriate behaviour surface. It is probable that these students have been retained in one or more grades and may have some form of handicap or limiting condition. Many at-risk students feel alienated from school life, not participating in extracurricular activities or athletics.

Potential dropouts have lower levels of educational and employment aspirations than do completers. Also, potential dropouts infrequently avail themselves for discussions with teachers and counsellors regarding future educational and/or employment plans. They have little knowledge of the labour market and what knowledge they do have may be unrealistic.

The educational expectations of at-risk youth are lower than are those of students who graduate. Ekstrom, Goertz, & Rock discovered that future dropouts "expected to attain less education than did stayers" (1986, p. 362). The stayers projected 2 - 4 years of college whereas the dropouts thought they would complete high school and take some junior college training. The research of Diem (1989) reads like a self-fulfilling prophesy. He found that at-risk students believe that they are not likely to reach their educational goals, are likely to drop out before completing high school, and are not likely to get the kind of jobs they want.

Sexton (1985) suggests that schools look at the institutional influence on the at-risk student. His 1985 study shows that when students moved from a high dropout school to a low dropout school, the retention rate increased. Rumberger (1986) questions whether poor facilities and inadequate staffing are more detrimental to the potential dropout's performance than to the performance of those not at risk of dropping out.

Out-of-School Behaviours

The at-risk student is not succeeding at school and finds little support or

encouragement at home. He or she is spending more time 'hanging out" with friends and is likely abusing alcohol and drugs (Britt, 1995; Farrell, 1990). Reference to alcohol and drug use as a factor in the dropout equation is a more recent phenomenon as noted by the publishing dates. These students are less likely to discuss their experiences with their parents. They also spend less time reading and doing homework. If these students are holding down a part-time job, they work more hours per week than do non-at-risk youth and they receive a higher hourly wage. The job is perceived as more important and more enjoyable than is school.

Personal and Social Psychological Factors

Research is consistent in profiling potential dropouts who have poor attitudes toward school, low occupational aspirations, low levels of self-esteem, low social and career maturity, and a more externalized sense of control, indicating that they feel a lesser sense of control over their lives than do non-dropouts. Females are likely to believe that a woman's place is in the home or that the man should be the major wage earner. Wehlage & Rutter (1986) state that half of all female dropouts leave due to pregnancy and/or marriage. Dropouts will stay home to care for their child(ren) or for health-related problems. It is ironic that at-risk youth are more likely to value money as they have neither internalized a strong sense of meeting responsibilities and social norms nor have they internalized a belief in the value and importance of education.

Peer Group Influence

"Peer group influence has received little attention in the dropout literature" but Rumberger goes on to say that "many dropouts have friends who are dropouts" (1986, p. 9). The Austin Independent School District Study has reported that "pressure from friends and/or siblings" (1982, p. 10) instigated leaving school. Ekstrom, Goertz, &

Rock (1986) report that the largest difference between dropouts and completers is that completers have plans to attend college whereas at-risk students struggle to graduate from high school. Diem's (1989) research of self-reported reasons for dropping out elicit comments based on negative peer pressure: 43% of respondents said, "My group gets into trouble a lot" and 40% acknowledged that "I chose friends who aren't afraid to have fun, even if its breaking the law" (p. 12).

Self-Report Factors

It would seem appropriate to give voice to the students themselves. Ekstrom, Goertz, & Rock (1986) used the National Center for Education's High School and Beyond (HS&B) database to investigate student responses on dropping out of school. This database was gleaned from a national probability sample of approximately 30,000 students who attended about 1000 public and private schools. Dropouts, those who did not complete high school, were compared with stayers, those who stayed in school. Ekstrom et al.'s results (see Table 1) outline eight major self-reported reasons for dropping out of school (1986, p. 363).

Table 1

Self-Report Reasons for Dropping Out of School

Reason	Total %	Male %	Female %
Did not like school	33	35	31
Poor grades	33	36	30
Offered job & chose work	19	27	11
Getting married	18	7	31
Could not get along with teachers	15	21	9
Had to help support family	11	14	8
Pregnancy	11	----	23
Expelled or suspended	10	13	5

Note.   n = 30000 high school sophomores.

The two most common reasons for leaving school are not liking school and poor grades. Ekstrom et al. interpret the data as suggesting that "about one-third of all dropouts leave high school because they do not achieve in school and/or because they are alienated from school" (1986, p. 364).

Diem (1989) also gave self-report surveys to fifty identified at-risk students from each of the five senior high schools within their school district. The purpose was to elicit the students' perceptions of school problems and needs, parental relationships, and personal views. The data (see Table 2) are based on 240 responses from students in grades 9 to 11.

Table 2

Self-Report Reasons for Dropping Out of School

Did not like school	43 %
The work is too hard	34 %
Never participated in extracurricular activities	62 %
Never attended any school activities	33 %
Reprimanded for breaking school rules	80 %
Parents do not make me finish homework	62 %

Note. n = 240 students in grades 9 -11.

The two studies highlight different factors. Ekstrom et al.'s study suggests that not liking school and poor grades are the two most common reasons for dropping out of school. Diem, on the other hand, suggests being reprimanded for breaking school rules is the major reason for dropping out followed by parents not monitoring homework completion and never participating in school activities. In either case, one might assume that lack of school success and alienation are major factors that impact on dropping out.

In conclusion, the research on why students leave school prematurely suggests a complex and diversified problem that spans academic, behavioural, economic, and personal factors.

Multiple Selves Approach to At-Risk Students

Edwin Farrell (1990) employed a unique approach to hearing and understanding the voices of at-risk secondary students: He hired and taught at-risk students to work in collaboration with him. Farrell's collaborators tape-recorded dialogues with other at-risk

students and then helped the author highlight and analyze the data. This original technique yielded a particularly insightful look at how at-risk students see themselves.

His book is about being in the wrong place (school) at the wrong time (adolescence). The teenage years are a critical time when "the adolescent is trying to create a particular sense of self" (p. 3). But Farrell proposes many selves: self-in-family, sexual self, self-as-loyal-friend, self-in-peer-group, self-as-student, sometimes self-as-parent, and self-as-my-work. Individuals strive to integrate their multiple selves into an identity that makes their lives meaningful. If these selves are weighted in such a way as to render certain social institutions such as school, or values such as education, meaningless, then students are in the wrong place at the wrong time. For example, if the self-in-peer-group and the sexual self are valued far above self-as-student and self-as-my-work, then education and future career aspirations do not hold meaning for these students at this time.

The Self-in-Family

The teenage years generally see an increase in tensions in the home as adolescents grapple with independence and parental pressure to conform. This is common in the at-risk culture as well. In fact, all respondents complained of parental interference with their independence and life style.

Parents appear to be powerless. Physical punishment is not an option, grounding is defied, and withholding of allowances, cars, trips, etc., is not effective if there is little to withhold. The only course of action left to the parent is the verbal one: arguing, lecturing, or as the students phrase it, giving "the speech", although this is largely ineffective. Not uncommon responses to family discipline are, "The speech is just like a recording, you know," and "It's still not going to stop me from doing it" (p. 62). Boys, more than girls, were concerned about being kicked out of the house. Perhaps

parents are more reluctant to evict their daughters. In any case, girls are more apt to assert that their parents have no control over them, whereas males realize that continuation in school is a prerequisite to living at home and that it would be difficult to support themselves.

Parents appear to want the best for their children, thus all the lecturing and speeches. Knowing their own powerlessness over their children, they turn to the school for help. Can the school fix their child?

For the most part, the data do not support the position that adolescents drop out of school because of family friction. However distasteful this friction is, school is where their peer connections are available. Adolescents are at risk of having a fight at home, and a few are at risk of losing the roof over their heads. They are not at risk with their friends, however.

The Sexual Self

The emergence of sexual desires during adolescence is what most differentiates this stage of development from that of childhood. These desires may be very intense and override all other competing selves. As a primary self, the sexual self will create conflict with the self-as family, the career self, the self-as-peer and the self-as-student. Even the self-as-loyal-friend may be on fragile ground. Farrell quotes Harry Stack Sullivan (1953) and his reference to "the lust dynamism" as the "primary force the adolescent has to deal with" (p. 36). Farrell's own research claims many more references to sex than to vocational commitment from the at-risk group.

The high school has developed sex education courses which focus on the biological function of sex, the "how to" of contraceptives, and the realities of sexually transmitted diseases with a current emphasis on AIDS. What is not discussed are relationship issues and the prominent place sexuality and desire occupy in the lives of

adolescents.

When Farrell analyzed his data, he noted distinct differences in gender responses. At-risk males rarely used the phrase "girlfriend" and when they did, it was in the plural usage and usually in a disrespectful and demeaning manner. None of those interviewed were in a mutually-exclusive relationship and transient alliances often existed with younger (grade 8) students. Generally, a negative attitude toward contraceptives is expressed, more so with the most sexually active. There seems to be a lack of understanding as to what a healthy relationship looks like. This makes sense in the light of males feeling pressured to have sex by the attitudes of their peers as well as by their own physical urges.

Although Farrell was not able to utilize a female collaborator, some information surfaced. Girls view relationships differently than boys. They consistently referred to their "boyfriends" and attached more meaning to the relationship than did their male counterparts. They knew what they wanted in a relationship: attention, caring, and understanding. They did not denigrate the opposite sex.

Successful students are able to channel their sexual urges and subordinate them when necessary to activities that will benefit them in later life. Farrell found that when at-risk students were paired with a college mentor, they adopted a more sexually responsible attitude as well. "When people are in the wrong place at the wrong time, however, when they have no real reason to be in high school, their sexual selves win by default. If they see no link between school and a career, they might choose only to engage in behaviours that lead to immediate gratification" (Farrell, p. 43).

Self -as-Loyal- Friend

Self-as-loyal-friend emerged as "the most positive, desirable behaviour that the people in our dialogues exhibited" (p. 43). It often takes precedence over other selves.

Farrell correlates this self with Kolberg's (1981) six stage theory of moral development wherein each stage represents a more advanced level of moral reasoning. It is not the choices themselves that are examined, but rather the reasoning behind the choices. Kolberg's six stages of moral reasoning are presented along a continuum of pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional:

Pre-Conventional Reasoning

    Stage 1: Rewards and Punishments. Decisions in this stage are based on consequences.

    Stage 2: Self-Interest. People are concerned with their own needs.

Conventional Reasoning

    Stage 3: Shared Values and Personal Image.

    Although these stages are not age-related, this stage often surfaces during adolescence. At this level of reasoning, behaviour is driven by how others will perceive you. The student who completes his homework because good students do their homework is operating on the same level as the student who doesn't do her homework because her peers do not value such activity.

    Stage 4: Societal Values.

    At this stage, the person is aware of the larger societal structure and although adherence to rules may be distasteful, they are followed for the greater good.

Post-Conventional Reasoning

    Stage 5 : Reasoning at this level appeals to universal principles. Not a lot of
    Stage 6: people operate on these levels.

Farrell found no evidence of moral reasoning at the post-conventional level or even at stage 4, the societal level. If students do not perceive that there is a place for them in conventional society, it is unlikely that these values will be expressed. The at-risk student in Farrell's study operates mainly in stages 2 and 3. Stage 3 was expressed through phrases such as, "If you fall down, I'll pick you up," and "You know, we all stick together" (p. 48). Second stage development was exhibited when a collaborator suggests that it is good to have friends because they may help you.

Farrell feels that if these at-risk youth are to attain higher levels of moral reasoning, they will first have to do it in terms of friendship as this appears to be a lot more meaningful to this group than do societal values.

Self-in-Peer Group

The supremacy of peer group influence, according to some respondents, is a junior high school phenomenon, a phase that no longer applies to them. It is manifested in the devaluing of both school (not cool to stay in and complete homework) and family (everyone argues with parents).

It is very much apparent that peer group pressure still exerts a great amount of influence in their lives as evidenced in their dress code, language, and mannerisms. It appears that how they are perceived by their peers continues to be a major influence on their behaviour and may be one of the few sources of positive reinforcement they get.

