Young Adults' Perceptions of Their School Years: Gaining insights into the complexities

of identified factors related to future academic choices

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Abstract

The process of completing high school or its, alternative dropping out, is impacted by a variety of factors that could be a part of an individual's psychological processes, psychosocial influences, or both. The outcome of these two processes can affect a person's academic, personal, and professional lives and ultimately the transition to adulthood which can impact later productivity (Pagani et al., 2008). Lucio, Hunt, and Bornovalova (2011) believe that educational achievement is a consequence of multi-dimensional interacting variables including family, community, school, peers, and the individuals themselves. This creates a complicated web of interconnecting and overlapping variables that have been directly and indirectly associated with academic success and failure. Those variables, which have been connected to educational outcomes, have been explored through many studies that have used a quantitative approach but there are limited studies that have explored them through individuals' perceptions of school experience. Therefore, there is a need in the literature to gain insights into individuals' perceptions of their schooling experience. The purpose of this study is to gain insights into the lived experiences of youth who have completed high school but did not pursue a post-secondary education. This study explored the perceptions of youth who did not pursue or did not complete post-secondary education. This qualitative approach values the lived experiences of youth and gives recognition to their voices. It is hoped that this research will help to expand knowledge and understanding of issues that influence educational decisions on the part of students, and could ultimately contribute to the improvement of services that which a teacher, school psychologist, guidance counsellor, and other professionals can plan for and provide.

Participants in this study were four young adults from a rural area in eastern Canada: two males and two females ranging from 19 to 23 years of age. Qualitative methodology was used

for the research design and each participant completed a semi-structured interview. Grounded theory methods were used to analyze the data.

Four themes emerged from the data. These themes were: individual factors, made up of values, attitudes and student engagement; support factors, indicated by parental and teacher support; contextual factors influenced by academic and social organization; and decisions and reflections, constituted by the concepts of familiarity and reflection. These four themes provide a way of conceptualizing how young adults perceive their time in schools and how those perceptions may influence future academic decisions.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

In educational research, both completion of high school and dropping out are events defined as developing over time, where graduation is the culmination of learning, skill development, and achievement, and where dropping out is a gradual disengagement that begins in childhood (Marcus and Sanders-Reio, 2001). The early development of attachment bonds, and the relationships along with the positive and negative behaviours which result, set an early path toward school completion or dropping out. The emotional bond a child develops with a parent will eventually transfer over into peer and teacher relationships as well as into the school setting which can have effects on academic progress (Marcus and Sanders-Reio, 2001). Furthermore, school dropout is the starting point to a long road that has been linked to a variety of negative outcomes such as unemployment, teenage parenthood, addiction, and crime (Marcus and Sanders-Reio, 2001). Such negative outcomes can translate into costs to communities and may include an increased likelihood of deviant and criminal behavior in schools and neighborhoods that contain higher rates of individuals who do not complete high school (Murry & Naranjo, 2008). Basic educational attainment has been found in research to play a key role in predicting the attainment of both social and economic resources as well as in predicting health behaviours and outcomes throughout adulthood (Pagani et al., 2008). Educational level was found to be related to the likelihood of employment, job status, and income in the general population (Mueser et al., 2012). Practical costs to the broader society may also be impacted and include increased dependence on social programs, increased costs associated with incarceration as well as loss of potential contributions to the economy (Murry & Naranjo, 2008). Therefore, education represents a beneficial life strength that influences a person's positive well-being especially

when weighed against the multitude of negative outcomes possible when dropout is probable (Bishop & Martin, 2007).

"Although educational experiences happen, for most, early in life, there is a long-term expectation that the early vested interest in education will have beneficial, long-term gains (Bishop & Martin, 2007 p.899)". For years research has been telling us that early life experiences shape psychosocial variables in ways that also influence later life outcomes. Therefore, investigators have acknowledged that the association between early experiences and outcomes in late adulthood is significantly mediated by psychosocial variables (Bishop & Martin, 2007). It was proposed by Hobfall (1989) that stress can revolve around resources accumulated or not throughout one's lifetime in the sense that such resources, whether they are lost, lacked, or gained can produce stress. Bishop and Martain (2007) state that those individuals who experience difficulty or failure in school (a loss of resources) eventually come to devalue education (lack of gained resource). As a result, individuals may develop decreased motivation to seek or attain higher levels of education, or they may choose to discontinue postsecondary education. Therefore, when such an individual experiences disappointment early in life, vulnerability to stressors can increase and may lead to negative psychological outcomes later (Bishop & Martin, 2007). Education represents an important early resource that shapes well-being in later life whether positively or negatively (Bishop & Martin, 2007).

Academic Success and Factors that Allow Students to Succeed

Lucio, Rapp-Paglicci, and Rowe (2011) believe, based on their review of the literature that educational achievement is a consequence of multi-dimensional interacting factors, including family, community, school, peers, and the individuals themselves. Aviles, Anderson, and Davila (2006), discuss the developmental psychopathology approach as understanding youth

as being in active relationships between the developing individual and their internal/external contexts. The approach allows researchers to determine contexts which impact upon a youth's future outcomes both negatively and positively, however there is less research focused on the positive outcomes. In addition, Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, and Carlson (2000) argue that negative academic outcomes rarely occur without warning, but rather are a process that starts early, accumulates, and seriously impact upon later development. Thus, it is implied that if such contexts and processes can be identified early, then negative outcomes have the potential to be negated.

Individual Predictors

Attitudes.

A number of researchers have examined various psychological variables that may contribute to academic success by looking at educational situations in which specific psychological variables could have an impact. For example, a positive self-concept is considered to be one variable that serves to mediate in the facilitation of educational attainment (Marsh, 1990) and is considered a relevant psychological construct influencing many educational outcomes directly or indirectly (Wouters et al., 2011). Academic self-concept is defined as an 'evaluative self-perception that is formed through the student's experience and interpretation of the school environment' (Guay, Ratelle, Roy, & Litalien, 2010, p. 644). Wouters et al., (2011) examined the predictors, as well as consequences of academic self-concept in late adolescence. The results of their study indicated that students with a more positive academic self-concept in high school tended to be more successful in coping with new academic demands once enrolled in higher education and had a higher chance of succeeding in their first year.

According to Lee, Daniels, Puig, Newgent, and Nam (2008) several studies in the 1960s and 1970s examined the association between self-concept and educational attainment, and found that the students' positive self-concept is part of the foundation for educational progress. The literature on the direction of the relationship between academic self-concept and academic achievement has been a critical issue in the field, and remains to have multiple views based on differing models of theoretical perspectives. According to the self-enhancement model, self concept is a determinant of academic achievement, whereas the skill development model proposes that academic self-concept is a consequence of academic achievement (Guay et al., 2010). However, according to Marsh and colleagues (1997), comparing these effects to support either model is insufficient. A more realistic way of doing so would be through a reciprocal-effects model, where prior self-concept predicts subsequent achievement and prior achievement predicts subsequent self-concept. Marsh and Yeung (1997) examined this causal relationship between academic self-concept and academic achievement in a three-wave study spanning three years. Participants were 603 students between 7 and 10 years of age in the first wave of the study. Researchers used a multidimensional academic self-concept instrument Academic Self Description Questionnaire (ASDQ) to measure academic self concept. For academic achievement, school grades and teacher performance ratings were obtained from school records at the end of each semester. The findings of the investigation clearly support the conclusion that prior academic achievement effects subsequent academic self-concept. The results of the investigation clearly support the usefulness of academic self-concept, not only as an important outcome variable in its own right but, also as a mediating variable that facilitates the attainment of other desirable outcomes.

Several researchers (Parker, 1994; Shepherd, Owen, Fitch, & Marshall, 2006) have suggested that locus of control is another important psychological variable that relates to academic success. Locus of control is defined as a center of perceived responsibility for one's behaviour. Individuals with an internal locus of control believe that they can control events related to their life, whereas those with an external locus of control tend to believe that real power resides in forces outside themselves that determines their life. It is argued that individuals who internalize their locus of control tend to attain greater academic success and is also associated with higher self-motivation, superior academic performance, and greater educational attainment (Nelson & Kristi, 1995; Parker, 1994). Locus of control had a direct effect on postsecondary educational attainment, with students who had an internal locus of control in the 8th grade achieving higher postsecondary educational attainment. Significant direct effects as well as indirect effects on educational attainment were found from the student academic expectation variable. In other words, low-SES students who expected a higher level of educational degree when they were in 8th grade were more likely to attain a higher degree in later years.

Casillas et al (2012) conducted several single-sample studies which examined the direct and indirect effects such as self-efficacy, motivation, and locus of control, (Grigorenko et al., 2009; Yen, Konold, & McDermott; as cited in Casillas et al., 2012). According to Grigorenko and others (2009) self-regulated learning increases in validity even after controlling for standardized achievement scores and grade point average (GPA). These findings are consistent with a large study that reviewed student success research conducted in elementary and middle schools, where social and emotional learning (SEL) constructs of self and social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision making were found to be key

indicators of student academic performance (Casillas et al., 2012). Casillas et al (2012) summarized a study by Kanfer and Heggestad (1997, 1999) which demonstrated the importance of self-regulation as being a point of origin for goal orientated behaviours when examining the development of learning. Motivation and self-regulation are made up of three critical processes: self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and self-reactions which reflect a student's internal ability to motivate them to do well and to succeed (Casilla et al., 2012). More specifically, Casillas et al (2012) summarized from previous research that having a lower level of self-regulation makes pursuing and meeting goals less likely and reduces overall learning motivation. Conversely, students who demonstrate high motivation and are self-regulated learners often have better chances to achieve positive academic outcomes.

Behaviours.

According to Caraway, Tucker, Reinke and Hall (2003) school engagement entails behavioural, affective, and cognitive components that reflect commitment to learning and successful academic performance. It describes students' feelings, behaviours, and thoughts about their school experiences (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011). In one study by Reyes et al (2002), middle school students who reported higher levels of engagement were 75% more likely to have higher grades and attend school regularly than those with lower levels of engagement. Engaged students are attentive, participate in class discussions, and put forth effort in class activities, as well as exhibit interest and motivation to learn. Students who are not engaged are more passive learners and report being bored, anxious, or even angry about being in the classroom (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Effective learning is therefore contingent upon the extent to which students are engaged in classroom learning activities. According to Jimmerson's et al (2003) review of school engagement literature, school engagement is made up of three dimensions: affect, behaviour, and

cognitive and therefore is defined as a multifaceted phenomenon. Each dimension is described as reflecting an area of school relatedness such as the affective dimension reflects an emotional link such as a sense of belonging. The behavioural dimension reflects the observable actions or performance referring to specific school related activities such as: completing homework, attendance, grades, and paying attention. Finally, the cognitive dimension reflects students' perceptions and beliefs related to self, school, teachers, and other students which make up the constructs of self-efficacy, motivation and aspirations.

Dotterer & Lowe (2011) assessed the three dimensions of school engagement (affect, behaviour, and cognitive) using the terms behavioural and psychological engagement. Their study used a multi-method, longitudinal approach which included self-reports and observational assessments of 1,364 children in the United States. Their study utilized data from a larger study, which was conducted between 2000 and 2005. Their research advanced prior research on school engagement and academic achievement by including theoretical and procedural improvements that allowed for stronger tests of the antecedents and consequences of school engagement for all students. Overall, the results from the study indicated that instructional quality, socio-emotional climate, and the quality of student-teacher relationships were the three main factors that determined classroom context and all related to both school engagement and academic achievement. Thus, in order to reduce or prevent disengagement, schools might focus on enhancing these three aspects of classroom context to promote school engagement and ultimately reduce or prevent academic-failure.

Contextual Predictors

Parental support.

