

## SIT Graduate Institute/SIT Study Abroad SIT Digital Collections

---

Capstone Collection

SIT Graduate Institute


---

Winter 12-12-2016

# Student Perspectives on Proficiency-Based Learning in Vermont's High School Completion Program

Hayley J. Shriner  
*SIT Graduate Institute*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/capstones>

 Part of the [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#), [International and Comparative Education Commons](#), [Other Education Commons](#), [Student Counseling and Personnel Services Commons](#), and the [Vocational Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Shriner, Hayley J., "Student Perspectives on Proficiency-Based Learning in Vermont's High School Completion Program" (2016). *Capstone Collection*. 2948.  
<https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/capstones/2948>

This Thesis (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Graduate Institute at SIT Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Capstone Collection by an authorized administrator of SIT Digital Collections. For more information, please contact [digitalcollections@sit.edu](mailto:digitalcollections@sit.edu).

STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON PROFICIENCY-BASED LEARNING  
IN VERMONT'S HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION PROGRAM

Hayley J. Shriner

PIM 74

A capstone paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Arts in International Education at SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA.

December 12, 2016

Advisor: Karla Giuliano Sarr

## Consent to Use of Capstone

I hereby grant permission for World Learning to publish my capstone on its websites and in any of its digital/ electronic collections, and to reproduce and transmit my CAPSTONE ELECTRONICALLY. I understand that World Learning's websites and digital collections are publicly available via the Internet. I agree that World Learning is NOT responsible for any unauthorized use of my capstone by any third party who might access it on the Internet or otherwise.

Student name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Introduction and Statement of Research Topic</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Background</b> .....	<b>4</b>
Relationship Between HSCP and the Public School System .....	5
<b>Literature Review</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>Research Design</b> .....	<b>11</b>
Participant Selection .....	12
Meet the Students.....	14
Meet the Schools .....	17
Meet the Administrative Coordinator .....	20
Methods.....	20
Limitations .....	21
<b>Presentation and Analysis of Data</b> .....	<b>22</b>
Educator Perspectives on the Referral Process.....	23
Language Used in the Referral Process.....	24
Impact of Act 77 in Schools .....	27
Student Response to the PLP Process in the Public School System.....	28
Theoretical Frameworks in Educator Interviews.....	29
Student Perspectives on the Public School System.....	30
Students' Familiarity with Proficiency-Based Learning.....	33
Connecting Student Perspectives to Theoretical Framework .....	37
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>40</b>
Discussion .....	41
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	<b>44</b>
<b>Appendix</b> .....	<b>46</b>
Appendix A: Sample Plan.....	46
Appendix B: Interview Questions .....	54
Appendix C: Sample of Interview themes .....	56

ABBREVIATIONS

ABE	Adult Basic Education
EFF	Equipped for the Future Standards
EQS	Education Quality Standards
HSPC	High School Completion Program
IPIC	Independent Practitioner Inquiry Capstone
PBL	Proficiency-based learning
PLP	Personalized Learning Plan
TABE	Test of Adult Basic Education

## ABSTRACT

This Independent Practitioner Inquiry Capstone (IPIC) paper examines student perspectives on proficiency-based learning at an adult education center in Vermont. Through Vermont's High School Completion Program (HSCP), adults can earn their high school diplomas through proficiency-based Personalized Learning Plans (PLPs). This qualitative study focuses on high school-aged students who received referrals to the program from area schools within the context of the current shift toward proficiency-based learning mandated by Vermont Act 77. The study draws on resources specific to Act 77, as well as literature on the nationwide trend toward personalized learning and proficiency-based learning. The researcher uses holistic student development and human capital theory as frames for analysis. The specific question posed in this study was "How do students in the High School Completion Program view proficiency-based learning and its impact on their education?" This question was answered through a thematic analysis focused on in-depth interviews with student participants and the guidance counselors who referred them to the program. Evidence from this study indicates that some students who have left the public school system are eager to contribute to conversations on proficiency-based learning and are able to identify ways proficiency-based learning has benefited them in terms of their professional and academic development. Through this study, the researcher highlights another student voice in the conversation on proficiency-based learning in Vermont.