Farrell examines the self-in-peer-group from the perspective of an existing subculture which competes with the larger culture of the school and society, a subculture that runs deeper than the obvious style of running shoes and jeans. Defining culture/subculture as "the way of life of a society" that is "transmitted by learning" (p. 53), the culture must be adaptive rather than maladaptive--it must serve a purpose that is meaningful to the participants and which acts as a survival mechanism. Farrell

submits that such a subculture exists, one that is not based on racial, ethnic, or geographical factors. Three generic traits within his at-risk population present themselves: (i) they all have literacy skills, (ii) their values are formed by and with peers, and (iii) they are all in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The larger culture of the educational system does not provide the support and sense of belongingness that this at-risk group is seeking. These youth find their niche in their peer group--in hanging out. This may be maladaptive in the long run, but it serves a purpose by giving meaning to the present. There is no economic future in this subculture but, on the positive side, it is not the culture of the streets, a culture that is not generally in favour with these students. Still, if the peer-self continues to predominate, it will be maladaptive. For example, if cutting classes becomes the norm, a 17 year old may still be struggling with grade 9 courses and consequently may not perceive school as an option.

As the respondents got older, many began to integrate their selves-as-loyal-friend with their peer-selves. This small step at least indicates an awareness that peers do not always serve you well.

Self-as-Parent

Teenage motherhood undoubtably forces the self-as-parent to dominance. Many adolescent mothers drop out of school but one young mother who chose to remain put it this way, "My son's going to be somebody and his mother's going to be somebody, too" (p. 77). Motherhood gave this particular young lady a purpose to remain in school.

In the teen pregnancy literature, Farrell states that the two greatest contributing factors are poverty and poor school performance. He maintains that race is not a significant factor. Whatever the probable causes, teen moms are unable to support themselves and without further education to acquire marketable skills, will not be able to

do so in the future. With no foreseeable future, many adolescent mothers bear a second child within three years. It would appear imperative to provide day care facilities as one means of encouraging these young people to stay in school.

Fathers are not usually in the picture nor are they welcomed. The young mother quoted above continues with, "He could die today or tomorrow, but I don't care. He just lived in the drug life" (p. 84). Young fathers are not in a position to support themselves let alone a family, either financially or emotionally. If they are ever to become providers in the future, it is imperative that they, too, remain in school.

Are these young mothers in the right place at the wrong time? Farrell proposes a reordering of life events. The ideal middle class life span begins with schooling, proceeds to career establishment followed by marriage and then children. For the at-risk student/mother, the order might look like this: schooling, children, schooling, career establishment, marriage, and then perhaps more children. In fact, this segment of the population may already be accommodated as evidenced by the rise in adult education and by the advancing age of the college student. The high school mom may be motivated to learn but no longer fits the regular student profile. She may be in the wrong place at the right time to integrate her student self with her self-as-parent.

Self-as-Student

A profile of the ideal high school student includes the following characteristics. The student (i) has a fully developed student self integrated with the other selves, (ii) arrives to class on time and prepared to work, (iii) has good attendance, (iv) completes homework, and (v) participates in extracurricular activities. The ideal students' lives revolve around school and school activities. They are in the right place at the right time.

For the at-risk student, the picture is very different. "By the time many respondents got to high school, they had enough academic handicaps and been

retained in grade enough times to make graduation appear impossible" (p. 66). From an early age, failure has been part of their school experience. Farrell argues that a critical reason for the stunted development of the school self can be found in the writings of Eric Erikson. "If a child does not experience work completion, if she despairs of her tools and skills, if she loses status among her tool partners, she develops a sense of inadequacy or inferiority" (p. 101). Farrell's students do not believe they have the tools to succeed in school. He puts forth the argument that work completion is not emphasized because of the erroneous assumption that insisting on completion of work from a slow working or struggling student will damage that child's self-esteem. Partial credit for partial work is the rule of the enlightened teacher rather than allowing a student to experience a sense of true accomplishment from a job well done. Many of the respondents had not completed an assignment in years and phrases such as "good enough" or "close enough" (p. 102) are common. To be in the right place at the right time "involves the creation of valued products" (p. 104).

Students who are used to failure often adopt strategies to save face. They disparage school, teachers, and successful students. They attempt to avoid failure by refusing to participate in a system that has caused embarrassment and frustration for many years. Because these students do not want to fail in life, they dissociate their school life from future aspirations in the world of work. If they did not do this, all would be hopeless. Thus, the school self and the career self are in conflict.

When the collaborators asked their peers about their dissatisfaction with school, they received the following responses: (i) teachers don't care, (ii) teachers care too much, (iii) severe laziness, (iv) cutting classes, (iv) the system is too lenient, and (v) the system is too restrictive. They continue to attend because school is where their peers are accessible. Respondents were asked what prevented them from becoming better students, i.e., what stopped the growth of their student self? In a word, the usual

response was "boredom."

The state of being bored was so prevailing in their dialogues, that Farrell devoted an unintended chapter to this. Boredom is a reality that is socially constructed and promoted among the respondents of Farrell's at-risk population. He sees it as one of the steps that leads to dropping out. A drop out continuum for these youth is as follows:

- A lack of student-teacher bonding is evidenced;

- A lack of academic success is noted;

- Peer bonding takes precedence over the student self;

- Peer disparagement of school is expressed;

- Boredom is exemplified as the first absenting behaviour, i.e., a passive, internal dropping out;

- To release the pressure of failure, classes are skipped;

- Absenteeism--usually the most reliable predictor of who will drop out-- escalates;

- Finally, dropping out of school is the inevitable result.

Self-as-my-Work: The Career Self

Farrell's at-risk population did not speak of careers--they referred to jobs. Their belief is that grade 12 graduation status will lead to success, i.e., a job. Their thinking is limited, with no concept of the larger socioeconomic picture or of the competitiveness in the job market. They do not see that to qualify for even an entry level position, that literacy skills, work habits, and attitudes, such as promptness or attendance, are prerequisites for entry into the job market. At-risk students have fewer of these qualities than do other students.

For the most part, Farrell's students avoided the question of careers, responding to queries regarding the future with statements such as, "Just live" or "You know, now.

That's my time. Maybe in the future I'll think about it" and "I'm gonna go where life takes me" (Farrell, 1990, p. 15). When career plans were voiced, they were totally unrealistic, emphasizing their lack of knowledge of prerequisites and skills necessary for job entry, of available post-secondary training, of existing role models in their lives on which to base information on that field of work, and no idea of networking skills in order to gain essential information.

For the at-risk student, the reality of the job market dictates: (i) that there are few jobs available for them, and if available, they are minimum-wage service jobs, (ii) that these students have few skills and little knowledge to sell on the market, and (iii) that they have little access to whatever job network there is.

Farrell (1990) compared his at-risk population to college-bound students of a similar socioeconomic and ethnic background. The college-bound students identified with both college and career. Furthermore, they knew their skills and abilities and something about the job market. They also had very specific ideas about their future. There was a connection between school and career that was absent in the at-risk population. Their identity as "self-as-student and self-as-my-work were well developed for them" (Farrell, p. 23).

Peer influence on work attitudes is also a factor. If the primary self is a peer self and the peer group does not value the self-as-student or the career self, a lack of positive role modelling is evident. As peer groups for at-risk students also support the sexual self, conflict seems imminent: conflict with the self-as-student, self-in-family, and the career self.

Farrell concludes that "the student self and the career self--the two most promising selves and the selves that society values for adolescents--are the least developed in (the at-risk student)" (p. 27). He proposes that it is the career self that has the promise of leading these young people out of the wrong place or transforming some

part of that place into the right place.

Self-as-Substance-User

Farrell (1990) added the user-self after all the data had been collected because it was a common theme among the male respondents. The collaborators stated that all the male respondents have used drugs at some time, the most common drugs being marijuana, pills, and most notably, cocaine and crack. The high of drugs can easily override all other considerations. There seems to be no fear of addiction, no fear of physically or mentally harming the self, and no fear of legal consequences. The at-risk student does not present the support systems of more integrated students and therefore may be more susceptible to the euphoric lure of the drug culture which includes cars, money, and access to sex.

The self-as-user can become the primary self of the adolescent, integrating the sexual, peer and career (drug dealing) selves within the life style. The user is prohibited from integrating all of the selves and, at the same time, becomes the wrong kind of role model for others.

Conclusion

The student voices in the dialogues have not been successful in integrating all the selves: self-as-my-work, sexual self, self-as-loyal friend, self-in-peer-group, self-in-family, self-as-parent, and self-as-student. They struggle with the pressures exerted by these competing selves, pressured by the attitudes of peers and the demands of their impulses, the strictures of their families, and their own anxieties about their futures.

They are caught in a war between their own meaning systems and the meaning system of the school and the greater community. To achieve successful integration at this time in their lives, they must see a connection between school and their career

aspirations for the future, or at least, with the world of work. If this does not happen, these students will continue to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Solutions

Kaplan & Luck (1977) examined dropout programs which prevailed in the 1950s through to the 1970s. The goal at that time was to reduce the number of early school leavers by improving attendance and academics--the two major factors associated with the dropout problem. To accomplish their goal, a number of strategies were initiated:

- Attendance personnel were increased;
- Parental contact was increased;
- Remedial and vocational elements were incorporated into the curriculum;
- Community communication and relations were improved;
- Guidance and counselling services were expanded;
- Re-entry programs were established for those already withdrawn.

Kaplan & Luck (1977) state that the results were minimal, with no significant lasting results. They attributed the lack of success to the fact that these programs were crisis management programs which did nothing to address the underlying causes which influence students to drop out.

Today, alternative programs and schools for at-risk students continue to flourish and still encompass many of the previously-mentioned recommendations. More recent suggestions include separating potential dropouts from other students, instigating a vocational education component, offering off-campus learning with the possibility of paid employment, and maintaining a low student-teacher ratio (Hamilton, 1986).

In contrast, Britt (1995) criticizes the fact that alternate programs are not completely integrated into the mainstream curriculum and that remedial instruction takes precedence over the emotional and social needs of the student. She would also like

more discussion on pregnancy and drugs, issues that are appearing more frequently in the dropout literature. Britt also promotes maintaining high expectations for at-risk youth and teaching parental responsibility to pregnant teens.

Ekstrom et al. (1986) propose three major types of programs at the high school level to alleviate the problem: (i) programs to help the pregnant teenager remain in school, (ii) work/study programs to help youth who are experiencing economic difficulties, and (iii) remedial programs for those students who perform poorly.

Diem (1989) promotes staff training in personal and group counselling skills as well as in-service workshops to assist personnel to develop a better understanding of the at-risk student. He feels that for any program to be successful, the parent, as well as the student, must have a personal stake in the program to create a "renewed commitment to school" (p. 13).

These solutions, although altruistic, appear somewhat vague. More substantial recommendations are proposed in four specific areas: career education, vocational education, early intervention and in the development of a causal model.

Career Education

It is not uncommon for potential dropouts to express a sense of alienation from school, from education, learning in general, and from the future world of careers. McKinlay (1989) contends that a sense of connectedness to school and work can be developed through the career planning process, a process that often leads to commitment and follow-through.

In 1987, the Career Information System (CIS) Project for At-Risk Youth undertook a large scale survey of school and agency sites in eleven states. Benefits expressed were both motivational and developmental. Forty percent of site respondents said it "gives them hope" (McKinlay, 1989, p.18) while 33% percent

professed the development of realistic goals. A site coordinator stated it this way, "It helps them dream realistic dreams" (p. 18). Knowledge of career options is pertinent to all students, but to those youth who are least motivated with no career plans for the future, career information and planning may be the one stimulus to make school meaningful. McKinlay asserts that, "Career information, when delivered in personally relevant forms, has a credibility with at-risk youth that many educational programs do not" (p. 26). Weber also encourages career exploration and education. He states that career education "has the potential for helping dropout-prone students more explicitly define their personal, school-related, and occupational goals and objectives" (1987, p. 25).

Vocational Education

Arguments have been made for the inclusion of vocational education as a means of decreasing the dropout rate. In 1986, using the High School and Beyond database, Weber analyzed a sample of 2000 dropouts and 3000 graduates with similar characteristics. As a consequence of that study, Weber & Sechler (1988) suggest that participation in vocational education is positively correlated with high school retention; although, Mertins, Seitz, & Cox (1982) argue that the sample population is too small to conclude that vocational education *in and of itself* significantly reduces the probability of dropping out of high school". The research does, however, clearly suggest that when vocational education and related work experiences are coupled with other critical components, dropout prevention programs can be effective.

Smith & Ament (1990) concur that a positive relationship exists between involvement in an occupational curriculum and retention of the at-risk student. They suggest that the components inherent in an occupational curriculum that retain at-risk youth are teacher control of the curriculum, small class size, individualization,

student recognition, external ties, and work experience.

Still, Weber & Sechler (1988) found that, for the most part, the vocational student does not participate in the mainstream of vocational programs nor do they invest much time planning their high school programs.