Parental involvement is viewed as multidimensional in nature. According to literature on parent involvement relating to academic achievement, there is little consistent evidence that parent involvement leads to greater school attainment for children. It is apparent in the research that inconsistencies continue to plaque researchers. In Fan and Chen's (2001) meta-analysis of quantitative literature of the relationship between parental involvement and students' academic achievement, the authors conclude that although parent involvement in school is significantly associated with academic achievement, there is still a great amount of variation among individual studies. More specifically from the analysis, Fan and Chen (2001) found that parent involvement in the home (as measured by parental supervision) is not significantly associated with academic achievement, but that it may be parental expectations and desire for their children's achievement that actually lead to school success. However, Barnard (2004) used data from the Chicago Longitudinal Study (CLS), in order to examine the relation between parent involvement in elementary school and children's high-school success. Parent ratings of their home involvement with their child during, second, fourth, and sixth grade were collected. Parents were asked how often they: (1) read to their child, (2) cooked with their child, (3) discussed school progress with their child, and (4) went on outings with their child. Parent ratings of amount of participation in the school were collected during the same grade levels and were asked how often they did the following activities: (1) participate in school activities; (2) talk with the teacher about their child; and (3) help in the child's classroom. Teacher ratings of parent involvement were also obtained and based upon teacher reports from the first through sixth grade.

The teacher ratings of school involvement were significantly associated with all educational attainment variables, indicating that the more years a teacher rated a child's parent participation as average or better was significantly associated with lower rates of school dropout,

higher rates of high school completion, and more years of school completed. The major

contribution of the study was the examination of the long-term effects of parent involvement. It

examined the association between parent involvement in elementary school and indicators of

school success at age 14 and age 20, and found a significant association between parent

involvement in early school and long-term success. Therefore, efforts to involve parents in their

child's education early in the educational process appear to have positive benefits lasting into

adulthood.

Storm and Boster (2011) found that an increase in supportive communication between

parents and students decreased academic stress for students and influenced students'

achievement in school as well as school completion. Specifically, the authors examined two

types of social support, emotional and instrumental, which have received considerable attention

in the support literature. Emotional support, as defined by Storm and Boster (2011), involves

expressions of care, concern, sympathy, understanding, and encouragement. Emotional support

has also been regularly identified as either the most helpful or one of the most helpful forms of

assistance. Storm and Boster (2011) defined instrumental support as tangible assistance, such as

physical assistance, advice or guidance and may include offers of information about resources

and advice about effectiveness. Sharing information about a problem is experienced as helpful,

provided the information is viewed as relevant to the problem (Cutrona, Suhr, & McFarlane; as

cited in Storm and Boster, 2011). Researchers have linked perceived support from family with

student's academic outcomes, specifically, students' academic performance and student learning

in school (Storm and Boster, 2011). Parental academic support, a combination of attendance at

PTA meetings and volunteering at school activities (Instrumental support), was strongly

associated with school completion (Marcus and Sanders-Reio, 2001). Students were found to

perform better in school and remain in school when their parents had high academic expectations of them, talked to them about school, and helped them with their homework (Emotional support).

Teacher support.

Access to competent teachers is one of the most unfairly distributed resources in the United States between disadvantaged and more affluent students. This is relevant as students' perceptions of teacher support have been consistently linked with increased achievement motivation, academic success, and feelings of well-being (Becker & Luthar, 2002). During the middle school years, it is important for students to develop positive relationships with teachers as, during adolescence, students need for adult mentors and support from non-parental adults increase. Significantly, students' reports of supportive relationships with teachers decrease after the transition from elementary to middle school. Students who perceive that teachers encourage and support them are more committed to learning and more successful academically. Such perceptions facilitate positive self-fulfilling prophecies that promote student achievement in keeping with those expectations (Becker & Luther, 2002). A study examined by Becker and Luthar (2002) by Murdock (1999) found seventh graders' perceptions of their teachers' evaluation and support to be the most consistent and significant predictor of student achievement outcomes. In addition, other studies summarized by Beckar and Luthar (2002) revealed that perceived teacher encouragement explained more than one third of the variance in students' expectations for success

Peer support.

Positive influences of peer attachment on school adjustment and performance can be seen as early as kindergarten. Children who had more friends when they entered school and who maintained these friendships liked school more and performed better academically than those

rejected by their peers (Marcus and Sanders-Reio, 2001). Research within the field of peer attachment has shown that 'positive social relationships can create powerful incentives for students to show up to school, even with students who report that school work is difficult and expectations are hard to meet' (Lee and Burkam, 2003 pg. 363). Nelson and DeBecker (2008) used a theory of personal investment to investigate the associations among perceived peer relationships and achievement motivation among teenagers. Peer climate variables and best friend variables each resulted in significant increases in variance accounted for in intimacy, approval, responsibility goals, and mastery goals which is consistent with the researchers contention that multiple peer contexts are likely to contribute to adolescents' motivation. It was also found that adolescents who perceived they were valuable and respected members of the classroom community reported higher levels of self-efficacy and mastery, performance-approach, intimacy, and responsibility goals, each of which is positively associated with student achievement. In other words, perceiving that a best friend values academics and having an intimate and caring friendship with a best friend were positively related to adaptive achievement motivation.

Summary

In summary, educational achievement is a consequence of multi-dimensional interacting factors that include family, community, school, peers and the individuals themselves. Countless studies have examined a multitude of specific factors relating to student achievement, but there is little consistency across the literature as to which ones can be accurately identified. Self-concept, locus of control, and self-regulation have been identified as contributing to the facilitation of educational attainment. Self-concept has been recognized as the student's evaluation of their personal perceptions of school which are formed by experiences and interpretations of their

educational environment. This psychological variable is easily connected to parental expectations and parental desire for their child's success in school, as expectations are perceived and interpreted by the child and influence how they perceive themselves. This psychosocial variable, if grounded in positivity and encouragement, has been recognized as leading to school success. Linked to self-concept is the variable of locus of control, which is at the center of how a student perceives the level of responsibility he or she must take in regards to his or her behaviour. Students who internalize their locus of control tend to attain greater academic success and demonstrate higher levels of self-motivation which is a construct associated with the third psychological variable identified, self-regulated learning. Self-regulated learning is the point of origin for goal oriented behaviours when examining the development of learning and has been linked to the psychosocial variable of student-teacher relationships. Student perceptions of teacher support have been consistently linked with increased achievement motivation and academic success. Students who feel that their teachers support and encourage them are more committed to learning and more successful academically. Ultimately, the variables at play in regards to student achievement are interrelated and act together to mediate the facilitation of overall student engagement, which is a key piece in a student's commitment to learning and successful academic performance.

Factors That Can Get in the Way of Success

Experiences and progress throughout the school years pay a crucial role in a student's transition from childhood to adulthood; therefore dropping out of school is viewed as harmful in regards to future development and transitions into adulthood (Lee and Burkam, 2003). Those who fail to complete school are more likely to be unemployed, use drugs, need welfare, and become incarcerated (Storm and Boster, 2011). Just as there are many factors that influence

academic achievement, there are many that can get in the way of such academic success. Valdez et al (2011) found that children with low academic achievement in one or more areas of academics (reading, math) may experience feelings of low self-concept and low sense of control; psychological variables discussed earlier as being essential to educational attainment. Children with an early history of low academic achievement are particularly vulnerable to grade retention, school failure, disruptive behaviour, and depression in adolescence. These constructs have been found to jeopardize students' capabilities in academics if not present. Storm and Boster (2007) believe that rather than focusing on individual characteristics only, it is important to understand the contexts within, and the people with whom students interact when attempting to determine prevention or remediation interventions.

Contextual Factors

Schools.

In a study conducted by Lee and Berkam (2003), the researchers characterized schools along three dimensions: school structure, academic organization, and social organization and briefly reviewed the literature connecting each category to academic achievement. Schools can be characterized by their structural components such as where a school is located and enrollment size. Rumberger and Thomas (2000) demonstrated that sector, urbanicity, and size all were related to dropping out. Once factors such as school demographic composition, resources, and attendance were accounted for, dropout rates were still higher in urban, public, and large schools. Lee and Smith (2007) demonstrated that students learned more, and that learning was more fairly distributed by student SES, in high schools that enrolled 600-900 students. It was also found that size influenced learning most strongly in low SES schools.

Another aspect of school factors that Lee and Burkam (2003) focused on was the structure of the high school curriculum. When the school curriculum consisted of largely academic courses and very few low-level courses, it was considered a constrained curriculum, as typically students must complete a majority of these courses to graduate. Basically the literature reveals that when a constrained curriculum is implemented in schools, students learn more than those in schools without a constrained curriculum. Most of these studies have focused on achievement outcomes, and could be interpreted as being connected to dropout behaviour in the sense that low-achievement is a high risk factor in dropping out (Lee & Berkam, 2003). Lee and Berkam (2003) investigated the link between school organization and structure and students decisions to stay in school or drop out. Specifically, the researchers asked 'what features of high schools' structure, social organization, and academic organization are associated with dropping out?' (Lee and Berkam, 2003, p. 365) Their results expand the research on dropout behaviour by providing further evidence that schools can have important organizational influences on a student's decisions to drop out or stay in school, above and beyond their individual behaviours and backgrounds. Specifically the structure of a school's curriculum was found in Lee and Berkam's study to be associated with keeping students in school until graduation. Regardless of students' own academic background and school performance, schools with the constrained curriculum model kept students in school more so than those without the model (Lee and Berkam, 2003), this goes against some commonly held beliefs and many other studies which have indicated otherwise. Implications of the study are to look beyond individual profiles and to explore the institutional characteristics and structure that make up the overall school environment. Such factors have the ability to act as protective factors which may ameliorate the influence of individual risk factors and prevent school dropout.

The context of middle school has also been investigated in terms of impact upon future academic outcomes. During the middle school years, teachers, classroom, and school experiences have critical effects on future education and life opportunities in adulthood. Research has shown that children who have resources that they can rely on (e.g., social support, positive attitudes about school) during the transition to middle school are better prepared for a successful school transition than students who lack such resources (Beckar and Luthar, 2002). Academic performance and behavioral indicators that are predictors of future academic difficulties are often identifiable during middle school years. Casillas et al (2012) reported that middle school is a critical transition point for the development of later high school and postsecondary success behaviors. Therefore, it is important to utilize the research surrounding psychosocial and behavioral variables that contribute to education attainment in order to assist in the prediction of future academic performance and thus be used in identifying middle-school students who are at high risk of failing academically. According to the person-environment fit model, the lack of fit between the middle school environment and early adolescent developmental needs is also responsible for the shift toward more negative student self-evaluations and school achievement attitudes (Beckar and Luthar, 2002). This model suggests that many of the changes associated with the transition to, and experience of, middle school clash with the developmental needs of adolescents. For example, adolescents are entering a point in their development where self-consciousness can be heightened, but yet the goals for learning are based on competition; greater independence is needed during adolesence, however opportunities for such independence diminish (Beckar and Luthar, 2002).

Parental support.

Casillas et al. (2012) also looked at parent involvement in education, and found that it can improve academic achievement. In student dropout studies, students who had parents devote time and attention to school activities and who got along with teachers and peers tended to demonstrate a reduction in dropout behaviours, according to Rumberger and Lim's 2008 review of 25 years of research in the field. One important contribution to the literature on school dropout may be the impact of messages in the home and in school regarding educational attainment. It is felt by researchers in the field that the examination of differences among messages regarding dropping out is paramount in identifying effective methods of prevention and remediation for dropout (Storm & Boster, 2007). For this reason, Storm and Boster (2007) conducted a meta-analysis pertaining to research examining the relationship between communication and education attainment. Their analysis concluded that such interactions have been shown to lessen the impact of daily challenges, which have the potential to grow into major stressors if left unattended (Storm and Boster, 2007). In a study conducted by Storm and Boster (2011), educational attainment was investigated as an outcome of the perceived valance of a message, its frequency and helpfulness, the type of support offered, and how memorable the message was. Additionally, support type was assessed concerning the helpfulness of the messages recalled.