The Development of a Causal Model

"A comprehensive, causal model of the dropout process is needed" (Rumberger, 1986, p. 10). Rumberger, recognizing this need, wants the model to identify the "full range of proximal and distal influences, the interrelationships among them, and their long-term cumulative effects" (p. 10). With these three conditions met, the model would then help: (i) identify dropouts at an early age when effective interventions could be designed and implemented; (ii) identify the kinds of educational interventions, both academic and psychological, that could be most effective; and (iii) identify the mix of both educational and social interventions that could be effective in helping potential and actual dropouts.

Ruby & Law (1987) present a developmental profile that recognizes that dropping out is not an isolated event but a "chronic developmental process" (p. 11). This profile perceives normal academic growth up to grade 6. After grade 6, negative academic and behavioural changes that characterize the dropout emerge: lower standardized test scores, absenteeism, and behaviour problems. Ruby and Law suggest that these changes are rooted in the development of student attitudes toward school. The majority of dropouts come from homes lacking in parental support and encouragement for school success--attitudes that are assimilated by the student and remain covert until adolescence. The school system then responds with punishments that further reinforce an already existing negative attitude and hastens the student's withdrawal from the school. The authors propose early intervention strategies that are

best designed as preventative measures, emphasizing that the longer strategies are left unattended, the less effective the measures will be.

In conclusion, the development of a model that addresses the underlying causes which prompt at-risk behaviour would seem preferable to coping with the negative behavioural symptoms.

Early Intervention

The problem of prematurely leaving high school uneducated and unprepared for the future has been well documented. The immediate solution has been to fix the problem where it is most visible--at the high school level--with remedial math and reading, vocational programming, personal and career counselling, or separate alternate schools and programs with small teacher-student ratios.

Most researchers are very clear regarding the importance of early intervention. Ekstrom et al. (1986) state, "It is also important to identify potential dropouts prior to the high school years and to begin interventions when the first behavioural signs are noted" (p. 371). McKinlay (1989) notes that, "Early identification has been noted as the primary factor in successful programs (p. 12). Britt (1995) agrees that, ". . . attention must be focused on the early primary grades with an emphasis on early intervention of at-risk students" (p. 7) and, "A greater effort must be exerted to reach them in their early years" (p. 13).

The use of school records as an identifier of at-risk students has been researched. Gresham, Mink, Ward, MacMillan, & Swanson (1994) studied 137 students in grades 2 to 4 who were stratified by ethnicity from five school districts. Using school records to determine at-risk status for achievement and behavioural difficulties, the investigation showed that primary school records reliably discriminate at-risk from not at-risk students. They found that students at-risk for achievement difficulties showed a

distinct profile of lower functioning in academic achievement, verbal and performance IQ, and social skills. It is further noted that students at-risk for disruption had higher scores for conduct problems, hyperactivity, and critical events and lower scores on academic engaged time and performance IQ.

Gersham et al. (1994) support Lloyd (1974) by emphasizing the early development of at-risk behaviours. Lloyd indicates that dropout status could be accurately predicted on the sole basis of information available in sixth-grade school records. Using the same type of data on third-graders, Lloyd (1978) correctly predicted 79% of graduates and 67% of dropouts in high school.

This knowledge is not new. Fitzsimmons, Cheever, Leonard, & Macunovich in their 1969 study of teacher grades as predictors of later dropouts reported that, "It has long been recognized that one characteristic of the high school dropout is a history of poor performance, probably beginning early in elementary school" (p. 135). Nearly 30 years later, in his recommendation for future research, Rumberger (1987) again pointed out the paucity of studies on early identification, believing that prevention, rather than remediation, is needed.

Barrington & Hendricks (1981) conducted a study of 651 students' permanent records entering two high schools to classify students as dropouts, graduates, nongraduates returning for a 5th year, and nongraduates who did not return. They concluded that dropouts can be identified by the third grade with 70% accuracy and with 90% accuracy by the ninth grade.

Recommendations from these studies are consistent in proposing that dropout prevention programs should focus on the elementary school and should involve the parents of at-risk students. It is also suggested that differentiated instruction appropriate to a student's ability and level of academic achievement is needed.

Summary

The problem of dropouts and retention has existed for decades and although great strides have been made in lowering the dropout rate, it is a more critical issue today than in the past. The emotional, social, and economic cost of dropping out of high school ill-prepared to meet the technological future has been well documented.

Although a universal definition is not used within the research, different types of dropouts are noted and a generic dropout profile has emerged, most notably a male student with low academic skills and poor parental support, who exhibits absenteeism and dysfunctional behaviour that can only lead to frustration, failure, and ultimate withdrawal from the school setting.

The statistics reveal a general dropout rate that ranges between 20% and 30% (Smith, 1990; Rumberger, 1986) but soars much higher for particular groups and locales. For example, the Aboriginal dropout rate in B.C is quoted as 64% as compared to a non-Aboriginal rate of 26% (B.C. Ministry of Education, 1999). A most encouraging statistic is that by age 24, the School Leavers Follow-Up Survey (1995) tells us that only 15% of all youth have not graduated. It appears that at-risk students do experience completion, but on a longer time line.

Farrell (1990) approaches the adolescent from a multiple selves perspective and offers an in-depth look at at-risk youth through their own eyes. His research provides a picture of the day-to-day reality of the at-risk high school student--a student who has not integrated the multiple selves into a balanced, healthy individual.

Solutions to the dropout problem have focussed on the high school arena through offerings such as career education, vocational education, remedial courses in basic math and reading, and the instigation of separate alternate programs and schools. Crisis management at the high school level has been the norm. This is curious as the research recommends early intervention at the elementary or even the primary level

(Ekstrom et al., 1986; McKinlay, 1989; Britt, 1995). The research further asserts that parental involvement is critical to the success of minimizing the at-risk population. It would seem that it is time for drop-out prevention resources to be expended on young children rather than on adolescents.

FOCUS GROUP METHODOLOGY: AN OVERVIEW

The focus group overview defines focus group, speaks of the appropriate use of focus groups, and describes the common characteristics of focus groups. Also mentioned is the composition of focus groups, the construction of suitable questions, and appropriate analysis as it pertains to the research questions in this project. Once again, the research questions are:

- What attitudes or support systems underlie the perseverance of high risk grade 12 students?
- What are the perceived barriers or issues that hinder the academic success of at-risk grade 12 students in their graduation year?

Definition

A focus group is a qualitative research method that employs "guided group discussion to understand participants' experiences and beliefs" (Morgan, 1998a, p.11). Essentially, a focus group is a group interview. A moderator guides the interview while a small group discusses the topic introduced by the interviewer. The discussion is the data set.

Rationale

Three fundamental principles of qualitative methods arrived at through "a process of *sharing* and *comparing* among the participants" (Morgan, 1998a, p.12) are: (i) exploration and discovery, (ii) context and depth, and (iii) interpretation. Morgan proposes that focus groups will meet your needs if:

- You need to explore poorly understood topics and discover new insights;
- You need to investigate the contexts in which your participants operate;
- You need to generate in-depth data about the range of things that matter to the group;
- You need to interpret how and why people think and act as they do.

Focus groups will meet this project's needs according to Morgan's description of the data that emerge from the process of sharing and comparing.

Appropriate Use of Focus Groups

Morgan (1998a) outlines instances when focus groups are appropriate to use that apply to the current project. They are when:

- A friendly, respectful research method is warranted;
- The moderator wishes to listen and learn in-depth knowledge from the participants as they share and compare their experiences, feelings, and opinions;
- The topic of interest can be explored through conversations among participants;
- Problems can be identified to meet prospective purposes of the group;
- The researcher wishes to understand or reduce a gap in understanding behaviours and motivations;
- A program can be developed for this group based on the data.

Characteristics

Characteristics of focus groups are discussed in detail by Krueger (1994, 1998a, 1998b), by Krueger, Morgan, & King (1998), and by Morgan (1998a, 1998b). A small focus group project consists of two to four groups where most of the work can be done in-house (at school) and there is an easily available recruitment source for the focus group participants (students). The project does not require complex analyses or full transcription of tapes to produce a brief report or summary. There are five basic steps involved in establishing a focus group: (i) planning, (ii) recruiting, (iii) moderating, (iv) analyzing, and (v) reporting.

Morgan (1998b) differentiates between structured and unstructured focus groups. A structured group is focused around the researcher's interests whereas an unstructured group gives priority to the members' interests. The degree of structure determines the degree of flexibility to accommodate the spontaneous expression of the viewpoints of group members.

The interview guide in a less structured project often implies the use of broadly focused, open-ended questions which invite members to explore the topic. The facilitator's goal is to help the group explore the issues in a way that generates new insights.

A moderately structured group balances the discussion between the researcher's focus and the group's interests. This allows the leader to suggest issues that may be pertinent to the group but have not arisen in response to the opening question(s). It is called the funnel design. The top of the funnel consists of one or two broadly stated questions that lets the members express their own thoughts and opinions (less structured). The middle of the funnel consists of the researcher's interjection of issues that have not been acknowledged up to this point in the discussion. The bottom of the funnel consists of several specific questions that narrow the discussion to sharply

defined issues. In this project, a less structured to moderate type of group structure is warranted as the goal of the project is to explore the range of issues that need to be understood.

Morgan (1998b, p. 78) feels that three to five sessions are required to reach "a point of theoretical saturation", the point where new information no longer surfaces.

Composition

Group composition is a crucial aspect. First, the topic must be of interest to each participant. Secondly, the members must be compatible with each other for honest and open group discussion, i.e., participants must feel comfortable with each other. Morgan (1998a) states that comfort level increases "when participants sense that they are all similar ..." (p.61). The current project brings together students who have commonalities in academic background, gender, and location.

Approach to Questions

As the goal is to learn the participants' perspectives on the topic, the facilitator allows the group freedom to pursue its own interests, within the broadly stated topic. Morgan goes so far as to state that "You don't necessarily need to know the interview questions in advance" (1998b, p. 49). A few questions that encourage discussion are sufficient.

Three to five questions are common and it is not unusual for the lead question to probe positive and negative responses to the topic of interest.

The moderator's role is to facilitate rather than to direct the discussion. This is accomplished through creating a climate of trust and sharing. The moderator's use of probes and follow-up questions initiates deeper levels of discussion. Morgan (1998b, p. 51) shares examples of these:

• "Who else has some thoughts about this--something different?"

• "What else have people experienced in this area?"

• "You've been discussing several different ideas; what haven't we heard yet?"

• "Remember, we want to hear all your opinions; who has something different?"

Questions for focus groups can be as simple as a Topic Guide which consists of words and phrases that pertain to the issues to be pursued or the more commonly used Questioning Route which sequences questions in complete sentences. Krueger (1998a) suggests five categories for the questioning route:

• The opening question encourages participants to feel connected;

• The introductory question initiates discussion of the topic;

• A transition question moves the discussion toward the key question;

• The key question focusses on the central concern. It is allotted the greatest amount of discussion time and attention in the analysis. It is supplemented with probes and follow-up techniques to solicit depth of understanding;

• The ending question helps the researcher determine where to place emphasis and bring closure to the discussion. It may take the form of a summary question or what Krueger refers to as "all-things-considered" question and ensures that critical aspects have not been overlooked.

Krueger (1998a) also recommends that questions be kept simple and open-ended, that the moderator avoids asking why, and that examples be used cautiously. He also provides direction on the sequencing of questions. Background information should precede general questions which are then followed by more specific questions. Finally, participant categories are elicited prior to sharing other categories.

Data Analysis

The raw data from focus group discussions are organized and catalogued in

order to identify patterns and important themes that emerge from the participants' experiences, perceptions and opinions.

Krueger (1994) promotes seven factors to be considered in determining the dominant trends that arise from the data. First, consider the words used by the participants and the meaning of the words. Second, examine the context of the participants' words, including the tone and intensity of the oral presentation as they are triggered by the facilitator's question or a comment from another group member. Third, monitor the internal consistency of participants' words. Fourth, consider the frequency and extensiveness of participant commentary. Fifth, note the intensity or depth of feeling toward certain issues. Sixth, give more weight to specific responses than to vague, third-person commentary. Finally, emphasize the "big ideas" that emerge.

The data may be collected through the process of note-taking and summary comments at the end of each session. The focus group may also be taped for the purposes of transcribing the oral summaries and verifying specific quotes that support the interpretative findings.

Analysis in focus group interviews begins with the first focus group and continues until after the final group. Analysis occurs simultaneously with data collection as compared to a quanttative study where analysis begins after all the data are collected.

Immediately after each group session, the researcher reviews the discussion on a question-by-question basis and prepares a summary of the most important issues in that session. The group, working with the facilitator, then produces a list of the most important themes across the full set of sessions/groups.

A final report describes the issues that matter most to the participants. A process of triangulation--comparing data from two different groups--may be utilized. Their priorities can then be summarized and recommendations offered based on the groups'

suggestions. Ideally, the report has the potential to offer "a rich source of insights into the human task of implementing change" (Morgan, 1998a, p.5).

METHOD

Participants

Participants in this group are grade 12 students who have a similar academic background of predominantly non-academic courses, a chronic low standard of achievement, and a history of tardiness and absenteeism. They have been retained in core courses and may have been recommended or are enrolled in an alternate program within the school setting called The Pathfinder Program.

The Pathfinder Program allows older students or those who qualify as Adult students to complete the grade 10 core subjects and a limited number of grade 11 courses in a more age-appropriate setting. These students are invariably taking the lower level courses such as Communications 11 and 12, Math 11A, Introductory Math 11 and the non-provincial grade 12 course requirements as well as the least demanding electives to round out the necessary 52 credits for graduation. The program of study has not been modified to accommodate physical or learning disabilities, and although in-school testing may have identified a deficit in skill level, the results are not severe enough to warrant further remedial intervention or to provide funding to support their learning environment.

Teachers in the specific subject areas generally expressed a belief in the students' ability to be successful in that subject provided basic work principles are exhibited, i.e., attendance, promptness, classroom attentiveness, and homework completion.

Recruitment

The participants were drawn from a mid-sized, grade 8 to 12 secondary school with a grade 12 population of approximately 100 students. It is important to note the unusual imbalance of gender in this 2000-2001 graduating year: 58 males as compared to 36 females.

Potential members were referred by the school counsellors who have a grasp of the greater academic picture. Counsellors are responsible for tracking the course selection of each student on their case load and are particularly aware of the academic history and the graduation status of grade 12 students. This puts them in a unique position to identify and refer the chronic high risk student.

It is appropriate to note at this time that all female group members were keen to be part of the focus group interviews. Those female participants that could not accommodate being in the group due to scheduling problems asked if they could at least share their opinions with the researcher and be privy to the results of the research. The researcher could not accommodate this request.

The males, on the other hand, were hesitant to be part of a group. A number of males expressed interest in the topic and in fact, encouraged the researcher to interview them on an individual basis. The researcher could not grant this request either, and some potential members elected not to participate while others did so, but reluctantly.

Procedure

A number of procedures were followed to ensure that ethical standards were met and to increase the possibility of running a successful group. The procedures were:

- Individual contact was made with potential members who were considered to be at-risk in their graduation year. The number of students recruited permitted two

focus groups--a group of 6 female students and a group of 5 male students.

- An overview of the purposes, objectives, and method of the research project was outlined for each individual;

- Students who felt they fit the criteria and were interested in the topic were invited to participate in the research study;

- Parental consent forms were distributed, signed and returned to the researcher;

- The sessions were held in the school's Career Centre. This locale offered both privacy and intimacy. The Career Centre is a mid-sized room with large windows, rectangular and round tables, and space for a flip chart to record information. Lunch was provided;

- Focus interview sessions were scheduled, stipulating time and place.

- The sessions continued until a point of "theoretical saturation" had been reached;

- The female group met for two 50 minute sessions and one 65 minute session within a one week period;

- The male group met for two 50 minute sessions within a one week period;

- Both male and female groups were held near the end of the first half of the school year--in semester one;

- To begin the first session, a review of group guidelines was stressed (respect and confidentiality), and the purpose and structure of the focus group interviews was restated to the group as a whole;

- A structured interview guide (Appendix E) was developed to ensure that open-ended questions were utilized as a means to elicit as much qualitative information as possible that related to the research questions. The researcher employed questioning techniques such as probes and follow-up questions to elicit further information and to insure that all participants were heard;

• Feedback was encouraged to prioritize the outcomes of the study;

• The focus interviews were audio taped. The tapes were transcribed in whole and then the tapes were erased;

• Outcomes were shared with the participants in a group format.

Issues and themes that did not surface from the participants but were significant in the research literature were brought forward for discussion. These themes were:

• Attendance and promptness;

• Time management in regard to commitment to school;

• Peer relationship issues;

• Family issues;

• Relationship issues with a significant other;

• Sexual issues;

• Career planning and goal setting;

• History of academic success and failure;

• Other possible issues: drugs, alcohol, physical/emotional health, and stress management.

These themes were presented as probes if they did not emerge spontaneously out of participant dialogue.

Ethical & Professional Considerations

Specific ethical standards were highlighted for this research project. At the onset of the project it was important that the issue of privacy and self-disclosure be raised. Participants have a right to understand any risks involved in the project. They have a right to confidentiality and, in particular, participants need to be aware that stressful situations and invasions of privacy can arise from their own disclosures during group

discussions. Ultimately, the researcher had the responsibility of protecting all these rights.

Parental consent forms (Appendix D) were given to the students so they could share this information with their parent/s or guardian/s. The forms had to be returned before any selection was finalized. In addition, approval for this research was granted by the school administration and notification of the research proposal was sent to the Superintendent of the school district. Parents were encouraged to contact the researcher and/or the university supervisor if they had any questions or concerns. Finally, this proposal was submitted to the UNBC Ethics Committee for approval.

FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS: FEMALE GROUP

Six female students agreed to participate in the research project. The group met over three consecutive days--Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday--during a one week period in early December. All sessions were scheduled to began at 11:00 a.m and finish at 11:50 a.m. Teacher permission was required as the students missed the last 20 minutes of their second class.

Session 1 began with introductions, followed by an overview of the purpose of the focus group and a review of the group guidelines. The researcher introduced the topic of being at-risk which led to the key question, "What do you see as the barriers to successfully graduating this year? What issues would prevent you from being successful?" Students quickly brain stormed issues and the researcher wrote their responses onto large flip chart paper. The sheets were posted onto the wall so that they were easily read. The group was asked to re-visit each issue as they were listed on the chart paper. Probes were used to elicit as much information as possible on each

topic from each participant. Topics discussed during session 1 were attendance, transition from high school, stress, and boyfriends. The group was dismissed at 11:50 a.m.

Session 2 began by reviewing the previous day's topics. The members were invited to change or add new insights. The group then continued to discuss the barriers to graduation that were listed on the chart paper. Topics discussed in session 2 were death, family transition/change, drugs and alcohol, and dysfunctional family history. As no further barriers emerged out of the discussion, the researcher introduced possible barriers not previously mentioned. Topics discussed were low skill level, transition from village schools and career goals. At this point, the group was asked to prioritize the list of barriers to graduation from most significant to least significant. The prioritization process was aided by each participant being given paper and pencil to record their own opinion as to the order of importance. The group was then given time to share their lists and come to a group consensus. The researcher did not take part in this process, other than as an observer. The resulting prioritized list of barriers were recorded onto chart paper. The group dismissed at 11:50 a.m.

Supports to graduation were introduced in Session 3. The same format was utilized--brain storming issues, recording the ideas onto chart paper, and re-visiting each issue--using probes and encouraging all members to participate in the discussion. When it appeared that the group had exhausted all support systems, the same process was observed to generate a list of prioritized supports to graduation as was used to generate the list of barriers. Session 3 concluded at 12:05 p.m. This fifteen minute extension allowed the group to complete the task of prioritizing the support systems to graduation and to conclude the focus group interviews.

This following section presents highlights and quotes from the female focus group. They are presented in the order that they surfaced from the group discussion.

Participants are designated by number, i.e., F-1, F-2, etc. Group dynamics, the issues expressed, and the priorities presented will be noted.

Group Barriers To Successful Graduation

The group brain stormed issues that they felt constituted barriers to successful graduation. The ideas were written on flip chart paper and the group then revisited each issue. Once their ideas were exhausted, the researcher presented potential barriers for discussion that were not mentioned. The following issues are listed as they emerged from the participants. At the conclusion of the focus group interviews, the students were asked to prioritize the issues, as a group, from most significant to least significant.

Attendance

The majority readily admitted to attendance problems as a factor impinging on school success.

F-6   I missed 22 classes my first month of school.
F-5   I missed the first two weeks at the beginning and didn't do anything about it.

When prompted further as to why attendance is a problem, different underlying reasons were expressed:

F-5   No reason. It's like a bad habit.
F-1   I'm just lazy.

Low self-esteem was introduced as a major reason for not attending. Feeling successful in a course encouraged attendance while eminent failure discouraged attendance.

F-6   I've already missed too much. Like, what's the point? You know, that attitude. I'm going to fail anyway.

The only participant with acceptable attendance stated:

F-3   When I do come to school, I sit in class and don't concentrate.

The group discussed the influence a teacher exerted on their attendance.

F-4   You have to like the teacher.
F-5   There's not many teachers that make you feel part of the class.

It's not unusual for an at-risk student to be two or three years older than the average student. One student explained:

F-6   I haven't been to class for two weeks because I'm 19 years old and I'm sitting there with a bunch of 16 year olds. It gets embarrassing if you miss a day and you're sitting there and I don't know what they're talking about.

It appears that it's not the age that is the barrier but rather feeling incompetent among the younger students. This same student expressed the idea that graduating from high school leads to change that is frightening and, perhaps, debilitating.

Transition from High School

Life after high school may generate fears that impact on a reluctance to graduate. One student perceives graduation as the precursor to leaving her hometown --a move she does not want to make.

F-2   I don't want to leave this town but that's what I feel I'm being pushed to do if I graduate. It's school that's keeping me here (in town).

On the other hand, a student who desires to leave her hometown, admits to being afraid of the unknown. She expressed her thoughts this way:

F-6   I can't wait (to leave) but I think somewhere back there I'm scared because this is what I know, what I'm comfortable with. I've been here 19 years. I know this, I know everything. And then I move away and I don't know anything. I don't know anybody.

The young mother in the group has a two year old daughter that is being cared for by her parents. After graduation, she will be expected to raise her own child. Her response was:

F-2   It scares me. I looked after her for two months after she was born

because my mom left town but . . . It scares me.

Stress/Feeling Pressured

All students intensely expressed the following "I have to" issue.

> F-2   I have to. I hear it from my parents; I hear it from my teachers; I hear it from where I work.

> F-6   You have to graduate, you have to do this, you have to do that.

One student felt particularly strong about this issue. She erupted with the following speech:

> F-2   It's like pressure. Like, I'm in a class right now and I'm worried that if I don't pass this class, I'm not going to be able to graduate this year and everyone is telling me that I *have to* graduate this year and I'm like, OK, I know I *have to* graduate already, so stop telling me that. I know! I know! I have this class that I'm trying to pass and you guys keep telling me that I'm failing it! I know! I know! Just get off my back! I'm trying my best. It's like, people expect so much from me and it's, the pressure, is so hard and I'm trying already to get my grades up to graduate . . . and I'm already worried about graduating and not graduating and stuff and I have people on my back telling me what I *have to* do about everything . . . what's going wrong with everything . . . They are not helping! They are just telling me the problems.

Another member concurred:

> F-5   Stress is a major one 'cause when you're feeling pressured, it's harder to do things. Lots of people who are supposed to graduate this year are
>
> stressed out because if they don't pass a class they won't be able to graduate.

A student recognized the personal attribute of stress saying:

> F-3   Some people won't be able to graduate because they're addicted to drugs. Others won't graduate because they're alcoholic. Some won't graduate because their boyfriend won't want them to, or something. Stress is different for everyone, I think.

Boyfriends

Four of the six participants voiced dysfunctional concerns regarding a relationship with a significant other. The two participants who live with their boyfriends expressed a feeling of entrapment--of not having the space or luxury to distance

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themselves from their concerns. Overall, this topic elicited tremendous emotional

content accompanied by deep sobs and half the Kleenex box.

The subject of control emerged first. The statement that gave impetus to this

issue was:

> F-3   I don't find that my boyfriend controls me but I feel that I control myself
> for *him*. Like, you do it do yourself, I think? Like, I think every part of my life
> should be about *him*. It took me a whole year to realize that I need to start
> *achieving myself back*. I don't even remember what myself is any more. I don't
> remember what I was without him. Now it's not so bad anymore because it's,
> like . . . I'm so learning to be myself in a relationship, but before that . . . .

This same student struggled with putting this in a school perspective:

> F-3   You kinda get wrapped up in finding yourself and school's not
> important either, you know. When you have all these things wrapped up
> together, you don't have time to even know who you are, so, what I'm saying
> is, trying to get rid of those things, um, school is not important. When you don't
> even know who you are, how are you supposed to concentrate on school?