Eighty participants were asked a series of closed- and open-ended questions about their high school experiences as well as about school achievement messages they recalled receiving from parents/caregivers in high school. The study revealed that message valence, message repetition, helpfulness of the message, pregnancy, and parental income were significant predictors of educational attainment. It appears that someone who heard a message and viewed it as negative was less likely to attain more education than someone who heard a more positive message. Hearing a message one time was believed to have less of an impact on decision-making

processes like deciding to stay in school versus dropping out. Hearing a message repeatedly, however, may serve better and ultimately reinforce a decision. Finally, if a message is viewed as helpful to the situation or problem a student faces, then it will likely be more impactful concerning decisions about educational attainment. Messages are perceived as more helpful if they provide some form of tangible assistance, such as physical assistance or aid in the form of advice or guidance (Storm & Boster, 2011). These findings provide important information concerning the importance of message design and delivery for important outcomes like educational attainment. That is, parents/caregivers could benefit from this research as it provides some guidance in how conversations surrounding education should take place with their children in order to make an impact upon future educational outcomes.

Attachment has been another area of focus in the literature on school completion and dropout. According to Marcus and Sanders-Reio's (2001) review of attachment literature, a healthy attachment to others and to the institutions in which individuals attend enhances the ability to complete school. Because educational attainment and its alternative, dropping out, are constructed as developmental processes, they are determined to have strong social and emotional antecedents. Therefore, Marcus and Sanders-Reio (2001) summarized, that it is the development or underdevelopment of early attachment bonds that can determine the path toward school completion or drop out. It has been theorized in the attachment literature that an early insecure attachment between infants and their mothers can lead to various behaviour and lead to expectations of ineffectiveness among peers, coercive-countercoercive family processes and negative social orientation (Marcus and Sanders-Reio, 2001). Attachment also has cognitive implications as well. When a child experiences poor interactions with their mother or caregiver, the child does not learn to properly problem solve, self-regulate, and develop necessary

knowledge for entry into school through independent problem solving and problem solving with proper parental guidance. The quality of a child's attachment generalizes to the quality of relationship with teachers as instruction in the school environment occurs in the context of relationships. Therefore, to learn from a teacher, a child must know how to be in a relationship, attend to another individual, and to respond to parental or teacher cues (Marcus & Sanders-Reio, 2001).

There are a wide variety of family-related variables as well that can act as risk factors to education attainment. According to Marcus and Sanders-Reio's (2001) review, students who reported less parental supervision of their academic progress were 34% more likely to drop out, and those whose parents had low academic expectations for them were more than 5 times as likely to quit school. Although familial variables are likely some of the hardest to prevent and remediate, it is important to be aware of such variables which act as risk factors so as to identify at-risk student for the purposes of intervention efforts and hopefully guide them on the best path to school completion.

Teacher support.

Attachment to teachers, as well as teacher evaluation and expectations, also affects academic motivation, behaviour, and school dropout. Marcus and Sanders-Reio (2001) examined a qualitative study of ten students with low scores on a questionnaire assessing attachment to school. The questionnaires revealed that these students perceived their teachers as either disliking them or not knowing them very well. Another finding from Marcus and Sanders-Rio (2001) review of the literature indicated that students also perceived their teachers as treating them unfairly, and not knowing for sure what their teacher's academic expectations were for them. Barile et al. (2012) found that schools that foster positive relationships between teachers

and high school students have higher math achievement and higher graduation rates as well as lower the rates of dropout (Barile et al., 2012).

Peer support.

If positive peer relationships are well established by entrance into school they remain relatively stable for the following ten years. Highly aggressive behaviour damages those early peer relationships and can alienate children from their peers, lower peer acceptance, and increase conflict with teachers as summarized by Marcus and Sanders-Reio (2001). Findings from peer relationship literature indicated that children who are rejected by their peers are less likely to have positive attitudes toward school and are less likely to achieve academically. Children that are rejected are not only excluded from social activities and play areas but also during academic activities within the classroom setting (Marcus & Sanders-Reio, 2001). The key issues with respect to peers and school completion that came out of Marcus and Sander-Reio's (2001) summary of the literature seem to be the quality of peer relationships and the types of peers with whom children associate. More specifically, a group of studies examined by Marcus and Sanders-Reio (2001) revealed that future dropouts have fewer school friends as well as less favourable relationships with the friends they have. They were more likely to think other students saw them as troublemakers and/or poor students; a perception that made it 50% more likely that these students would leave school early. In a 5 year longitudinal study summarized by Marcus and Sanders-Reio (2001), it was found that 17.5% of "rejected" students dropped out of school before the end of 9th grade.

Summary

In summary, experiences and progress throughout school play a crucial role in a student's ability to transition from childhood to adulthood successfully, and with the ability to lead a

productive and satisfying life. Low academic achievement puts students at risk of developing feelings of low self-concept and a low sense of control, psychological variables discussed earlier as being essential to educational achievement. Similar to academic achievement, social support in regards to positive interactions between parents, teachers, and peers have been shown to lessen the impact of daily challenges and problems that if unattended could grow into major stressors. Specifically, the construct of attachment has been linked to school dropout, as a healthy attachment to others and to the school environment, enhances the ability to complete school. Therefore it is the development or underdevelopment of early attachment bonds that can determine the path toward school completion, and includes the attachment with parents or caregivers, as well as with teachers and peers. Although, variables directly associated to the individual are important and are often a popular focus in the research, school related factors have become more widely examined. School structure in regards to enrollment size and location (urban versus rural), academic organization or the structure of curriculum, and social organization have been linked to drop out, with more positive relationships and smaller enrollment linked to fewer dropouts. Ultimately, all variables whether they are psychological or psychosocial, interconnect and overlap making it difficult to solidify causation. However, it is the interplay amongst all factors that make or break the road to success.

Students at risk of failing who do not drop out

Although there are a considerable number of variables that could put students at risk of low educational attainment or drop out, there are some students who, although at risk for dropping out, complete school and obtain their high school diplomas. In the literature, these students are referred to as resilient students as despite the presence of some form of significant

risk or challenge in their lives, have been able to adapt and become academically successful (Lessard et al., 2009).

Although many of the variables already discussed have been proven to relate to or influence academic success, Lassard et al (2009) conducted a study examining how students who were at risk of dropping out of school actually persevered and succeeded in obtaining their high school diploma from the student's individual perspectives. Data was collected from 60 participants through semi-structured, individual, face-to-face interviews that were audio-recorded and transcribed. In regards to the researcher's first question about challenges faced, the students' discourse revealed challenges at three different levels: family-related, school-related, or personal. A common challenge regarding family was divorce of parents which resulted in changes in family structure and moving to new schools. Both of which have been found in the research as impacting student success ability. A positive student-teacher relationship was also a common factor reported by the resilient students. Overall, however, the most recurring and seemingly significant challenges were ones relating to family (Lasserd et al., 2009). In answering the researcher's second question, three types of protective strategies were used by the resilient students and included: establishing relationships, using positive inner discourse, and making decisions aimed at keeping them on track towards graduation (Lasserd et al., 2009). Such findings suggest important ways future educators and school staff can assist students at risk of dropping out by offering positive relationships and environments within the school setting as well as focusing on ways to ameliorate familial challenges by facilitating strong relationships at school.

Barrington and Hendricks (1989) developed a study to identify dropouts, as well as to focus on students who stayed in high school the entire four years but did not graduate. Based on

previous research, the authors compiled a list of characteristics thought to be predictive of high school non-completion and obtained information relevant to those characteristics from the student's cumulative files. The authors found, that one can draw a general conclusion about the typical dropout and non-graduate (a student who completes the four years of high school but does not receive a diploma). Essentially the authors were trying to determine ways in which dropouts and non-graduates could be identified early and targeted for intervention. They established that one could use data typically available in school records to identify measures that differentiate potential dropouts from students who will graduate. The authors report that this differentiation can be identified by the third and ninth grades with 70% and 90% accuracy (respectively). One measure the authors found for identification purposes was teacher comments. Teacher comments on student's permanent record allowed for identification of students who will complete the four years of high school but not graduate with 68% accuracy in elementary school, and by the ninth grade these nongraduates could be identified with 77% accuracy. Therefore, the findings infer that identification of potential dropouts can be accomplished with reasonable accuracy as early as the middle elementary school years (Hendricks & Barrington, 1989).

In a qualitative study by Murry and Naranjo (2008), factors and processes that are associated with high school graduation in a high-risk urban context were examined. Eleven graduating seniors with learning disabilities, all of whom were African American from low-income backgrounds, participated in the study. Case studies of these youth indicated that there were a number of important factors and processes that they believed contributed to their ability to complete high school in an environment where approximately 80% of youth fail to complete school. Broad themes associated with school persistence included, individual, family, peer, and teacher factors. The reported high school graduation rate at the school was 57%. Eleven students

in grade twelve with a learning disability (LD) were recruited to participate (Murray & Naranjo, 2008). The primary themes that emerged from analysis were related to individual, contextual risk, and protective factors. The participants indicated experiencing a variety of risks to not graduating which included low academic and cognitive skills, health histories, and other contextual risks within families (early parenting), neighbourhoods (neighbourhood violence), and the school (negative peer pressure). The findings revealed specific individual factors such as self-determination/independence, willingness to seek support, and belief in the value of education. Family factors that were found were parental involvement and parental structure and peer factors included isolationism (isolating themselves from the challenges presented here). Teacher factors indicated were special educators, importance of caring, ongoing involvement, persistence, instrumental support (conveying curriculum in an understandable way) and power. Consistent with prior research on school dropout and school persistence, the findings of the study suggest that a combination of individual and environmental factors and processes contribute to school completion and persistence among high risk youth populations (Hendricks & Barrington, 1989). This study offers insight into the individual's perspectives and highlights the strength and resilience that at risk youth can have when there are strong influences at play from environmental supports within families and schools.

Summary

In summary, although there are a considerable amount of variables that could ultimately put a student at risk of low educational attainment or dropout, there are some who, although at risk, complete school and obtain high school diplomas. In the literature, these students are referred to as resilient. Academic support from family members, peers, and teachers were all related to positive academic outcomes regardless of risk factors. Psychological variables such as,

self-esteem and problem solving skills were related to resilience and were two of the most documented factors reported by resilient students. Also reported in the research were a number of protective strategies, these included establishing relationships, using positive inner discourse, and making decisions aimed at keeping on track towards graduation.

Factors that Contribute to Continuing Education Post Secondary

Whether a person attends a postsecondary school (and the type of school he or she attends) has a major impact on individual development, occupational status, and wealth. Enrollment in higher education has expanded dramatically in the United States during the past century. As access to higher education has expanded, the importance of postsecondary schooling in determining life changes, occupational status, and wealth has increased (Lee et al., 2008). Attainment of a bachelor's degree has increased in importance with regard to personal financial rewards and career goals (Trusty & Niles, 2004). According to Trusty & Niles' investigation of the literature, the percentage of young people who enter college soon after high school graduation has steadily increased over the past 30 years. In response to the literature, Trusty & Niles (2004) examined the effects of background variables and high school variables on realized potential versus lost talent. All participants reported expecting to attain a bachelor's degree. The high school variables that held particularly significant effects on the outcome were attendance, participation in extracurricular activities, parents' expectations, and science and math course intensity. The strongest effect was from credits in intensive math courses. The strong effect of intensive course taking highlights the career development importance of students' high school learning experiences and career-related actions to their success in postsecondary learning environments. Implications resulting from Trusty and Niles' (2004) study point to the importance of education/career planning in regards to helping students construct learning

experiences and develop necessary skills that lead to actions conducive to entering and completing post-secondary education. That is, young people may benefit from not only having a parent or caregiver discuss with them their educational/career goals, but also discussing the options available to them in order to attain those goals.