Another student expressed far more serious concerns of control and entrapment.

She spoke of emotional and physical abuse and the toll it took on her self-esteem:

> F-2   I choose to stay with him through all that stuff and I think I made a
> mistake and now I feel like I can't move back on it. I'm stuck with him for the
> rest of my life. I'm already 19. No one else is going to want me. Who else is
> going to want to be a Dad to someone else's baby, right?

She perceives the connection between the relationship and her self-worth but

seems powerless to do anything about it.

> F-2   It brings my self-esteem extremely low, way down; and another thing
> that brings my self-esteem down is him trying to control my life, telling me what
> I'm doing wrong all the time and what I should be doing and how to improve my
> life and what to wear and not to wear and who to talk to, who not to talk to, and
> when I'm allowed to talk on the phone, when I'm allowed to go for a walk, you
> know, how high my shoes are allowed to be. It makes me feel like, all these
> things are wrong with me--that's who I am. I can't fix it 'cause it's up to him to
> make me better.

This same student continued in a very emotional manner:

> F-2   It's just so hard. And I live with him which is really, really hard. (sobs

up to this point) I live with him which is pretty much how he controls me because when I didn't live with him, I could sneak and go with my friends which would be all right, you know. School wouldn't be so hard . . . I could talk to people. He didn't want me talking to my brother, or my girlfriend, or my little brothers.

Later, she concluded:

F-2   One day he's going to tell me that I'm not allowed to talk to my own daughter. What am I going to do then? (harder sobs) I know it's not right but I've been doing this for two years. I'm such an idiot. All my friends tell me so.

The second participant who lives with her boyfriend also explained how difficult it is to focus on school when dealing with the ups and downs of a live-in relationship. An argument over the weekend led to a temporary break up. She explained:

F-5   When you've been together with somebody so long (one and one-half years), it just feels that there's something missing. When I'm in school, I'm not focused on school. I'm wondering what went wrong or how I'm going to get my relationship back together.

And yet another student confessed that:

F-1   My boyfriend tries to keep me home from school.

In conclusion, the group agreed that:

F-3   Top priority is trying to get my life in line.

F-4   School becomes secondary to these things.

Death

Although this was initially mentioned as a barrier to graduation, the topic did not elicit a lot of discussion. An unfortunate tragedy was referred to where three young men drowned early in the school year. A student spoke of male students who have struggled with this incident.

F-3   I know three young men haven't actually been in school since then. They come to school about once a week . . . they don't really do anything. They just can't seem to concentrate on anything . . . they just think about their friends that they lost.

One participant found

> F-4   It's hard to focus on school, especially around Christmas, 'cause my cousin died last year at this time.

The topic of death led into the next heading, Family Change/Transition.

> F-4   My dad died when I was little and I never got to know him. It's hard because my mom has this different boyfriend now.

Family Transition/Change

These young women struggle with the changes the family as a whole are experiencing. Two participants are concerned about the relationship their mom is in and the negative impact it has on them.

> F-3   My mom's relationship really bugs me. He's just a jerk. He doesn't like me and my two older brothers because we're not his kids.

> F-1   My mom's in a relationship, too. Her boyfriend's controlling. My family is really worried about her.

> F-3   My mom and dad's divorce makes everything that I ever knew before dysfunctional. I realize now what our life was like. My mom's trying to make everything peaceful in the house now, so we all got to make an extra effort to put that in and it interferes with the way I used to live and I know that it's dysfunctional but, I know that I need to change it and part of that is getting my school life together . . . I need to graduate and do something with my life. I realize that. The whole family has to change.

Drugs and Alcohol

It is important to state here that participants make the distinction between alcohol and drugs as well as between the choice of drug. One student did not see either drugs or alcohol as a problem.

> F-6   I don't think my drinking is getting in the way at all. I drink on the weekends. Maybe once in a while; not very often.

Others, though, acknowledged that drugs and/or alcohol had a detrimental impact on their schooling:

> F-1   The reason I'm at risk is I started in grade nine and I've been in trouble ever since because of both drugs (marijuana) and alcohol. It makes me a slackard in school. I don't get my homework done at night 'cause I'm doing drugs and end up falling asleep. It's hard to wake up in the morning.

Another member shared a serious personal insight:

> F-3   I told myself that's one thing I'm not going to do--cocaine--that's just going too far. I know I have an addictive personality and, even drinking alcohol, I stopped drinking for about a year and one-half, but then when I start drinking, I love it. The addiction just keeps getting bigger and bigger and every weekend it's a struggle for me to say no, I'm not drinking. You drink, you want to get drunk--that's the whole point.

The discussion exhausted itself with:

> F-1   I drink, not to have a good time, but to forget my problems.

Dysfunctional Family History

This was another topic that was discussed openly, with intense emotional import. The participants were eager to share their family backgrounds and it was obvious that their personal histories were crucial to an understanding of self.

A participant shared a particularly moving story that included a family history of abusive language, emotional abuse and physical violence prior to the breakup of the marriage. She shared excerpts that included:

> F-3   Everyday I was being backhanded in the face and it wasn't cool, you know, and it really interfered with school. And so, when you go through something like that, you can't concentrate on school.

Throughout this period, the member described her mother's vulnerability and her own efforts to be supportive.

> F-3   When I go home from school, I try to do everything I can to help her around the house. I've always been like that and over the years, it's like taking over. I know I'm supposed to be doing my homework. But after I drive my brother and sister to their things, I just put homework aside and it's not important anymore. And it reminds me of when I was little, too, 'cause I never had a set time to do my homework. My mom's never said, "Do your homework" you know, she never reminded me to do my homework. And my mom never had anyone to help her. I don't know . . . if I was to be appreciated for the family stuff . . . If the abuse didn't take place, I wouldn't be thinking about it, and not thinking about it would give me time in school to work on my work, but even in class I can't

concentrate on schoolwork sometimes.

One of the group members who lives with her boyfriend views her situation as "trying to run away from dysfunction". She later concludes with:

> F-5   My mom's been through a lot and I try to understand that but she takes it out on people. That's why I'm trying to get away from her. My mom kicked me out--she does it at the worst times, too. She kicked me out a couple of years ago right during exams. I ended up missing a couple of them because I was out drinking and I came to one (exam), but like, I hadn't slept. That was grade 10. What hurts is when she says this stuff to me, like, she says it out of anger. She doesn't even think what she's saying and she said some pretty bad stuff and I'm thinking, 'She's my mother. She's supposed to love me. She's the one who brought me into this world.' Why is she saying this?

To put these life stories in perspective with school, a student declared:

> F-2   It always scares me when they say that your parent's relationship will reflect on your relationships. So, unless I make a change now, and I feel that right now's the time, so why should I be worried about anything else, like school?

Observation

An atmosphere of trust and empathy developed very quickly within the group that gave the members permission to share very private and emotional pain with each other.

Probed Barriers

The participants had exhausted their list of perceived barriers at this time. Because the following issues were not broached by the focus group, the researcher introduced each point as a possible barrier to successful graduation.

Low Skill Level

There were spontaneous nods from around the table when having a low skill level was introduced as a possible barrier to graduation. The students referred to two specific areas: math and English. If course work is perceived as too difficult, the usual solution is to skip class:

F-1   I skip and don't do homework if it's too hard.

F-6   Last year I felt English was too hard for me so I skipped a lot.

Most participants shared their struggle to meet college entrance requirements for their program of choice. English 12 is a prerequisite for these students to pursue a preferred field of study as compared to Communications 12, a far easier course. The same holds true for Principles of Math 11 as compared to Introductory Math 11, Math 11A, or Accounting 11. As two members report:

F-2   I'm taking English 11 instead of Com 11 because I can't get into the college program I want without English.

F-6   I tried English 12 last year and only showed up half of the time and failed it miserably. I'm taking it again this year so that I can get to college.

It appears that specific educational goals for the future are a motivating force.

Transition from Village Schools

Students feed into our high school from outlying First Nations villages. They usually enter at the grade 8 level or the grade 11 level. They leave their familiar surroundings and arrange for 'home stay' placements to attend a much larger school within a much larger community. This transition was introduced as a possible barrier to successful graduation. The discussion was brief. The only point made was that of being academically unprepared for the high school curriculum.

Sexual Issues

This also was not a topic of concern. No stressors were verbalized regarding being sexually active with the accompanying risks and responsibilities other than earlier statements that pertain to their own mothers and not wishing to make "the same mistakes."

Career Goals

Three of the group members had a fairly clear and realistic picture of their career plans and the post-secondary education required to fulfil those plans. The other three members were vague, at best, on what their future holds. This was succinctly recognized with the words:

> F-1   If you don't really have a goal of what you want to do in your life, then you don't have the motivation to graduate and get your diploma because you don't think you're going to do anything anyway. What's the point of graduating if I'm not going to do anything?

Prioritized List of Barriers

At this point, the group exhausted all contributions to barriers to successful graduation. To conclude session 2, they were asked to prioritize these barriers from most significant to least significant. The list is as follows:

1. Stress

2. Low Self-Esteem

3. Fear of Graduation

4. Abuse: emotional, mental, physical

5. Friends

6. Alcohol/Drugs

7. Boyfriends

8. Family and Motherhood Issues

9. Low Skill Level

10. Teachers

11. Transition from Village

12. Jobs

Observation

The group made it clear that stress, the strongest barrier, encompassed all other barriers. There was a definite feeling that these students were feeling overwhelmed, not by one factor, but by a number of issues.

The prioritized list was, in some ways, inconsistent with the focus group interview discussion. For example, the discussion was weighted more in terms of family and boyfriend issues than the topic of friends or low self-esteem. This is not reflected in the prioritized list. The group held firm with their list although this anomaly was brought to their attention.

It was apparent that the group as a whole welcomed this personal type of sharing and there was a strong pull toward group counselling sessions rather than focus group interviews.

Support Systems To Successful Graduation

Session 3 opened with a review of barriers to graduation. As no additions or deletions were suggested, supports to graduation were introduced. The researcher explained,

> Many issues have made success in school difficult and yet, none of you have dropped out, or, if you have, you're back. You have all exhibited a perseverance, a stick-to-it-iveness. You have not quit. Students who have experienced many of these barriers chose to quit school as their solution. The one thing in common at this table is that you are all here. What has contributed to your perseverance?

Potential Life Style

Potential life style as a motivator to graduate appears to be intertwined with self-respect:

> F-6   I dropped out twice. It's fun for awhile. You get to do what you want and sleep in and . . . do as you please and . . . It's fun for a while but then it just gets boring. What the heck am I doing here, just lying on my couch? It made me realize that I don't want to be lying on this couch for the rest of my life, living with my mom. Both times I dropped out because I was partying too much. I'd go out . . . I couldn't get a job . . . I knew that if I didn't get back to school, I'd be on that couch for the rest of my life. . . living with my mom or living on welfare.

> F-5   I don't want to be just sitting around waiting for my welfare cheque to come in.

> F-6   Yeah. Waiting around for the government to send you a cheque while other people are out working so hard to get what they have.

> F-1   They have lots of money . . . a nice house . . . a car . . .

> F-6   Yeah. I don't want to live in an apartment complex . . . have three kids running around. I just don't want that kind of life.

> F-2   My mom tells me that I deserve better than that life.

> F-6   Being scared motivates me--supports me. Not having a life, not having a job, not having money. The fear of all that . . .

> F-2   I think it's self-respect that makes us stay in school.

Parental Support

Although one student perceives no parental support whatsoever, other participants expressed a continuum of support from their parents:

> F-6   My mom gave up on me long ago. My parents, family aren't even in the picture. I have to do this on my own--for me.

> F-3   Parents are our supports but they're also our downfall in a way, too.

> F-1   My mom's definitely not my role model but she's always supported me.

> F-6   My mom is my role model. I've actually considered her my role model forever.

Social Aspect of School

Most group members recognized the reciprocal influence of and on friends. They expressed agreement on the social pull of their friends.

F-3   Like parents, I think friends are our supports and also our downfalls.

F-6   Most of my friends are younger than me. Some have dropped out and I got angry because they're at that age where I dropped out. It just makes me mad.

F-3   Sometimes my social life brings me to school. Sometimes that's the only thing I have to look forward to . . . coming to school to see my friends.

F-1   I was going to say that--the social scene--to be around places that you know.

School Personnel

School counsellors and teachers have considerable influence over the attitude of this group toward school.

F-6   My counsellor helps me to come.

F-4   Teachers have a big impact.