Summary

In summary, attending a post secondary school has a major impact on individual development, occupational status, and wealth. Access to higher education has expanded in the United States, and therefore the importance of post secondary schooling in determining life changes, occupational aspirations, and income has increased. Similar to the research on academic achievement and dropout, the variables at play for post secondary pursuit all interact and influence each other while impacting academic outcomes for students. According to research in the field of post secondary educational attainment, one variable that had a direct effect was locus of control. Similar to research findings in the field of academic success, students who had an internal locus of control achieved high post secondary education. Also student academic expectations had both direct and indirect effects on educational attainment. It was demonstrated that students who expected a higher level of educational degree when they were in the 8th grade were more likely to attain a higher degree in later years. Overall, one of the most important predictors of post secondary educational attainment is high school academic performance. This is relevant as all the variables that were found in the academic success literature are important here. In order to attain success in high school, variables such as, self concept, student engagement, and parental involvement in regards to expectations, supportive student-teacher relationships, and positive peer relationships must all work together in a succinct and consistent format. Therefore, the path to post-secondary education is highly dependent on factors and experiences that begin in

early development and that are influenced by people and environments along the way. Thus, it is important to identify the gap across the literature that neglects to focus on decision making following high school and what factors may or may not influence those decisions. There is a need for greater understanding of what these factors are and are not so as to better assist students throughout school and prepare them for a productive adulthood.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to gain insights into the of youth who have either completed high school but did not pursue a post-secondary education or who were unsuccessfully in completing a post-secondary program. This study will provide a greater understanding into the complexities of some of the identified factors as to why youth do not pursue post-secondary education from the perspective of youth. It is hoped that this research will help to expand knowledge and understanding of factors that influence education decisions on the part of students, and ultimately contribute to the improvement of services and resources provided by educational professionals throughout a student's time in school.

CHAPTER II: Methodology

Purpose of the Study

Taken as a whole, there is a vast amount of research examining the processes of high school completion and its alternative dropout. This creates a complicated web of interconnecting and overlapping variables and factors that have been directly and indirectly associated with academic success and failure. Those variables, although, individually connected to educational outcomes, have not been explored through individuals' perceptions of school experience and many studies have used quantitative approaches opposed to qualitative. Therefore, there is a need in the literature to gain insights into individuals' perceptions of their schooling experience. This process will allow for further exploration of the data collected so as to determine whether or not there are similarities and/or differences among participants' perceptions that may be related to their future educational direction after high school (i.e. graduating, or whether there was pursuit of postsecondary education). Thus, this study explored young adults' perceptions of their experiences throughout school. The psychological and psychosocial factors discussed previously have been classified into board topic areas including but not limited to: social support (including parental, teacher, and peer relationships) as well as individual and school factors. Guiding questions have been prepared to assist with covering these topics and others that may arise. The purpose of this study is to gain insights into the lived experiences of youth who have either completed high school and did not pursue or those who did but did not complete their studies. This study will provide a greater understanding into the complexities of some of the identified factors as to why youth do not pursue post-secondary education. This qualitative approach values the lived experiences of youth and gives recognition to their voices. It is hoped that this research will help to expand knowledge and understanding of factors that influence educational decisions on the part of students, and ultimately contribute to the improvement of

services that which a teacher, school psychologist, guidance counsellor, and other professionals can plan for and provide. More specifically, three research questions are proposed:

(1) In what ways did the factors identified by the participants contribute to their educational decisions before leaving or after finishing high school?

(2) What are the commonalities and differences among students' perceptions and identified educational outcomes?

Theoretical Framework

This study, guided by a social constructivist framework and employing qualitative methods, will explore young adults' (19-23 years of age) perceptions of their experiences throughout their time in school. In order to gain perspective from a variety of experiences, participants' experiences ranged from graduates who did not pursue post-secondary education and those who did but did not finish post-secondary schooling. The research is grounded in the language of the participants to reflect their voice and not that of the researcher. Included is an overview of the rationale for a qualitative study design, guided by a social constructivist framework through a grounded theory approach, description of the study population, and description of data collection, analysis, and procedure.

The theoretical perspective of social constructivism in grounded theory provides the framework for the development of the study, which lends itself to qualitative methodology (Patton, 2002). Qualitative methodology is concerned with exploring how meaning is constructed and interpreted as well as with building theory. It has been defined as procedures which one would follow when investigating human action where subjects are able to describe their own behaviour and experience in their own words. Investigators are required to gather such information about the phenomenon through conversational language rather than numbers (Slife

& Williams, 1999, p.234). Therefore, a qualitative design that allows exploration of young adults' individual construction of school experiences provides insight that is relevant for both the school setting and future academic achievement research. A qualitative design offers insight into an understanding of how an understandable and agreed upon phenomenon such as school experience is constructed within a population (Torrens Salemi, 2006) and allows for depth and detail when developing a contextual understanding of a social setting (Patton, 2002). This design allows for an in-depth understanding of how young adults define their school experiences in the context of post secondary decision making, the social interactions that inform their understanding, and relationships between understanding and behaviour.

A qualitative research design was chosen for two major reasons: 1) in a qualitative study the goal of data analysis is usually to identify any themes present in the data; and 2) the current research questions are well-suited to it. A qualitative approach can facilitate understanding of complex phenomena acutely and in great detail (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A multitude of methods fall within the realm of qualitative research, and the analysis is determined by the perspectives and purpose of the researcher (Richards & Morse, 2007; Anderson, 1994). What makes the methods used in a grounded theory approach different from other types of qualitative research is the way in which data is thought about and conceptualized by the researcher (Richard & Morse, 2007).

Social constructivism is based on the belief that knowledge is constructed through an inherent instinct for humans to want to interact with the world and environment around them. The social and historical context in which an individual finds oneself is what provides meaning to experiences and where knowledge is ultimately derived. In Mathis (2011), social constructivism is defined in terms of people building knowledge through interactions with their

surroundings, which ultimately produces change within the individual and their environment. That is, knowledge is believed to be found within the social contexts of an individual's life and it is through these interactions that development is facilitated (Mathis, 2011).

The term grounded theory refers to an organized process for constructing a theoretical analysis from data, which involves clear and direct analytic strategies and implied guidelines for data collection (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2003). Grounded theory most frequently focuses on a behavioural concept or an interesting behavioural phenomenon (Schreiber & Stern, 2001) and has been commonly accepted as being an appropriate way of studying the perceptions of individuals (Creswell, 2007). Grounded theory is designed to create explanations of interactions among people and the processes and actions which drive those interactions. By doing so, grounded theory facilitates explanations of phenomena in regards to process, action, or interaction among people and to explain phenomena through a theoretical standpoint that is essentially grounded in the experiences and perceptions of the participants (Creswell, 2007). Grounded theory was developed by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in the 1960s. In order to address topics that had not been previously studied, and to counter the view that quantitative research was far superior to qualitative designs, they found a way to develop "theories from research grounded in data instead of by deducing testable hypotheses from existing theories" (Charmaz, 2006, p.4). Glaser and Strauss aimed to move qualitative research beyond descriptive studies to providing abstract, conceptual understandings of the studied phenomena (Charmaz, 2006). For Glaser and Strauss the key components to defining grounded theory included: (a) simultaneous collection and analysis of data; (b) construction of codes and categories as they emerge from the research instead of from preconceived hypothesis; (c) constant comparisons to bring meaning to the collected data; (d) use of each step in data

collection and analysis to create theory; (e) memo-writing to elaborate categories, specify

properties, define relationships between categories, and identify gaps; (f) sampling to construct

theory instead of analyzing purposes; and (g) review of literature constructed after analysis if

possible (Charmaz, 2006 p. 6). It is believed by Strauss and Glaser, along with many other

researchers, that implementing these grounded theory components will help researchers better

control their process and their analysis (Charmaz, 2006). In this methodology, language and

action play important roles as process takes priority over structure, which results in new and

deeper understandings of people, common and subjective meanings, problem-solving practices,

and the open-ended study of action to grounded theory (Schein, 2012)

More recently, researchers have moved towards constructivist grounded theory, in which

multiple subjective realities are thought to exist and data is viewed as jointly created between the

participant and researcher. A constructivist view of grounded theory denies the existence of an

objective reality, emphasizing instead, that realities are social constructions of the mind (Mills,

Bonner, & Francis, 2008). Constructivist grounded theory redefines the relationship between the

researcher and participants throughout the research process and requires a few key components:

(1) creating a sense of reciprocity between participants and the researcher in the collaborative

construction of meaning which results in a theory that is grounded in the participants' and

researchers' experiences; (2) clarifying any power imbalances and make an effort to change

them; and (3) clarifying the researcher's position, significance of participants story, and how the

stories are interpreted into theory (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006). Therefore how participants

express their views and construct meaning through language are important components of a

constructivist grounded theory model (Taylor, 2011), and drive the current study's exploration of

the social processes and constructed meanings of young adults' experiences throughout school.

Through this analytic research design, data is collected, organized, analyzed, and interpreted at the same time in order to form new theories (Tyler, 2011), thus theories are essentially rooted in data, and therefore, grounded (Taylor, 2011).

Reliability and Validity

In qualitative research, it has been argued that the constructs of reliability and validity are more suited towards quantitative research (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Quantitative researchers focus their attention on breadth by gathering a variety of information on which to build knowledge, which generally results in generalizable numeric results and outcomes (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Such researchers define a reliable study as one in which findings can be replicated repeatedly using the same methods. In contrast, qualitative researchers tend to focus their attention on depth by identifying a single phenomenon by gaining a deep understanding with a limited number of participants (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Thus, results from research using a grounded theory approach are much more difficult to reproduce as data is sought from social or psychological processes which are subjective and cannot be observed directly (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The intent of qualitative research is to provide a close-up view, a deeper and richer understanding within a specific context, which can be missed in quantitative research. All the same, data collection and analysis in qualitative research must be guided by some criteria to allow for justifiable outcomes (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). The model of Trustworthiness consists of four components that are relevant to qualitative research: (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability. Credibility is similar to internal validity in quantitative research. It is the element that allows others to recognize the experiences contained within the study through the interpretation of participants' experiences. To establish credibility, researchers are to review the individual transcripts, looking for similarities within and

across study participants. Transferability is the second component and is the ability to transfer research findings or methods from one group to another, and is similar to external validity in qualitative research. To achieve transferability a researcher would provide a dense description of the population studied by providing description of demographics and geographic boundaries of the study. Thirdly, dependability is related to reliability in quantitative terms and occurs when another researcher can follow the decision trail used by the researcher. This is done by the researcher describing the specific purpose of the study, discussing how and why the participants were selected for the study; providing a description of how the data were collected and analyzed; discussing the interpretation of the findings; and explaining credibility. Finally confirmability is similar to objectivity in quantitative research and occurs when the first three components of trustworthiness have been established.

Methods

Participants

The primary focus of this study was young adults who graduated high-school who either did not pursue post secondary education or who did but did not complete their studies. The focus was on their perceptions of their experiences throughout their time in school. A constructivist grounded theory approach requires a theoretical sampling, which pertains only to conceptual and theoretical development not about representing a population or statistical generalizability (Charmaz, 2006). In theoretical sampling, grounded theorists aim to fit their emerging theories with their data, and must actively search for people or information in which highlight or define the overall purpose of a study (Charmaz, 2006). All participants were to have completed high school within the last five years as this grounded theory study requires shared perceptions of experiences and necessitates representation from various outcomes including, but not limited to,

completion high school with or without the initial pursuit of post-secondary. To provide a comprehensive picture of young adult's perspectives on experiences throughout school, this study also included young adults from various backgrounds based on socioeconomic status (SES) and rural versus urban.

The current research study was conducted in a rural area in eastern Canada known for industries such as farming, fishing and forestry with the majority of the population employed by manufacturing and construction industries. In the early 20th century, workers sought out the area for good blue-collar jobs at the factories. However those industries, like others around eastern Canada, have all closed (Beswick, 2013). Over recent years, the area's police forces and social service agencies have struggled with hard drug use and other social consequences of lack of opportunities (Beswick, 2013). Based on the 2006 Census of Population, this rural area has a population below 50,000. The average family income is $61,500 with 10.4% of families determined to be of low income status (Government of Nova Scotia, 2006).

Participants were four young adults (2 male, 2 female) ranging in age from 19 to 23. All identified themselves as Caucasian and high school completion as their highest level of completed education. All participants attended all their years in high school in this rural area. Two participants identified at least one parent as having some form of post-secondary education and two identified high school as being the highest level of education completed by a parent. All participants were employed either full or part time at the time of interview, and were living in childhood homes. Family income ranged from $25,000-$39,000 to $85,000+. No participants identified themselves as having been diagnosed with a disability.

Data Collection

In-depth semi-structured interviews

Interviews are the appropriate form of data collection when the intention is to understand another person's perspective. It is one method for finding out things that cannot be directly observed, such as perceptions and thoughts and are useful in gathering detailed information (Patton, 2002; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). This method also reflects the social constructionist assumption of self-awareness and the role of the researcher in the process of research. The researcher is not an unbiased objective individual, but is actively involved in the interview process and therefore, the creation of data. There are three basic approaches to open-ended interviewing: 1) unstructured interviews; 2) semi-structured interviews; and 3) structured interviews (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). For this study, Semi-structured interviewing was chosen as they are most beneficial when there is only one opportunity for the interview (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The interview can be conversational; however, the use of an interview guide provides a systematic approach to interviewing different people (Patton; 2002). The guide provides an outline for the interview of topics or issues to be covered, but there is room for flexibility in the order at which questions are asked and in probing for more concise responses as the interview progresses (Patton, 2002). The guide also assists the researcher in attaining the most out of every interview, to anticipate gaps, and be prepared to account for them. Limitations of this method include: 1) the potential to overlook relevant topics that may be briefly touched upon in a response, thus producing gaps in the data; 2) if questions are sequenced differently for each participant, the variation could produce varied responses that can decrease comparability (Torrens Salemi, 2006); and 3) all data is self reported.

For this study, the interview process consisted of a brief demographic questionnaire (to be filled out by the participant (Appendix A) followed by a 35 minute semi-structured interview which consisted of open-ended questions so as to best understand their perspectives. The open-

ended questions provided flexibility in the order at which the questions were asked, and allowed for prompts to be used in order to gain greater depth and breadth of responses. A set of guiding questions (Appendix B) were developed based on the research review and were used as an outline for potential topics/areas to be covered and to provide a more systematic approach. A copy of these questions was provided to the participant at the commencement of the interview. Interested individuals who expressed an interest in the study were emailed a response to ensure they met the criteria for participation (must be between 19 and 25, and be out of school for no more than 5 years). Once there was confirmation, another email was sent to arrange a location for the interview that was mutually agreed upon and the participant was sent a letter of information about the study. Upon meeting, the participant was provided a paper copy of the letter of information and consent form. These forms and the issue of confidentiality were discussed in person. Participants were encouraged to ask questions if they were unsure of anything. Upon receiving the participant's consent, the interview process began. The entire interview/demographics questionnaire took approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Each interview was also audio-recorded, with the consent of the participant prior to the interview.

Data Analysis

In Tyler, (2011), suggestions to avoid criticism when employing grounded theory were summarized as having to gather rich data, offer original ideas about the data, establish solid evidence for ideas, and recognize the limits of such ideas. These recommendations clarified steps necessary to conducting grounded theory research which included data gathering as the starting point, usually in the form of unstructured or semi-structured interviews. Charmaz (2006) explained that by asking open-ended questions, researchers have a better opportunity to gather rich descriptive data from their participants. Interviews are recorded, usually through audio-

recording and transcribed which allows the researcher to capture the data shared in the interviews. Coding is the next step and the beginning of data analysis. Coding has been defined as the process of naming data that allows for summarization and allows the researcher to remain close with the data (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theorists begin examining data for patterns from the initial interview and begin the coding process. In coding the pieces of data, it is important to include the use of vivo codes, which are labels for categories in the participants' exact words. Essentially, patterns become codes, codes become categories, and categories become concepts. Overall, the grounded theory approach to qualitative data analysis is continuously comparing and examining data, and refining categories and themes that emerge from the data (Charmaz, 2006). This approach to data analysis includes several steps:

1. Transcription and reading of interviews

2. Identification of emergent themes or categories

3. Pull together data consistent with themes and compare

4. Think about relationships and patterns among themes

5. Construct theory comparing it against data

6. Present results that exemplify the theory (Torrens Salemi, 2006).

Four young adults were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire and were then interviewed on the topics of interest. All interviews were audio taped. Audio tapes were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts and demographic information were the sources for the database used for this analysis. Data analysis is a central step in the research study and is the one that is most variable. In order to analyze the data effectively, researchers must gather rich data, offer original ideas about the data, establish solid evidence for their ideas, and recognize the range and limits of ideas (Charmaz, 2009). The audio-recordings of the interviews were transcribed by a

professional transcriber to ensure the data shared in the interviews was captured accurately. Participants were provided the opportunity to review their transcription to ensure accuracy by having the option to provide their contact information on the bottom of their demographics questionnaire. Data from the transcripts were organized and divided into meaningful groupings. The words, context, frequency or extensiveness of comments, and the intensity of comments were examined. The goal was to find the major themes expressed throughout the interviews. Coding is a recommended method of dividing the data into categories. In this process, transcriptions are reviewed and data are coded into major themes and subcategories (Charmaz, 2009). This analysis included a review of all transcripts. Transcripts were reviewed line by line. Once a particular concept was identified in a line or paragraph, a code word was developed and placed in an excel file table developed by the researcher for the purpose of the data analysis. As review and coding progressed, concepts of similar meaning were grouped together. Once all transcripts were reviewed, the excel file data were re-examined for patterns and sub-categories. Eventually, relationships among categories and themes were analyzed by comparing theory and data, at which point the findings were reported, interpreted, and discussed.

Limitations

The strengths of this qualitative study are that the approach allows for a comprehensive exploration of the perceptions of individuals from their lived experiences, and allowed for thick, rich data in the literature of academic achievement. Limitations of this method include the potential of having gaps in the data due to the possibility that relevant topics are overlooked; the potential for decreased comparability in data due to variation in responses; and all data is self reported. Some aspects of the interview have the potential to be sensitive areas for the participant; therefore the risk of difficult topics arising was acknowledged. The interviewer did

have specific training and experience in talking with persons dealing with sensitive and difficult

issues and therefore any issues that may have risen would have been addressed; thereby

mitigating risk. However the risk is minimal and by addressing any sensitivities it enabled the

participant to feel as little distress as possible upon completion of the interview. A list of

community resources was attached to the demographic and guiding questions reference sheet

provided to each participate for if they later decide to seek assistance for any reason – academic,

career, or otherwise (Appendix C).

Writing of the Results

Chapter Three of this research project presents the findings of the study. Concepts,

subcategorizes, and themes of data were identified and discussed in relationship to the study's

research questions while providing a "thick description" of the phenomenon examined.

Chapter III: Findings and Discussion

Introduction

Through a social constructivist framework and employing qualitative methods, this study gained insights into young adults' perceptions of their experiences throughout their time in school as well as the similarities and differences in their perceptions and how they may have contributed to their future academic choices. The research was grounded in the language of the participants and their lived experiences. This chapter presents the findings for the data collected by mapping out concepts, subcategories, and final themes while providing a rich, in depth, description of the phenomena examined. Finally a summary and conclusion of the study is presented followed by recommendations for future research.

Findings and Discussion

The themes identified in the data include: 1) Individual Factors; 2) Contextual Factors; 3) Support Factors; and 4) Decisions and Reflections. Several subcategories emerged for each major theme and will be discussed within the thematic context in which they emerged.

Individual Factors

The analysis of individual factors led to three sub-categories: (a) values, (b) attitudes, and (c) student engagement.

Values.

For the most part, the young adults had similar values which focused on education and obtaining work. All participants had obtained jobs during their high school years, and most increased their hours from part-time to full-time once they had graduated. The participants perceived that a high school education to some degree was important. However, the importance of having a job and making money was indicated by all participants. As the participants

expressed their uncertainty about going on for further education, it was seen as a possible waste of both time and money, and therefore education was established as less important. This is evidenced by one participant reporting he had gone on to post-secondary education initially, but decided to not return after the first year in order to maintain his job with his former place of employment during high school. This participant reported he wished to move up in the company and felt he could do so by staying and working. Another participant demonstrated the importance of a high school education by stating "*close to the end of grade 12, I had to pick up a correspondence for six months for an extra credit, I passed and was able to graduate*".

According to the literature on resiliency, three types of protective strategies were used by the resilient students and included: establishing relationships, using positive inner discourse, and making decisions aimed at keeping them on track towards graduation (Lasserd et al., 2009). It is inferred by this participant's comment, that his protective factor was indeed making decisions that were aimed at keeping him on track towards graduation. Upon completion of high school, this participant ended his academic career to pursue a full time job within a company that would be considered a good job in his local community. This outlook on education and career was an unexpected finding and may be supported by Mitra, Movit, and Frick's (2008) theory that youth interested in trades and service occupation often remain in their home communities along with those who have a strong "sense of place". These youth are theorized as placing family connections in their community ahead of more promising career and educational opportunities, as they often remain in entry level jobs that offer few opportunities for advancing. With the rising cost of education, many families in rural areas do not have the means to send their children for further education, placing a more important role of obtaining work right out of high-school.

   Attitudes.

The construct of self-concept emerged from the interviews with an indication that low-self-esteem was fairly consistent across all participants. In the literature, a positive self-concept is considered to be one variable that serves to mediate in the facilitation of educational attainment (Marsh, 1990) and is considered a relevant psychological construct influencing many educational outcomes directly or indirectly (Wouters et al., 2011). Academic self-concept is defined as an 'evaluative self-perception that is formed through the student's experience and interpretation of the school environment' (Guay, Ratelle, Roy, & Litalien, 2010, p. 644). Other forms of self-concept have been looked at in the research such as self-esteem, however this research refers to a broad sense of the concept by generalizing Guay et al's (2010) definition. Only one participant demonstrated an optimistic outlook of his self-concept where all others identified with a more unsure or critical self-concept. For instance, when asked "what individual or personal characteristics do you believe you demonstrated throughout your education?" The participant responded with "*hard worker, good listener cooperative and helpful, I guess"*. Whereas other participants were unsure how to answer the question and often said they didn't know, which could be identified as contributing to a negative academic self-esteem. The idea of self-concept emerged throughout the entire interview, appearing in multiple responses with participants stating things like "*I was just lazy*" or "*I know I'm not like a genius...*". This attitude of self-perception crossed over into their academics as well, as all participants reported that they felt they did "*okay*" or only "*fairly well*" in school. Although all participants graduated high school, no participants completed post-secondary education. Only one participant sought higher-education; however that participant chose to not return after one year of enrollment. One could argue that such decisions were influenced by the effects of not having strong positive self-concepts as according to Wouters et al., (2011) students with a more positive academic self-

concept in high school tended to be more successful in coping with new academic demands once enrolled in higher education and had a higher chance of succeeding in their first year. Marsh and Yeung (1997) examined the causal relationship between academic self-concept and academic achievement in a three-wave study spanning three years. The findings supported the conclusion that prior academic achievement effects subsequent academic self-concept and positive self-concept as a mediating variable that facilitates the attainment of other desirable outcomes (Marcus and Yeung, 1997). Therefore, one could infer that a less-positive self-concept may impact young adults' ability to pursue and attain post-secondary education.