F-5   (Name of teacher). I really like him. He keeps me interested. And my (subject) teacher. I really like her. She's cool.

F-4   And my Math teacher was really funny. I liked him. That was, like, in grade 10.

An astute comment connected perceived teacher acceptance and their own positive attitude toward the course work with feelings of competency.

F-6   It makes a difference, especially if it's classes that you understand, classes that you can make sense of. Like, you have to understand the work as well as like the teacher. Teachers that don't say anything bad about you . . . Even though I'm not the greatest student in his class, I've never heard (teacher name) say one bad thing about me.

Perhaps at-risk high school students expect teachers to be less content oriented.

F-3   When you're a teacher, you don't just stand in front of a class and teach some information. You got to be there to support them. You're teaching them--like it's their livelihood but it's also ours, too. They don't understand that.

Sibling Support

Older brothers and sisters provide support and motivation to succeed.

> F-3   My brother's in University right now. I'm not going to university but I want to live up to him. He's also encouragement. He'll tell me to get my act together. It means more coming from my brother than from my parents.

> F-2   My brother means a lot to me so what he says to me means a lot. You want to impress them. They just care about you so much that you want to give them a reason to.

> F-4   I want to impress all those people who care.

> F-3   My parents, my brother and me are the main people I want to impress.

There was a sense that older siblings are more apt to express unconditional love to their younger sisters and that this is a source upon which they build self-worth.

Career Goals

As the lack of a clear career path can be a barrier to successful graduation, having a distinct goal supports their graduation plans. Three members voiced distinct career plans:

> F-2   I'm going to graduate and be a teacher.

> F-3   I know what I want to do. I want to go to fire fighting school.

> F-6   I know where I want to go; I know what program I want to take.

Praise

Positive reinforcement works for these students. This point takes on more significance when compared to the stress mentioned previously where members felt pressured by the external "have to" phrase. Although praise has the potential to create further expectations and therefore increase the stress load, the participants did not view praise in this light.

> F-5   Praise is a big thing for me. My family knows that I'm graduating this year and every time I see somebody, they're always saying how proud they're going to be and they want a ticket; they want a picture and . . . .

F-2   And you want to do that. You want to impress them.

Praise helps this member to perceive graduation as a real possibility:

F-1   I never imagined the day when I'd be walking down with my cap and
my gown. I always thought I'd be just like everyone else--on welfare.

Prioritized List of Supports

The group members agreed to extend session 3 by fifteen minutes. This allowed
the group to complete the prioritization process rather than meet for a fourth session.

Their prioritized list of support systems are:

1. Self-Respect

2. Praise

3. Parents/Siblings

4. Friends/Social Scene

5. Teachers/Counsellors/Course

6. Graduation

7. College/Post Secondary

Observation

The time invested on this topic was significantly less than the time spent talking
about the barriers to graduation. In fact, 22 pages of transcripts were devoted to
barriers as compared to 5 pages of supports.

FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS: MALE GROUP

Five male students participated in the research project. Initially the group had planned to meet prior to the Christmas break but various school-wide activities prevented this timeline. The two sessions took place--on a Tuesday and Wednesday-- during the third week in January. Both sessions were scheduled to begin at 11:00 a.m. and conclude at 11:50 a.m. The first session started 10 minutes late as two of the participants were tardy. The session was extended to complete the barriers to graduation prioritization process.

The same format was followed with the male group as with the female group. In session 1, the group brain stormed issues that they felt were barriers to their academic success and all ideas were written on flip chart paper and posted. The group then revisited each issue. The topics discussed were teachers, relationships/girls, lifestyle, homework, drugs, and career goals. Once their ideas were exhausted, the researcher presented potential barriers for discussion that were not previously mentioned. Barriers discussed at this point were attendance and tardiness, low skill level, peer relationships, and stress. As with the female group, the following issues are presented as they emerged from the participants. To conclude session 1, the male group members were asked to prioritize the issues from most significant to least significant following the same format that was utilized in the female group.

Session 2 began on time. It dealt with support systems to graduation. The brainstorming produced the following topics: motivation, school involvement, teachers, parents/family, siblings, peers, self-concept, and counsellors. The process of prioritizing was again utilized so that a consensus was arrived at by the group. The session concluded at 11:50 a.m.

Group Barriers To Successful Graduation

The following section presents quoted highlights of the sessions in the same order as they surfaced from the participants. The male participants are designated M-1, M-2, etc.

Teachers

Teachers were mentioned as both a barrier and a support but more emphasis was noted under barriers:

> M-2   They don't take that much interest in you. They don't help you out sometimes and neglect you.

> M-3   Yeah. They help a student here, a student there, they work around you. The teacher didn't like me so I failed it. Like, two percent I needed. I finished everything. He wouldn't mark them so I failed it.

> M-1   There are some teachers that won't help you out sometimes. I feel that they just don't do enough.

> M-4   We always lose our good teachers, like (three teachers named who left our school). We should get rid of some of the old ones. They'll be here until they're eighty.

> M-2   Everyone thinks we're crack heads. That's what I hate about this school. Teachers think we're a bunch of idiots . . . crack heads. We're not. That g.d. drug awareness week . . . it's been since November and it's still on the TV. Like, what the hells's that? Are they're trying to tell us something?

Relationships/Girls

Relationships with a significant other are not perceived as a barrier to graduation. Not one of the participants has a steady girlfriend. Note the following conversation:

> M-4   Girls are not a big issue.

> M-2   I almost had one but it didn't work out, though. I have lots of girlfriends. Not a special one.

> M-1   Having a girlfriend gets too serious. You have to talk to them on the phone. Then you have to buy them presents.

> M-3   They write your name . . . saying Forever. Then you can't talk to other girls. They're very possessive. They'll tattoo your name on their body!

It appears that they find a steady relationship stifling and are not prepared at this time to commit to such a relationship.

Also, as Farrell (1990) noted, girls were referred to in a disrespectful manner:

> M-4   They're the reason we stay in school. I can't wait for the weekend and then pick 'em up.

> M-3   It's easier to pick 'em up on the weekends . . . at parties . . . booze . . . drugs. They look prettier, too.

All of this conversation was accompanied by much laughter and knowing looks between participants.

Lifestyle

This group of young men described how they spend their time. There seemed to be a general consensus that there are many attractions that override school work. The weekends are reserved for "hanging out" and "parties". The weekdays were described by the following dialogue:

> M-1   We hang out with our friends during the week . . . smaller groups.

> M-2   Big screen TV, big huge stereo, computer games . . . like, what should I do? (Lots of nods, laughter) I got a TV that's taller than me . . . .

> M-1   A stereo you can hear two blocks away . . . .

> M-4   My whole house is like a big computer . . . .

> M-3   Homework, textbooks don't compete!

> M-2   And then you have your drugs right beside you! (laughter)

> M-4   The TV, computer games . . . That's a big chunk of not doing well.

> M-5   I get addicted to it. (TV, games, etc.)

> M-1   There are too many addictions.

> M-3   Addicted to watching TV.

> M-2   It all goes together, though. Watching TV, playing on computer, drinking, doin' drugs.

> M-4   A big part of it for me was the hot tub. I never got out of that thing. My parents had to empty it.

Although the group was not out partying during the week, the above conversation clearly shows that school work is not a priority for them.

Homework

Homework for all but one participant was not a regular activity in their daily lives. The one member who routinely did homework stated:

> M-4   I probably spend 10 hours a week on homework. I spend 1 to 1 1/2 hours a night on homework . . . except on weekends, I don't do any.

For the remainder of the group, homework ranged from none at all to about two hours a week. The following statements were made:

> M-3   When there's important projects to do, I'll do homework.
>
> M-1   If it's really important, I do it.
>
> M-3   I don't do that much. I wait till the last moment, then do it real quick.
>
> M-1   It's not an everyday thing for me but I do homework. Once every second day or something.
>
> M-3   I spend about 2 hours a week.
>
> M-5   I don't spend any more than that, either.
>
> M-2   I don't do any, actually.
>
> M-2   I don't study. I don't . . . but I still do good though. Like I said earlier, if I try, I do good, but I just don't. I don't know why. I just don't.

Grade 12 students who do well in school consistently put in many hours of homework per week. This lack is a significant factor that defines this group as at-risk.

Drugs

At no time did this group identify the consumption of illegal drugs with being

academically at-risk. For most, it appears to be part of their life style and has been for some time. The male group also makes a clear distinction between soft and hard drugs.

> M-4 Marijuana's not too bad. I'm trying to quit though.
>
> M-5 I don't do that shit.
>
> M-2 Everybody does it. My parents do it every once in awhile. They don't overdo it.
>
> M-2 Angel dust and heroin--once in a blue moon.
>
> M-2 I try to get away from all that stuff. I want to get back into sports. Drugs can suck you in.
>
> M-3 I'd rather be down' (soft stuff) than other worse kinds of drugs.

One student expressed anger at the perception that drugs were used to deal with their problems and, specifically, the drowning deaths that occurred early in the school year:

> M-2 We were best of friends, and then . . . It shook me . . . .
>
> M-4 Me and (name) were pretty close too, man.
>
> M-2 We're not trying to solve our problems by doing drugs and . . . It's just the way we are. I've heard it from a lot of people that you guys think we're doing drugs because we lost our friends. Like we're trying to solve our problems by doing drugs and shit.
>
> M-4 Drugs have been a part way before . . . and not all drugs are good, but . . . .

Goals

Future career goals were vague and ill-defined. One student felt that having a well thought-out plan was not necessary and the others were not clear on a post-secondary program of study.

> M-3 It doesn't matter if you have no goals. You know what you like and don't like. It's a matter of what you fall into. I didn't want to be a cook until I was in grade 12. It's what I like to do. Knowing I want to be a cook doesn't actually help me do school work.

M-4   The weekends, TV, computers, sports and stuff get in the way.

M-5   I want to go to college next year but I've no plan or program that I want to take.

M-1   I've thought of next year . . . a little bit but nothing specific.

M-2   I'm going to college next year but . . . what I want to do is play baseball. There's nothing down here and you have to go far, far away. I'm looking at carpentry or something at a college.

Probed Barriers

The boys exhausted their barriers at this point and the researcher introduced other potential barriers that were not mentioned by the group.

Attendance and Tardiness

All group members admitted to both of these being a problem at some time.

M-1   Yes. For (first) class. Getting up late. I'm only about two to three minutes late and it's such a big deal.

M-3   The alarm clock or something can make you late. Like missing the bus or something. So I'm late 'cause I had to walk. So I do an essay during class and miss the work so I've more homework.

M-5   Once in a while it's a problem for me.

M-3   I think it's better a student come late than not at all.

M-1   Can be a problem for me--both lates and attendance.

M-4   It used to be a problem for me.

M-2   I'm late during the day.

M-3   Missing a class and then you're behind in your work and then you miss the due date.

M-1   Sometimes I been so far behind I've just been overwhelmed.

Low Skill Level

The group did not perceive themselves as having a low skill level in any subject

area although earlier statements were made that would contradict this perception:

M-1   I'm at-risk with my math class.

M-3   Me too. Everything else is easy but math is gibberish to me. I can do English. I can do socials, but math--no.

M-1   I do fine in math, but struggle with English and socials.

The male group was more inclined to present a picture of academic competence:

M-3   I didn't want to ask for help in high school. I would look at the examples and figure it out.

M-2   I don't find it (having low skills) a problem. I've found it pretty easy to get to grade 12. I didn't try and got 50% in all my classes.

M-1   In com class I had 37% going into my final exam and then I studied like, an hour, and I got, like 75%.

M-3   I got a B in Science 9 and and failed Science 10 because of the teacher.

The phrase "If I try" was mentioned a few times:

M-2   I don't feel I'm "at-risk" at all . . . because I wasn't actually trying, like I didn't try. If I actually put my mind to it, I could do it, but . . . I don't know. There's something there, holding me back, I guess. If I tried, I could actually do good in my classes.

Peer Relationships

The researcher introduced the idea that peer pressure may be a contributing factor to being at risk. This was met with nods of agreement.

M-1   Yup. I'll go out for a smoke with a friend and skip class.

M-2   Skipping is mostly with a friend--skipping the whole class. Sometimes I walk the halls for half an hour, go to the washroom, stuff like that.

M-3   I like to go out for a smoke for a couple of minutes and then go back to class. Sometimes there's a problem getting back into class--depending on which class.

M-2   Why should I be scared of the teacher. I can go back if I want. If they say, "Go to the office" . . . Okay. I'm leaving (school). I'm not going to the office. I'll go get something to eat downtown.

M-1   Or go play pool.

M-4   I've said no. I actually went and worked on a project or something.

Stress/Emotional Health

This topic was not considered to be a barrier to academic success. The general solution was to take a path of least resistance.

> M-1   Not really a problem. I don't get stressed out. I try to keep that to a minimum by not taking too many classes or too hard of classes. I plan my courses that way.

> M-5   I do that, too.

> M-3   I do. It helps. I just take the classes I know . . . Construction . . . I know that. And Art Marketing . . . I took that two years in a row. I took just the things I need to become a cook, like Math 11A, Foods & Nutrition, Com.

The males did not equate dealing with the death of three peers or the paralysis of a fourth peer as stress or as having an effect on their mental health.

Prioritized List of Barriers

The barriers to successful graduation had been expended at this point. To conclude session 1, they were directed to prioritize their barriers from most significant to least significant.

1. Loss: Family and Friends
2. Teachers
3. Parties: Alcohol, Drugs, Girls
4. Attitude Toward School/Low Motivation
5. Being Late for School/Attendance
6. Self-Motivation
7. Peer Pressure
8. Personal Life Style
9. Low Skill Level

Observation

The researcher voiced her confusion, i.e., the prioritized list does not match the discussion. For example, there was considerably more discussion concerning the many attractions that override school work as compared to the amount of talk about peer pressure or the problem of attendance. Nevertheless, the group held fast to their prioritized list.

Support Systems To Successful Graduation

Session 2 opened with a review of barriers to graduation. As no additions or deletions were suggested, supports to graduation were introduced. The researcher explained, "Many issues have made success in school difficult and yet, none of you have dropped out, or, if you have, you're back. You have all exhibited a perseverance, a stick-to-it-iveness. You have not quit. Students who have experienced many of these barriers chose to quit school as their solution. The one thing in common at this table is that you are all here. What attitudes and/or support systems have contributed to your perseverance?

Motivation

Group members experience a sense of motivation to graduate for diverse reasons. Personal accomplishment, future jobs, peer pressure, and graduation activities all add impetus to graduate. Excerpts from the focus group interviews show the various contributions:

> M-4   Getting skills for the workplace helps, too. It's about income and getting hired and stuff.

> M-3   CPWE 12 (Career Preparation Work Experience) helped me out in the kitchen and stuff. That course is pretty good.

> M-5   I think more of going to college . . . the future.

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M-4   I'm not coming back. I'm going to graduate and then I'm going to college. No ifs, ands or buts!

M-1   For me, it happens when it happens. . . I'm still concerned about the future.

M-2   It can't get much worse than it is right now, you know. Am I going to lose another three friends, four friends? Nothing worse can happen now. (Name of boy who drowned) did it - I can do it. That's one of my main motivators, you know. It motivates me most. That goof did it (graduated last year)

M-1   Not much motivation. Sometimes need pushing. Thinking of grad helps.

M-5   I'm involved in, like, the grad fashion show. That helps.

M-4   Yeah. That's fun.

Other grad activities mentioned appear to create a sense of belonging to the graduating class which these students find motivating.

M-1   Prom. Casino Night.

M-2   Parties. Fund raising. Selling chocolates.

M-4   Tree cutting, Xmas gift wrapping.

School Involvement

Although graduation fund raising activities and graduation events are school related, this group has not been consistently involved in school activities over the duration of their high school education. Some involvement was noted:

M-2   I like to be involved in sports activities 'cause you gotta have your marks up to go on trips. . . that's motivation.

M-4   I was involved in the gym riot (a half-day school-wide event)

but others confessed,

M-5   I was never really involved in school.

M-1   I haven't been involved in anything.

Teachers

Do teachers contribute to the perseverance exhibited by these at-risk grade 12 students? The response was positive when the teacher was perceived as lenient or when the student did well in that particular class. It is always questionable whether the student does well in a class and therefore enjoys the course and the teacher or whether the student enjoys the teacher or course work first, and therefore does well in the class. In any case, this group maintains,

> M-3   Many teachers have helped to keep me in school. Some teachers give you chances and stuff . . . to help you and stuff. They give you extended dates for your projects and stuff.

> M-5   Not really. Probably the same thing. Some have more discouraged me.

> M-3   (Name) was a good teacher, too (retired). He sometimes still teaches. I got a B in his class. And the next year I got, like, a C-.

> M-1   I had one elementary teacher who, like, made science fun. He was a good teacher.

A sense of humour was also mentioned as a quality that students enjoy.

Parents/Family

This topic was initiated under barriers to graduation but all comments were supportive to the individuals' education. Graduation for these members elicited a strong sense of family pride.

> M-4   My parents nag at me lots but it's actually kinda good. My mom nags me because she doesn't like me to fail. I know why she's nagging me so I respect it.

> M-2   My parents do the same thing. I get lots of support from my family.

> M-1   They want me to do well; to graduate.

> M-5   Parents will be proud of me when I graduate.

> M-4   They keep giving me advice through life 'cause they've been through it all the hard way. They don't want me to do the same. Encouragement.

M-2   They encourage me. They give me advice and stuff like that . . but if I skip and do whatever I want, they're not going to come at me about it because they can't stop me. I'm doing this for my parents because they've been pushing me my whole life . . . until I hit grade 12 and now they can't say nothin'. They're still behind me, though.

M-1   Yeah. Not just my family but relatives . . . .

M-3   I'll be the first in my family to graduate, except for my auntie who graduated 12 years ago. She's the only one who ever grad-ed. My cousin's graduating this year, too.

M-4   I have cousins now out of college with good jobs. Both brothers both graduated, my aunties . . . .

Siblings

The male focus group did not experience older siblings as support systems like the female group did although two participants hope to learn from their brothers' choices.

M-3   I can see my older brother's mistakes and I don't want to be doing that. My brother got accepted at Cariboo (College) but he didn't go down. He went to (village) instead because he had a girlfriend up there.

M-2   My brother was in grade 12 and, like, dropped out two months before graduation.

M-1   My older brother doesn't say anything to me.

Peers

Very little was said on the influence of peers and the statements reflected disparate viewpoints:

M-5   Some friends try to keep you in school.

M-4   Need to be with my friends. . . who are in school.

M-2   I have some friends who don't go to school.

M-5   I just ignore them . . say I have homework to do.

M-4   I have a friend who graduated two years ago. She was really good in school. She lives down the street from me so I go to her house all the time . . . almost every night now. She's helping me with, like, poetry and math and stuff. She's like a tutor.

Self-Concept

> M-2   A big one is my reputation. I have many friends and I wouldn't want to let them down because . . . it's just like a 'rep' thing. I don't want to be seen as the loser, the quitter, you know.
>
> M-4   Yeah . . . 'cause they're all crack heads. Most of the people that I know who have dropped out are druggies.
>
> M-2   Yeah. I don't want to be like them.

Farrell's (1990) research talks about this same separation that at-risk students make between themselves and those who have dropped out because of drugs.

Counsellors

Counsellors were not directly introduced to the group. The group was asked if they found support from any other areas.

> M-3   Counsellors have helped . . . moral support and . . . .
>
> M-5   The counsellors help to give me ideas for what you want to be for a career.
>
> M-2   I feel a counsellor has helped me more than a teacher has.

Prioritized List of Supports

To conclude session 2, the participants prioritized their support systems:

1. Family

2. Self-Motivation: Graduation/Career/Future

3. Friends

4. Reputation

5. Involvement in Graduation Activities

6. Counsellors

7. Teachers: Flexibility/help with work

8. Involvement in School: Sports/Gym Riot (a half day activity)

COMPARISONS & DISCUSSION

Stark differences between the two focus groups were noted as early as the Recruitment phase. At this initial stage of the process, the females were anxious to be part of a group study whereas the males were hesitant to participate in a group setting.

The female group members willingly shared very personal experiences and the focus group could easily have developed into a group counselling session. They welcomed the opportunity to share their lives with one another and expressed the opinion that the process itself was cathartic. As the researcher, I had to constantly remind myself that I was not in a group counselling session; that this was a focus group interview and those parameters had to be maintained.

The male focus group differed significantly. The group sessions were shorter in length, their responses were briefer, and more prompts had to be employed as compared to the female group. Also, humour among the male participants was evident. A short comment followed by group laughter was not uncommon. As a point of curiosity, the researcher asked the male focus group, "Would the group have been different if run by a male counsellor?" The answer, "No."

The female group generated far more discussion than did the male group. The female group continued for 3 sessions; the male group for 2 sessions. The total amount of discussion for both groups on barriers to successful graduation was considerably more than the discussion about supports to graduation. Note the approximate word count:

	Females	Males
Barriers	6800	2500
Supports	1500	1100
Total	8300	3600

To make the comparison clearer, the following lists, as prioritized by the groups, may be helpful:

BARRIERS

FEMALE GROUP

1. Stress
2. Low Self-Esteem
3. Fear of Graduation
4. Abuse: Emotional, Mental, Physical
5. Friends
6. Alcohol/Drugs
7. Boyfriends
8. Family and Motherhood Issues
9. Low Skill Level
10. Teachers / Authority
11. Transition from Village
12. Jobs

MALE GROUP

1. Loss: Family & Friends
2. Teachers
3. Parties: Alcohol, Drugs, Girls
4. Attitude toward School
5. Attendance, Tardiness
6. Self-Motivation
7. Peer Pressure
8. Personal Life Style
9. Low Skill Level

SUPPORTS

FEMALE GROUP

1. Self-Respect
2. Praise
3. Parents / Siblings
4. Friends / Social Scene
5. Teachers / Counsellors / Course
6. Graduation
7. College / Post Secondary

MALE GROUP

1. Parents / Extended Family
2. Self-Motivation: Graduation / Career
3. Friends
4. Reputation (Self-Respect)
5. Grad Activities
6. School Counsellors
7. Teachers
8. School Activities

What issues do the two groups have in common and what issues are gender-based according to the perceptions of these students? The following lists clearly demonstrate where the differences and commonalities lay although the common items may hold little priority for both groups.

BARRIERS

Barrier	Female	Male
Friends / Peer Pressure	x	x
Alcohol	x	x
Drugs	x	x
Teachers / Authority	x	x
Low Skill Level	x	x
Stress	x	
Low Self-Esteem	x	
Fear of Graduation	x	
Abuse: Emotional, Mental, Physical	x	
Relationship with Boyfriend	x	
Family and Mother / Fatherhood Issues	x	
Jobs	x	
Loss: Family & Friends		x
Attitude toward School		x
Attendance, Tardiness		x
Self-Motivation		x
Personal Life Style		x

SUPPORTS

Supports	Female	Male
Self-Respect / Reputation	x	x
Parents / Extended Family	x	x
Friends / Social Scene	x	x
Teachers / Course	x	x
School Counsellors	x	x
Graduation	x	x
Self-Motivation: Graduation / Career	x	x
Praise	x	
Older Siblings	x	
Grad Activities		x
School Activities: Sports/Gym Riot		x

It is interesting to note that the female group's top four barriers or issues that hinder successful graduation--stress, low self-esteem, fear of graduation, and abuse-- are not at all factors of concern for the male group. Although the girls listed relationships with boyfriends as #8, it is a very intense issue for half the female group, and once again, is not an issue for the male group.

On the other hand, the male group emphasized the loss of friends as their #1 barrier. This illustrates their personal struggle with the death of three of their peer group. A fourth member of their peer group also experienced an accident that left him paralyzed from the chest down. The following three male barriers--teachers, the party scene, and attitude toward school are touched upon by the female group but the males

ascribe more importance to these issues. Only five issues overlap: influence of friends, alcohol, drugs, teachers and low skill level.

There appears to be far more in common when comparing the support systems that underlie their perseverance and determination to graduate. In fact, three of the top four issues prioritized by both groups are generic: family members, friends, and respect, either from self or others. All but one support item on the female list are listed by the male group as well. These issues include, albeit prioritized differently, teachers and school counsellors, graduation, and future career goals.

The one form of support that is meaningful to the females--listed as their #2 issue --and is not mentioned by the male group is the motivational aspect of receiving praise.

Two points that are itemized by the males that are not a factor for the girls are the graduation activities and, judged to be least significant, school activities.

Overall, it is important to note that barriers to graduation are more gender based than are the supports systems for these two groups.

How do these findings compare with the existing Drop Out literature?

Although research on the school dropout phenomenon has been in existence in America for the last century, the researcher was unable to locate any self-report research on at-risk grade 12 students.