Student Engagement.

According to Caraway, Tucker, Reinke and Hall (2003) school engagement entails behavioural, affective, and cognitive components that reflect commitment to learning and successful academic performance. It describes students' feelings, behaviours, and thoughts about their school experiences (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011). Engagement emerged as a definite sub-category across all interviews where only one participant reported being engaged in school the majority of time as indicated by his response to the question - did you feel like you were motivated, engaged in school? – His response being "*95% f the time, probably*". Other participants reported not feeling engaged or motivated, and others reported that "*I could have tried a little harder*" and "*I should have been more into it*". Engagement also seemed to be contingent on the type of class, as many participants reported feeling engaged in classes where there were hands on activities or opportunities to be creative. For instance one participant reported "certain classes I really tried, like French where it was more creative". According to the literature engaged students are attentive, participate in class discussions, and put forth effort in class activities, as well as exhibit interest and motivation to learn. Students who are not engaged

are more passive learners and report being bored, anxious, or even angry about being in the classroom (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Therefore, effective learning is therefore contingent upon the extent to which students are engaged in classroom learning, which seems to be related to how material is presented to them; a finding that may have implications for high school-educators.

Support Factors

As the interviews continued, participants were asked to share their perspectives regarding support that felt they received or did not receive throughout their time in school. Casillas et al. (2012) also looked at parent involvement in education, and found that it can improve academic achievement. In student dropout studies, students who had parents devote time and attention to school activities and who got along with teachers and peers tended to demonstrate a reduction in dropout behaviours, according to Rumberger and Lim's 2008 review of 25 years of research in the field. This overall theme is comprised of two specific sub-categories: (a) Parental support and (b) Teacher support.

Parental support.

Storm and Boster (2011) found that an increase in supportive communication between parents and students decreased academic stress for students and influenced students' achievement in school as well as school completion. Specifically, participants reported on their perceived parent/caregiver support where two types emerged: emotional and instrumental. *Emotional support* - Emotional support, as defined by Storm and Boster (2011), involves expressions of care, concern, sympathy, understanding, and encouragement. Emotional support has also been regularly identified as either the most helpful or one of the most helpful forms of assistance. Participants reported expressions of care in regards to how well they did in school as well as being encouraged by their parents to pursue goals. For instance two participants stated

they *"wanted to know what I wanted to do"*, *"mom was more helpful, but dad always asked, always wanted to know what was going on"*.

Instrumental support – Storm and Boster (2011) defined instrumental support as tangible assistance, such as physical assistance, advice or guidance and may include offers of information about resources and advice about effectiveness. All participants reported physical assistance such as helping with homework and all but one participant reported one or both of their parents attending parent teacher conferences. For instance one participant said "*well dad tried to help out with projects, and mom too, but it was more mom than dad. I don't know, my grandmother lived next door, and here and there I'd go over and ask for some help from her*". One participant reported advice or guidance by saying "*once or twice a week for sure they'd go over all, what have you got planned? What are you thinking? Just to keep me on track, like which courses, and that sort of thing*". These two types of parental support have been examined in previous research findings which demonstrate that parental academic support, a combination of attendance at PTA meetings, volunteering at school activities, and helping with homework (Instrumental support), was strongly associated with school completion (Marcus and Sanders-Reio, 2001). Students were found to perform better in school and remain in school when their parents had high academic expectations of them, and talked to them about school (emotional support).

Therefore, support that all participants reported as receiving in the home may have influenced the importance they all placed on obtaining a high school education but the lack of advice or guidance in regards to offering information about how to obtain goals or pursue post-secondary education may have influenced their decisions against attending post-secondary.

Teacher support.

Reports of teacher support varied among the participants as two indicated they experienced some support depending on the teacher – *"...the coaches were still teachers, so if you had them, then it was easier to get into..."*; one reported feeling supported by mostly all staff – *"well I had a lot of good relationships with teachers..."*; and one feeling no support of any kind – *"I didn't really have any relationships with many teachers."* However, when you compare participant's perceptions regarding teacher support and their perceptions regarding other areas such as self-concept and engagement there are similarities in tone of responses (either positive or negative). For instance, the participant who viewed himself as having a positive self-concept and high engagement rating also reported a strong presence of teacher support throughout his time in school. On the other hand, the participant who reported not knowing what characteristics she demonstrated, and having little to no motivation or engagement in school also reported having no support from teachers throughout her time in school. This is an important observation as students' perceptions of teacher support have been consistently linked with increased achievement motivation, academic success, and feelings of well-being (Becker & Luthar, 2002). Students who perceive that teachers encourage and support them are more committed to learning and more successful academically. Such perceptions facilitate positive self-fulfilling prophecies that promote student achievement in keeping with those expectations (Becker & Luther, 2002). Therefore this finding has important implications for professionals working with adolescents, as if perceived support is positive then perhaps their self-concept and perceptions would too be positive, in turn impacting upon their sense of capabilities after high school.

Contextual Factors

In the course of the interviews, participants recalled their experiences within the school environment. Within the county where the research was conducted, two large high schools were built approximately ten years ago, to amalgamate approximately six smaller high schools from six neighboring towns within the county. Therefore when students in this area, enter grade nine and ten they are no longer attending school with classmates from their respective small towns, but are joined by students from other towns, for the first time. Schools can be characterized by their structural components such as where a school is located and enrollment size. Rumberger and Thomas (2000) demonstrated that sector, urbanicity, and size all were related to dropping out. The majority of participants attended the same high school; however, both schools were built at the same time and therefore are very similar in size and organization. Participants reported the average enrollment of each school to be between 700 and 1000 students, a range that has been supported in the literature as being most effective for learning (Lee and Berkam, 2003). In the reflections of the participants, a theme emerged that will be defined as contextual. This theme comprises specific sub-categories that were found across several of the interviews. These sub-categories include: (a) Academic organization and (b) Social organization.

Academic organization.

When the school curriculum consisted of largely academic courses and very few low-level courses, it was considered a constrained curriculum, as typically students must complete a majority of these courses to graduate. As reported by the participants in this study, their high schools followed a more constrained curriculum, with certain academic courses being mandatory for graduation. This is evidenced by the following statements by participants: "*we had English and like three sciences I think it was, and then three maths I think*" and "*there were certain maths that we needed and certain sciences*". Previous literature including Lee and Berkam's

(2003) study reveal that when a constrained curriculum is implemented in schools, students learn more than those in schools without a constrained curriculum. Specifically the structure of a school's curriculum was found to be associated with keeping students in school until graduation. Regardless of students' own academic background and school performance, schools with the constrained curriculum model kept students in school more so than those without the model (Lee and Berkam, 2003). This constrained curriculum may have contributed to the participants' completion of high school but didn't allow for other interest areas to emerge which may have become areas of interest for further education.

Social organization.

Overall climate in the school setting became a pattern emerging across the four interviews, and was incorporated into the sub-category of social organization. In a study by Liu and Lu (2011), researchers examined student's perceptions of school social climate and found that such perceptions positively predicted their academic motivation. Dotter and Lowe (2011) found that classroom context is an important predictor of school engagement – they focused on three aspects: instructional quality, socio-emotional climate, and student-teacher relationship – as they have been found to be related to both school engagement and academic achievement. This finding is also suggested through participants' perceptions in this study as one participant reported " *well our French class was pretty much the same group of people for five years. And so when we went into our French class and stuff, our teacher kind of got along with us really well. And so it helped, and then going into exams and everything, it was always comfortable*". This same participant went on to say that "*French was probably like our home*" and "*one French teacher always asked if she could help me get ready for exams and stuff*". This link between

classroom climate and engagement is an important finding as engagement and climate are both important predictors of academic achievement.

Decisions and Reflections

During the interviews, participants were asked about their experiences in school, and their decisions after high school. Participants relayed such experiences through discussion of how they felt when first making those decisions and how they felt currently about those past decisions. From analyzing the responses of participants, two sub-categories emerged. The sub-categories discussed represent important insight into why young adults make certain decisions after they leave high school.

Familiarity.

Over the course of the interview a major sub-category emerged surrounding reasons for making decisions. The sub-category was appropriately terms familiarity as many of the participant's responses included things like "*I wanted to stay close to home*" or "*I didn't want to stray too far, the first time on my own really*". In a case study conducted in rural Nova Scotia by Corbett (2005), examining the relationship between formal education and out-migration, findings suggested that youth in coastal or rural communities may actually be facing a more restricted set of options and opportunities. Factors such as rising tuition costs, the centralization of educational and other services in rural areas, the high cost of leaving, and the expansion of low-wage, low-skilled work in the expanding rural service economy may help to explain continuing low post-secondary participation rates in rural communities. A more challenging life in a known community may look better than taking a very expensive shot at an educational journey that represents an expensive, unproven, and uncertain path. This is demonstrated in responses such as "*I kind of wish I went and at least took a couple of courses through community college or*

something, but I'm glad I didn't waste time or money going to do something I probably wouldn't have wanted to do" and *"well I didn't really want to jump right into school, so I figured I'd start off with a job and get some money before I did anything"*.

Reflection.

During the course of the interviews, participants were asked why they thought they had made the decisions they made and how they felt about them looking back. Participants' reasons, justifications, and explanations for how they felt about their past decisions encompassed several possibilities, but those that occurred most often included: felt it was the right decision, or they wished they had decided on something else, namely to attend post-secondary. This is indicated in several participants' responses such as *"I wish I had of thought more about going somewhere and actually put the thought into it"* and *"I wish I had of went to school, so I didn't have to work at Harvey's still"*. This is also supported by findings from Corbett's (2005) case study, as he suggests that rural youth need to see a connection between higher education and the cultural and geographic spaces they inhabit. Many youth may not possess the necessary cultural and economic resources to make such a leap of faith. This suggests that after becoming aware of such a connection, these young adults realize the benefits of post-secondary education only after experiencing the lack of benefits first hand.

Summary

After analysis the results fell into four major themes: Individual factors, Contextual factors, Support factors, and Reasons for and Reflection of decisions. Within these themes several sub-categories emerged. These themes and sub-categories offer insight into the perspectives of young adults' perceived experiences throughout school and how those experiences may have influenced future academic decisions. In discussing the results of

individual factors, the sub-category of "Values" emerged, demonstrating a trend that a high

school education was valued but that obtaining a job and making money was the next priority

above that of pursing post-secondary education. Another sub-category emerged out of the theme,

individual factors, which was termed "Attitudes". Incorporated in this sub-category was the idea

of self-concept and more commonly young adults had a more negative sense of self than a more

positive one, perceptions that crossed over into their academics and their perceptions of how well

they did in school. Finally, "Behaviours" was the last sub-category in this theme and discussed

school engagement. Only one participant felt engaged 95% of the time in school, whereas others

felt disengaged most of the time or it depended on the class.

Support factors became a theme that emerged through the perceptions of support from

family, friends, and teachers. Very little information was provided regarding peer support,

therefore two sub-categories emerged as parental and teacher support. In regards to parental

support, all participants reported having felt supported by their parents who provided help with

homework and most attended parent-teacher conferences. Some participants reported feeling

encouraged by their parents to pursue goals after high school but only one participant reported

getting advice and guidance on how to do so. Participants' reports on teacher support varied, as

two participants stated that they felt support from only certain teachers regarding asking for help,

or seeking advice. One participant reported feeling he had support from all staff and that overall

he felt his teachers wanted him to do well. One participant reported feeling no support at all.

The theme Contextual Factors emerged from concepts such as school climate

(subcategory social organization), and curriculum requirements (academic organization).