As already discussed in the Literature Review section, Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock suggest that "about one-third of all dropouts leave high school because they do not achieve in school and/or because they are alienated from school" (1986, p. 364). Keep in mind that Ekstrom et al. is talking about dropouts whereas the current project is about those students who are still enrolled in their grade 12 year.

Diem's self-report survey given to at-risk students from grades 9 to 11 gleans results similar to Ekstrom's, supporting the argument that alienation and lack of success

are major factors that impact on dropping out.

Barrington (1989) focused on the differences between student dropouts, graduates, nongraduates returning for another year, and nongraduates who did not continue. His study utilized school records to predict who would graduate and who would dropout. His findings on the potential dropout's poor attendance patterns and low academic skills are consistent with other research and, for the most part, correspond with the self-report barriers in the present study.

The current study is also consistent with the dropout literature by Britt (1995) and Farrell (1990). They confirm the inordinate amount of time at-risk students spend "hanging out" with friends and the impact alcohol and drug use have on student achievement. These writers also refer to lack of parental support and encouragement. This point is not totally substantiated by the present focus group members. Their parents provide ample encouragement to graduate, although it appears that guardians have no control in terms of monitoring their children's out-of-school activities, attendance and tardiness, or homework completion--all elements that affect academic success.

Low academic skill level is emphasized as a major contributor to the dropout rate. In this study, half the female group exhibit signs of determination to pass English 12 (a course that demands a high level of skill) for future college aspirations rather than settle for the easier Communications 12 course. The male group, on the other hand, is more inclined to avoid the more demanding courses.

The literature suggests that alienation is a major dropout factor. This is not the case for the grade 12 students, especially the male group. For them, friends and grade 12 graduation activities sustain their involvement in school. Rumberger (1986, p. 9) states that dropouts have "friends who are dropouts". Even though the focus group participants have friends in this category, they also have a peer group who are still

attending school. There appears to be sufficient pressure from friends, as well as siblings and parents, to graduate.

Farrell"s (1990) "Multiple Selves and the At-Risk Student" holds some validity for this project. Farrell's premise is that the at-risk student is in the wrong place (school) at the wrong time (adolescence). It would seem that the at-risk grade 12 student, having maintained his or her place in the school system, is struggling to be in the right place, at the right time. This struggle is particularly evident for the female students who are committed to serious adult relationships. Wehlage and Rutter (1986) and Ekstrom et al. (1986) attribute marriage and pregnancy as a dominant contributor to the female dropout rate. Although the females in this study are not married, two of the participants are in a live-in situation with their partners. The self-as-student has and continues to battle with various other selves, and a winner has not yet been declared.

Based on the current focus group interviews, the researcher proposes that the reasons for being at-risk at this stage of their education is very different for females than it is for males. It appears that the barriers the male focus group depict are closer to the existing research than are the barriers the female focus group present.

What does not exist is a student explanation of the at-risk high school student that is defined by grade level. It would seem that the profile of the at-risk grade 8 student would be very different from the at-risk grade 12 student. For one thing, the grade 12 student has exhibited the perseverance to complete high school.

The literature does not deal with the topic of at-risk students from a positive perspective. One might assume that since these students have been chronically at-risk for some time, the alienation and lack of success discussed by researchers has not been severe enough to warrant dropping out. These students have managed to maintain enough success to prolong their stay in high school and all have a desire to attain their graduation diploma. Based on the current focus groups, two main areas

have contributed to their perseverance: personal pride and parental encouragement to graduate.

Post Script

Semester one is now complete. Three of the six female group members no longer qualify for graduation this year.

- One participant is pregnant and although she has no immediate plans to move from home to live with the father of her child, she has emotionally withdrawn from school. She thought that perhaps she would manage attending part-time but that is not working out.

- Another participant who lives with her boyfriend did not pass some required courses for graduation in semester one and cannot make up enough of these credits in semester two. She is still attending although she is aware that she cannot graduate this year.

- The third group member, who also lives with her boyfriend, has withdrawn from school. She continues to pursue her graduation through Distance Education.

All five male group members still qualify for graduation this year.

- Two students failed the required math credit. Their timetables were adjusted to allow them to enrol in the PathFinder Program to complete Math 11A. Although most students would not complete a course within one semester in this self-paced program, it does keep them on the graduation eligibility list for the Walk-Up Ceremony in May. (The Walk-Up eligibility list will be re-visited for all potential graduates after the mid-term break).

APPLICATIONS

Can the results of this project be used for the benefit of these students? Possible outcomes that may emerge from participation in the focus group in and of itself are:

- A support network between members may emerge out of the sharing and comparing experience;
- The knowledge that they are not alone in surmounting barriers may be helpful in itself;
- The sharing of perceptions and experiences that foster perseverance may be helpful to other group members and motivating to each participant;
- An informal support group may evolve spontaneously from the focus group.

Also, this focus group research project may prompt the formation of a formal group for at-risk students--one that is leader-led with a structured program that speaks to the main issues that arise out of the focus groups. This group could meet regularly for educational and support services. Each session could be structured around an introductory activity, followed by a review of the previous session, a weekly update on attendance and academic progress, and the "topic of the day", i.e., issues that are supportive and/or detrimental to academic success. Each session would terminate with a summary of the group process and feedback for future sessions.

Based on the findings of the current project, it may be wise to form gender-based groups. The issues, especially as they pertain to the barriers, are too divergent to endorse coed groups.

Further research on the barriers and supports of at-risk grade 12 students is warranted. Results may substantiate the findings of this project and/or expand on the barriers and support systems that are peculiar to the grade 12 at-risk student.

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Appendix A

Common Identifiers of At-Risk Youth

Demographic and Background Factors

- low socioeconomic background

- member of a minority group

- older and male

- urban rather than rural schools

Family Background

- from a single parent home, typically with mom working

- low educational and occupational attainment of parents

- low family income

- language other than English is spoken in the home

- absence of learning materials and opportunities in the home

- minimal parental concern with, or supervision of, students' activities

- little family encouragement for staying in school

- infrequent discussions with parents regarding future educational or
  employment plans

- prefers to work or has to work to help out their families

Educational and School-Related Factors

- history of failure; lack of academic preparation

- poor academic achievement

- poor basic skills in reading and math

- lower intelligence scores

- lack of interest in school and school work

- negative attitude toward learning

- behaviour problems such as truancy, absenteeism, tardiness, and
  suspensions for inappropriate behaviour

- repetition of one or more grades

- some form of handicap or limiting condition

- feels alienated from school life

- lower level of educational aspirations

- infrequent discussions with teachers and counsellors regarding future
  educational and/or employment plans

- little knowledge of the labour market

Out-of-School Behaviours

- spends considerable time 'hanging out"

- not likely to discuss their experiences with their parents

- spends little time reading and doing homework

- likely to use alcohol and drugs

- works more hours per week and receives a higher hourly wage than non-
  dropouts

- perceives job as more important and enjoyable than school

Personal and Social Psychological Factors

- poor attitudes about school

- low level of occupational aspiration

- low levels of self-esteem, social maturity, and career maturity

- more externalized sense of control, indicating that they feel little sense of control over their lives
- females likely to believe that a woman's place is in the home or that the man should be the major wage earner
- more likely to value money
- poor health
- has not internalized a belief in the value and importance of education
- has not internalized a strong sense of meeting responsibilities and social norms

Peer Group Influence

- little attention in this area in the dropout literature (see Farrell)
- friendships with others whose attitudes and behaviour toward school are negative

Self-Report Factors

- does not like school
- attains poor grades
- chooses work over school
- does not get along with teachers
- helps to support family
- pregnancy/ marriage
- expelled or suspended
- no involvement in school activities
- little parental support or encouragement

Appendix B

Participant Consent Form

I _____ agree to participate in a
please print name
research project being conducted by Linda Ostoforoff, PRSS counselling staff.

I understand that the purpose of this study is to find out about the supports and barriers that have impacted on my high school education.

I understand that scheduled interviews will be audio taped. I further understand that provisions have been made to ensure that my identity is not linked to any information that I give in the focus interview sessions.

I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

I understand that to prevent violations of my own or others' privacy, I have been asked to respect the privacy of the other members of the group by not disclosing any personal information that they share during our discussion.

I understand that for the purposes of this study, the researcher may choose to review my permanent record card which lists schools attended, courses completed and achievement.

The researcher has offered to answer any questions I may have about the study and what I am expected to do.

I have read and understand this information and I agree to take part in the study.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C

Information Sheet

December , 2000

Dear Parent or Guardian:

Hello. My name is Linda Ostoforoff. I am a school counsellor for School District #52 and a graduate student at the University of Northern British Columbia.

I am conducting a study aimed at understanding the perceived support systems and barriers that impact on grade 12 students. This study will fulfil the research requirement for a Master of Education degree in Counselling. Approval and support for this project has been granted by School District #52 and the University of Northern British Columbia.

During semester 1 of this year, I plan to conduct group interviews to explore the opinions of these students. A number of 50 minute sessions are planned and will be scheduled within a two week period. Teacher permission will be requested as the sessions will be scheduled from 11:00 am to 11:50 am. (Twenty minutes per session of class time will be missed).

Through this study, I hope to determine those areas that support the successful completion of high school as well as to identify the barriers or issues that may prevent successful graduation. The ultimate purpose of this project is to make high school graduation a reality in the grade 12 year for these students. Information from the participants may lead to better school supports being in place. To that end, the students' opinions are highly valued.

I hope you will be willing to support this endeavour. If you have questions that you would like answered, please feel free to contact me at 624-6757 or my supervisor, Dr. Bryan Hartman at 250-960-6629.

Thank you for your attention and support.

Sincerely,

Linda Ostoforoff

Appendix D

Parental Consent Form

Dear Parent(s),

A research project aimed at understanding the barriers and support systems of grade 12 students is being conducted by Linda Ostoforoff, a school counsellor at Prince Rupert Secondary School. Your son/daughter is being asked to participate in focus group interviews to identify these barriers and support systems.

The information from the interviews will be used for my research project. All information will be kept confidential except when there is an ethical responsibility to limit confidentiality. I have an obligation to report circumstances of child abuse or threats of harm to others to the appropriate authorities. The study will not identify participants by name or implication. A summary of findings will be available for those who wish to obtain a copy.

Please direct any questions to either me or my university research project supervisor. The phone numbers are listed below.

Parental Consent Form

I, _____ , have read the information above and I understand that my son/daughter's participation in these interviews is purely voluntary and that he/she may withdraw at any time. My signature below certifies that I consent to my son/daughter's participation. A copy of this consent form is available at my request by contacting Mrs. Ostoforoff at the school.

Name of Student: _____ Date _____

Signature of Student: _____

Signature: _____ (Parent/Guardian)

Thank you for your cooperation.

Linda Ostoforoff, School Counsellor
Phone: 624-6757

Dr. Bryan Hartman, UNBC Supervisor
Phone: (250) 960-6629

Appendix E

Interview Question Guide

The purpose of this focus interview is to understand your perceptions, opinions, and ideas regarding your high school education.

1. **Introductory Question**: Introduce yourself and tell us one thing you would like us to know about you.

2. **Transition Question**: When you hear the words, "at-risk", what comes to your mind?

3. **Key Question**: You have all exhibited a certain perseverance to remain in school. What has kept you in school? (Brainstorm ideas and list on flip chart).

4. **Key Question**: What do you see as the barriers to successfully graduating this year? What issues would prevent you from being successful? (Brainstorm ideas and list on flip chart).

5. **Key Questions**: Use probes and follow up questions regarding the two main questions. Examples:
   • Who else has some thoughts about this - maybe something a little different?
   • What else have people experienced in this area?
   • You've been discussing several different ideas; what haven't we heard yet?
   • Remember, we want to hear all your opinions; who has something else?

5. **Key Questions**: The research suggests the following areas have a bearing on at-risk students. Are they a factor for you? (Probe if these issues have not already surfaced).

   • Attendance and promptness issues

   • Low skill level, i.e., the work is hard

   • Commitment to school

   • Peer relationships

   • Family issues

   • Relationship issues with a significant other

   • Sexual issues

   • Personal life style goals and issues

   • Career planning and goal setting

   • Other possible issues: drugs, alcohol, physical/emotional health, stress management and time management

6. **Ending Question**: Of all the issues we discussed, which ones are most important to you?

7. **Ending Question**: (After summarizing key questions and main ideas that emerged from the discussions) Is this an adequate summary? Is there anything we should have talked about but didn't?

8. **Final Question**: Are there any changes you would like to make regarding our final outcomes? (additions? deletions? inferences?)