Participants reported that their schools enrolled approximately 700-1000 students from grades 9

through 12, and that there were certain core academic courses that were mandatory for

graduation (specific number of math, sciences, and English). In regards to social organization, many students found that high school was cliquey but that they each had their own peer group. All students reported on the teacher-student relationship with the majority feeling that knowing your teacher outside of the classroom (through previous classes or coaches) allowed for a more comfortable relationship in the classroom.

Finally the last theme to emerge was that of Reasons for and Reflections on decision-making. This theme made for interesting findings and consisted of two sub-categories familiarity and reflections. All participants reported making their post-secondary decisions based on staying close to home, and maintaining a job that was familiar to them. However upon their reflections, all but one participant reported wishing they had of gone to postsecondary education right out of high school.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research

The findings from this exploratory qualitative study tell the story of young adult's personal perspectives of their time in school. The use of a social constructionist framework provides insight into young adults' decision making after school, how they arrive at them, and their perspectives of influences on those decisions. This study establishes that the path to post-secondary decision making is impacted by a variety of factors that could be a part of an individual's psychological processes and/or psychosocial influences. Lucio, Hunt, and Bornovalova (2011) believe that educational achievement is a consequence of multi-dimensional interacting factors, including family, community, school, peers, and the individuals themselves. Many of such factors (individual, family, & school) have been identified in the participants' individual perspectives on their school experiences.

Individual factors were a major theme emerging from the study placing emphasis on the importance of specific factors like self-concept and school engagement. According to Lee et al (2008) several studies in the 1960s and 1970s examined the association between self-concept and educational attainment, and found that the students' positive self-concept is part of the foundation for educational progress. It is relevant to point out that only one participant reported a more optimistic sense of self, and who also reported pursuing post-secondary education for a short time. Although he did not return after his first year, he did report still feeling good about that decision. This supports what Lee and colleagues (2008) were arguing regarding positive self concept and educational progress. This particular participant also reported being engaged in school and feeling a strong presence of teacher and home support. All of which have been associated with academic achievement and pursuing bachelor degrees (Dotterer and Lowe, 2011 ; Trusty and Niles, 2004). In contrast the majority who reported a lower sense of self also reported a lack of engagement in school, with engagement being contingent upon type of class. They also reported experiencing less positive student-teacher relationships and having emotional support at home which lacked some key instrumental support such as advice and guidance in regards to pursuing goals. Thus the tone in responses across the interviews may indicate an overall attitude or belief about the school environment or education in general that may possibly stem from beyond the individual but the belief systems they were raised within. The findings point to the clear relevance of educational achievement being a consequence of multi-dimensional interacting factors. Many sub-categories discussed in the findings could easily be explained in any one of the overarching themes emerging from this study. For instance, teacher support could easily have been identified as a contextual factor emerging through the sub-category of social organization. Also, each factor seems to influence or impact upon any other

factor as a positive student-teacher relationship impacts the overall classroom climate which impacts school engagement and ultimately results in academic achievement. Therefore, previous literature and the current findings suggest that there is no one factor that predicts or influences academic achievement or future academic decisions. It is the cumulative outcome of all factors interconnecting and working together that will determine any one outcome. Future research in the area of attitudes and beliefs surrounding education may have implications for both parents and professionals working with adolescents. Referring back to the literature on middle school transitions (Casillas et al, 2012; Beckar and Luthar, 2002) having higher levels of engagement and positive student-teacher relationships throughout the middle school years increased academic achievement and attendance. Therefore, middle school experiences may have more of an impact upon later school years experiences, attitudes and beliefs that were not a focus of this investigation. It may be beneficial for future research to compare middle school transitions with perceptions of high school experiences to determine if these two milestones are relatable.

Two other findings that emerged from this data analysis that would benefit from additional research relate to the themes contextual factors and decisions and reflections. The idea of constrained curriculum surfaced when participants discussed having to take certain core courses to graduate. Previous literature including Lee and Berkam's (2003) study reveal that when a constrained curriculum is implemented in schools, students learn more and attend longer than those in schools without a constrained curriculum. However the findings from this study suggest that a constrained curriculum may have limited their post secondary career options, in the sense that it may have enhanced their opportunity to complete high school but gave limited exposure to other non-traditional areas of study. Thus, additional research in this area is needed so as to review literature already completed and to explore similarities and differences in

perceptions, experiences, and outcomes of those who experienced constrained and un-constrained curriculums. Another unexpected finding was the concept of "sense of place". This concept, discussed by Mitra, Movit, and Frick's (2008) theorized that youth interested in trades and service occupations often stay within the communities they grew up in. These youth are theorized as putting their community roots first, ahead of more thriving career and educational opportunities. These youth often remain in minimum-wage jobs that leave little in the way for job growth and advancement. Findings from Corbett's (2005) case study, suggest that rural youth need to see a connection between higher education, the communities they live in, and the opportunities available in the area. This suggests that after becoming aware of such connections, these young adults may realize the benefits of post-secondary education only after experiencing the lack of benefits first hand. Overall, it seems as though the most lacking service to young adults is that of education and career knowledge. The results of Trusty and Niles' (2004) study examining the effects of background variables and high school variables on realized potential versus lost talent revealed an important means for helping young people realize their potential; by helping them gain learning experiences and take actions that are consistent with their ability and goals. Therefore results of their study in conjunction with the current study point to the importance of education and career planning through discussion of education and career goals and the options available to pursue them. Thus, it is important to explore how a community or school can build upon the assets it offers while encouraging young people to seek successful and stable career paths.

Strategies need to be generated that prepare young people for post secondary opportunities. Such strategies should incorporate incentives and policies that guide and provide youth and parents knowledge about post-secondary options. In particular, improving

achievement for all students; building awareness of local career opportunities; and strengthening communication/relationships between high schools, community colleges, technical schools, and four-year institutions were found to be the three most common strategies used to address community needs (Mitra and Halabi, 2012; Mitra, Movit, and Frick 2008). In particular, Mitra and Halabi (2012) demonstrated that awareness strategies have also recognized how communication between schools and employers can be strengthened through career awareness programs, and how such initiatives can be beneficial for students and their communities. Parents and educators should be provided with an understanding of available career paths and the knowledge and awareness of education and training necessary for such career opportunities. This knowledge and understanding, then, needs to be distributed to young people in a manner that will not just target those who voluntarily seek such information. If these processes are implemented and an emphasis on communication is instilled then perhaps more young people would realize the value in education, seek post-secondary academics and, gain opportunities for more prosperous careers. Future research is needed to examine how such knowledge can be obtained, how partnerships between high schools, training or vocational institutions, universities, and employers can be developed and maintained, and how such information can be efficiently and effectively provided to students and their families. Post secondary education is important for youth in today's global society. This qualitative study recognizes the value of the voices of youth in helping to advance our understanding of how best to support youth in obtaining postsecondary education after graduation from high school.

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Appendix A – Demographics Questionnaire

Participant Code: _____

Date: _____

Script (not to be on participants copy): *I first would like you for coming and participating in this interview with me. I am a graduate student conducting research for the completion of my degree at Mount Saint Vincent University. I am specifically doing research on people's perspectives of their experiences throughout their school years to explore similarities and differences and whether they are related to future academic choices. I will give you a moment to complete the first section on demographics. If you feel unsure or wish to not answer a question, that is okay. The interview itself consists of eight main topics, which may have follow up questions for clarification purposes. Again, you can choose to answer/or not answer any of the questions. I will be audio recording our conversation, and if you wish I will provide you with a transcription of it for your review to ensure it is accurate. Anything on the transcription that you wish to be excluded from the study will be removed. There will be a space provided on the bottom of your demographics questionnaire for you to indicate whether you would like a copy and your contact information to do so. Do you have any questions?*

Demographic Information:

Age _____

Sex *(circle one)*   Female   Male

Racial Identity *(check one)*

☐   African-Nova Scotian

☐   Caucasian

☐   First Nations

☐   Other (Please specify):_____

Approximate family income *(circle one)*

$0-$15,000 $15,000 -$24,000 $25,000-$39,000

$40,000-$54,000 $55,000-$69,000 $70,000-$84,000 $85,000+

☐   I'd prefer to not answer this question

Parent/Guardian highest level of education_____

☐   I'd prefer to not answer this question

Your highest level of education_____

☐   I'd prefer to not answer this question

Employment status *(circle one which applies to you)*

Employed Part-Time   Employed Full-Time   Unemployed   Student   Between Jobs

☐   I'd prefer to not answer this question

Living arrangements *(circle one)*   living in childhood home   living on own

Other: _____

☐   I'd prefer to not answer this question

Appendix B - School Experience Semi-Structured Interview

Interview: Guiding Questions

1. **Tell me about yourself and what comes to mind when you think back to your school years.**
   Possible Prompts: Where did you go to school? Was it an urban or rural school? How many people approximately attended the school? Did you have good attendance? Did you participate in any extra-curricular activities? (Sports, clubs, committees) Did you attend school anywhere else? If so, how did those experiences differ? What subjects did you struggle or excel in? Describe the curriculum in high school- did you have core academic courses that were required to graduate?

2. **For my research project I am looking at people's experiences in school and how that has influenced decision making in regards to their future. What did you do after high school and how did you decide on this direction?**
   Possible prompts: Do you remember what you were thinking at the time you made this decision? As you reflect back on this decision, how are you feeling about it?

3. **What individual/personal characteristics do you believe you demonstrated throughout your education?**
   Possible Prompts: Did you feeling good in regards to how you were doing in school? Did you feel as though you were you motivated/engaged/were you goal oriented?

4. **Tell me about the types of supports you felt you had throughout your school years.**
   Possible Prompts: Did you have support from your family? Did your parents participate in school activities, attend parent/teacher conferences, help with homework? Did your parents ever ask or talk with you about your future education/career goals? Did your parents provide you with encouragement? Did your parents care about how well you did in school? What were your relationships with like with your parents/guardians?

5. **Tell me about your peer relationships throughout your time in school.**
   Possible Prompts: Did you have a large/small group of friends? Were you ever bullied?

   Could you trust your friends? Did your friends value education? Did you feel as if you were on par academically with your peers? Why/Why not?

6. **Tell me about a time in school that you felt things were really going well.**

7. **Tell me about a time when you found school really difficult and what made it so difficult.**

8. **Describe other experiences you had in school, for example, your relationship with teachers and staff, things you liked about school, things you really didn't like and so forth**
   Possible Prompts: Did you experience any academic challenges? If so, what grade did these challenges first arise? Were there any particular subjects that you found more difficult/easy? What was your relationship like with teachers and other staff members in your school? Did you feel like you could go to them with concerns? Did you feel they wanted you to succeed?

9. **Is there anything else you would like to add or expand upon?**
   Prompts: Is there anything you felt we missed that you feel is important to talk about?

Appendix D – Community Resources and Supports

List of Community Resources

Pictou County Health Authority –Mental Health Services

http://www.pcha.nshealth.ca/mentalhealthservices/default.htm

Who They Are
- Staff comes from a variety of professions including psychiatry, psychology, nursing, clinical social work and other specialties. Their team approach gives you an opportunity to receive the best care from the best provider based on your needs.

How to Access Mental Health Services
- You may be referred through your family doctor or a professional from a community agency that is familiar with you. Parents may make a referral directly on behalf of children younger than 16 years of age. Self referrals are accepted.
- Emergency services can be accessed through the clinic during open hours Monday to Friday, 8:30 am - 4:30 pm, or by calling the clinic at 755-1137. After hours the Emergency Department of the Aberdeen Hospital provides emergency services, call 752-8311.

Some Services
- **Adult Services Division**

The Adult Services Division of Mental Health Services provides a wide range of mental health assessment, treatment and support services to adult clients age 19 and over of Pictou County who have a primary mental health diagnosis or mental health issues.

   How to access the Adult Services Division
   o Your family doctor may refer you.
   o Someone at another community agency (e.g. Addiction Services, Family Services, EAP Services, New Leaf) may refer you at your request.
   o You (or someone you know, acting with your consent) may refer you directly.
   o Telephone referrals can be made Monday to Friday, 8.30 am to 4.30 pm. Call 755-1137 and ask for the Adult Services receptionist.
   o Referrals can be sent by fax to 928-0297.

- **Life Management Program**

Many people who experience mental health difficulties feel distressed and alone with their concerns. If you are over the age of 19 and find yourself in this situation, the Adult Life Management Program can provide support and solutions.

   How to access the Adult Group Therapy Program
   o You must first be referred to the Adult Services Division by your family doctor or a professional from another community agency (e.g. Community Services, Family Services, New Leaf, Tearmann Society) who is familiar with your needs and acting on your request. You may refer yourself by calling 755-1137.

- You will then receive an assessment from the Referral Coordinator, who may refer you to the Life Management Program.

Teamwork Cooperative and The Workbridge
http://teamworkbridge.org/

The WorkBridge share a vision that persons with disabilities will participate equitably in the workforce. For more than 13 years the WorkBridge worked successfully with employers and community partners to strengthen the participation of persons with disabilities in the workplace. We specialize in job development, job mentoring, creative job carving and job search skills.

- Job Development/Job Carving
- Career Counseling
- Employment Maintenance Program

The Pictou County Continuous Learning Association (PiCCoLA)
Adult Learning in Pictou County
http://www.piccola.ca/

PiCCoLA is adult learners. It is our belief that every adult should have an equal opportunity to an education. The Pictou County Continuous Learning Association is a non-profit based organization. PiCCoLA is part of (NSSAL), the Nova Scotia School for Adult Learning. We are funded by the Nova Scotia Department of Labour and Advanced Education.

Their Mission:

- To provide academic upgrading to adults of Pictou County.
- To assist adults who want to develop skills for lifelong learning – so they can participate more fully at home, in the workplace, and in their community.
- To promote the awareness and importance of literacy in Pictou County.

Pictou County Help Line
http://www.pictoucountyhelpline.ca/

Help Line is a confidential and non-judgemental telephone service providing care, support and encouragement to the people of Pictou County and surrounding areas by providing the following services.

Pictou County Assessment and Counseling Services
The Dragon Fly Centre
http://www.ldans.ca/resdir/pictou/assessment.php

New Glassgow, NS
Phone: +1 (902) 755-9521
Ages Served: 18 months to Adult
Referral Procedure: Anyone, including self, can refer
Services Offered:

- Offers multidisciplinary assessment and Intervention services for children 18 months-adult as well as evidenced based remediation for reading, math, and writing.
- We have psychology, Speech Language, occupational therapy, and social workers available on staff.

Appendix F – Letter of Information

Dear Participant,

My name is Julie Franc and I am a student in the Masters of Arts in the School Psychology program, in the Faculty of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Nova Scotia. Dr. Mary Jane Harkins is a professor in the Faculty of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University and is my thesis supervisor. I am currently conducting a research study on exploring the perceptions of young adults' experiences throughout school, similarities and differences among the perceptions and how they may have influenced their academic decisions after high school. I would like to invite you to participate in this study.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to gain insights into the lived experiences of youth who have either dropped out of high school or completed high school but did not pursue a post-secondary education. This study will provide a greater understanding into the complexities of some of the identified factors as to why youth do not pursue post-secondary education. It is hoped that this research will help to expand knowledge and understanding of factors that influence educational decisions on the part of students, and ultimately contribute to the improvement of services and resources provided by school personnel throughout a student's time in school.

If you agree to participate in this study you will be asked to complete a brief demographics questionnaire and participate in a semi-structured individual interview about your perceptions and experiences during your time in school. **All individual interviews will be audio recorded and conducted by me. Once the interview has been recorded it will be transferred to a password protected computer and the recording deleted. When the transcription is completed, you will be given the opportunity to review the transcription and to add, delete or change any of the information so that it accurately reflects your responses to the questions. Up to three weeks after the interview process has ended, you also have the opportunity to contact me to discuss any aspect of your transcript. All identifying information will be removed prior to the data analysis.** The completion of the demographic questionnaire and interview will take place at a time and location that is mutually agreeable. It will take approximately 45 minutes of your time. If a participant withdraws from the interview process their information gathered from the interview will be destroyed and not used in the study. Their collected demographic information and written transcription of the interview will be shredded, and the audio recording will be deleted.

The results of this study will be used for future presentations at conferences and submission to peer reviewed journals for publication. Your name and any identifying information will not be used nor will it be used in any publication or presentation of the study results. You need to be aware that if you reveal information causing the student researcher to feel that anyone is the

subject of abuse or neglect or is engaged in illegal activities, the student researcher will have the responsibility to report this information to the proper authorities. All information collected for the study will be kept confidential. All demographic information collected and transcriptions will be stored in a locked filing cabinet, while all recordings will be deleted after being transferred to a password protected computer. Once the recordings have been transcribed, the recording on the computer will be deleted. After seven years, the transcriptions/demographic information will be shredded and all electronic information on a password protected computer will be deleted.

Some aspects of the interview have the potential to be sensitive areas for the participant; therefore the risk of difficult topics arising is acknowledged. The student researcher does have specific training and experience in talking with persons dealing with sensitive and difficult issues and therefore any issues that arise will be addressed; thereby mitigating risk. However the risk is minimal and by addressing any sensitivities it will enable the participant to feel as little distress as possible upon completion of the interview. A list of community resources will be attached to the demographic and guiding questions reference sheet provided to each participate for if they later decide to seek assistance for any reason – academic, career, or otherwise.

 Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate, refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time with no professional penalties. Only the researchers will have access to the data. Upon study completion, if you have given your contact information, a brief summary of results will be e-mailed to you or you may contact the researchers at the email addresses below to request a copy of the results summary.

If you have questions about this research project or concerns, please ask me now or you can contact me later (julie.franc@msvu.ca) or Mary Jane Harkins, my thesis supervisor by phone at 902-457-6595 or by email at maryjane.harkins@msvu.ca. If you have questions or concerns about how this study is being conducted and wish to speak to someone who is not directly involved in the study, you may contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Board by phoning 902 457 6350 or by email at research@msvu.ca.

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

Appendix C – Online Advertisement for Study

Research Opportunity for Young Adults Exploring Perspectives of their School Experiences

Young adults between the ages 19 to 25, who wish to share their perspectives of their experiences throughout their school years may be eligible to participate in a research study. This study is being conducted by Julie Franc, a Master's student in School Psychology at Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, in partial fulfillment of her degree. The purpose of Julie's thesis study is to gain insights into the lived experiences of youth who have either dropped out of high school or completed high school but did not pursue a post-secondary education. This study will provide a greater understanding into the complexities of some of the identified factors as to why youth do not pursue post-secondary education. It is hoped that this research will help to expand knowledge and understanding of factors that influence educational decisions on the part of students, and ultimately contribute to the improvement of services and resources provided throughout a student's time in school.

To be eligible to participate you must meet the following criteria:
- Young Adult between the ages of 19-25
- Must be out of high school for at least one year
- Must be out of high school for no more than five years
- Attended school in the Pictou County area
- Are not currently attending Post-secondary education

Participation involves 45 minutes of your time in which you would be asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire and participate in an in-person interview in the Pictou County area – where a mutually agreed upon time and location is determined.

If you have further questions or are interested in doing a 45-minute in-person interview with Julie, please contact her via email at julie.franc@msvu.ca
Participants will be entered into a draw for two, $25 gift cards as a token of appreciation for participation. Identifying information will be kept strictly confidential

Appendix G – Letter of Consent

Dear Participant,

Julie Franc is a student in the Masters of Arts in School Psychology program, in the Faculty of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Nova Scotia. Dr. Mary Jane Harkins is a professor in the Faculty of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University and is her thesis supervisor. Julie is currently conducting a research study on exploring the perceptions of young adults' experiences throughout school, similarities and differences among the perceptions and how they may have influenced their academic decisions after high school. We would like to invite you to participate in this study.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to gain insights into the lived experiences of youth who have either dropped out of high school or completed high school but did not pursue a post-secondary education. This study will provide a greater understanding into the complexities of some of the identified factors as to why youth do not pursue post-secondary education. It is hoped that this research will help to expand knowledge and understanding of factors that influence educational decisions on the part of students, and ultimately contribute to the improvement of services and resources provided by school personnel throughout a student's time in school.

If I agree to participate in this study, I will be asked to complete a brief demographics questionnaire and participate in a semi-structured individual interview about my perceptions and experiences during my time in school. **All individual interviews will be audio recorded and conducted by Julie Franc. Once the interview has been recorded it will be transferred to a password protected computer and the recording deleted. When the transcription is completed, I will be given the opportunity to review the transcription and to add, delete or change any of the information so that it accurately reflects my responses to the questions. Up to three weeks after the interview process has ended, I also have the opportunity to contact Julie Franc to discuss any aspect of your transcript. All identifying information will be removed prior to the data analysis.** The completion of the demographic questionnaire and interview will take place at a time and location that is mutually agreeable. It will take approximately 45 minutes of my time. If I withdraw from the interview process, my information gathered from the interview will be destroyed and not used in the study. The collected demographic information and written transcription of my interview will be shredded, and the audio recording will be deleted.

The results of this study will be used for future presentations at conferences and submission to peer reviewed journals for publication. My name and any identifying information will not be used nor will it be used in any publication or presentation of the study results. I need to be aware that if I reveal information causing the student researcher to feel that anyone is the subject of abuse or neglect or is engaged in illegal activities, the student researcher will have the responsibility to report this information to the proper authorities. All information collected for

the study will be kept confidential. All demographic information collected and transcriptions will be stored in a locked filing cabinet, while all recordings will be deleted after being transferred to a password protected computer. Once the recordings have been transcribed, the recording on the computer will be deleted. After seven years, the transcriptions/demographic information will be shredded and all electronic information on a password protected computer will be deleted.

Some aspects of the interview may have the potential to be sensitive areas for a participant; therefore the risk of difficult topics arising is acknowledged. The student researcher does have specific training and experience in talking with persons dealing with sensitive and difficult issues and therefore any issues that arise will be addressed; thereby mitigating risk. However the risk is minimal and by addressing any sensitivities it will enable the participant to feel as little distress as possible upon completion of the interview. A list of community resources will be attached to the demographic and guiding questions reference sheet provided to me if I later decide to seek assistance for any reason – academic, career, or otherwise.

Participation in this study is voluntary. I may refuse to participate, refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time with no professional penalties. Only the researchers will have access to the data. Upon study completion, if I have given my contact information, a brief summary of results will be e-mailed to me or I may contact the researchers at the email addresses below to request a copy of the results summary.

If I have questions about this research project or concerns, please ask them now or I can contact you at julie.franc@msvu.ca or Mary Jane Harkins, the thesis supervisor by phone at 902-457-6595 or by email at maryjane.harkins@msvu.ca . If I have questions or concerns about how this study is being conducted and wish to speak to someone who is not directly involved in the study, I may contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Board by phoning 902 457 6350 or by email at research@msvu.ca.

Signing below indicates I understand the information on this form, have considered the implications of participating and am willing to participate.

_____   _____
Participant Signature   Student Researcher Signature

_____   _____
Date (day/month/year)   Date (day/month/year)

I am also giving my consent for this interview to be audio recorded. I realize that once the recording is completed and the recorder transported to Mount Saint Vincent University in a locked box, it will be transferred to a password protected computer and the recording deleted. Once the recording is transcribed, the computer recording will be deleted.

_____   _____
Participant Signature   Student Researcher Signature

_____   _____
Date (day/month/year)   Date (day/month/year)