**Key terms:** proficiency-based learning, personalized learning plans, adult education, alternatives to school, project-based learning, holistic student development, human capital theory, career development, Vermont

### **Introduction and Statement of Research Topic**

In 2006, Vermont established the High School Completion Program (HSCP) as a means for adult students to earn their high school diploma. Since then, this program has been run through a number of adult education providers throughout the state. Plan Managers work with students to develop Personalized Learning Plans (PLPs) to meet the graduation requirements of area high schools, and guide students through the process of completing these proficiency-based plans. Throughout this process, there is an emphasis on transitions to post-secondary education and the workforce. Learning activities in student PLPs are intended to connect students with opportunities that will bolster their transitions, and are designed to take into account any barriers to educational access they may face.

Just over a year ago, I joined one of these adult education providers<sup>1</sup> as a Plan Manager. As I grew to understand the program and the needs of my students, I was surprised how many conversations revolved around credits. Despite our program writing our PLPs using proficiency-based graduation requirements, students continuously arrived at my office door wondering how many credits they had in their plans, how many credits they need to graduate, and how many credits they can earn through one learning activity or another. Efforts to use the language around proficiencies were often met with blank stares. These conversations led me to question how much the students in our program actually understand about proficiency-based learning.

---

<sup>1</sup> The name of the provider has been masked in order to assure anonymity for study participants.

The majority of the students in my caseload come as direct referrals from area high schools, and arrive at the program with a clear expectation of how many credits they need to graduate and what the process of earning credit looks like. The language, structure, and expectations around proficiency-based learning are unfamiliar to them. While proficiency-based learning systems vary in terms of design and implementation, a basic definition is that a student's progress is measured not simply by their attendance in class and completion of work, but by a specific demonstration of skill and knowledge in a subject. Proficiency-based learning differs from the model used in most schools in that success is not necessarily time-bound, because a student may take a very short time or a very long time to master a subject, or bound to the classroom, because students can demonstrate knowledge and skill in a wide variety of contexts.

Confusion regarding the proficiency-based system at the learning center where I work may be compounded because Plan Managers often create PLPs containing both credits and proficiencies. This is most often done in order to more easily facilitate the acceptance of the PLP by the high school granting the diploma. The adult education centers, which are not accredited, design the learning activities, and the schools grant the credits. While the schools understand that students are not earning credit through the High School Completion Program, it is a language that is familiar and addresses the graduation requirements of the schools. Because we have to identify the number of credits a student needs to graduate when they enter the program, and because some student plans contain credit values assigned to learning activities, students often identify with the credit, rather than the



proficiency, as a measure of having completing a learning activity. However, some student plans are purely proficiency-based, and what I have found is that the quality of advising that accompanies their plans changes as well.

This point of view is supported through current literature on proficiency-based learning. Experts in the field have demonstrated through numerous studies that students are more empowered throughout their learning process when using proficiency-based learning models (Solberg, 2012; Phelps, 2011; Posner, 2011). My personal experience working with students further substantiates these claims and this Independent Practitioner Inquiry Capstone (IPIC) provides an opportunity for more formal investigation. The guiding question for this study is: How do students in the High School Completion Program (HSCP) view proficiency-based learning and its impact on their education? In order to answer this question, I conducted one-on-one interviews with students, the school guidance counselors who referred them to the program, and the Administrative Coordinator who conducted their orientation. In the sections that follow, I will provide background on the High School Completion Program, analyze some of the literature which supports this study, describe the research design I used, and present an analysis of my findings including recommendations for the future and points of inquiry for further research.

### **Background**

While this study focuses primarily on the experiences of High School Completion Program students, it is situated in a larger discussion about proficiency-based learning in Vermont. I provide contextual information as background to in

this section. To begin with, in 2013, the Vermont Legislature passed Vermont Act 77, or Flexible Pathways, which mandates that all Vermont high schools implement assessment and graduation standards based on proficiencies rather than credits (Vermont Agency of Education, 2016c). In addition, Act 77 aims to increase student access to alternative learning opportunities which will better meet the work and post-secondary goals of Vermont's graduates. The first class to graduate on proficiencies is the class of 2020, or this year's incoming freshmen. Though all Vermont high schools are in the process of adopting proficiency-based learning standards, schools statewide are in vastly different stages of implementation, including the three schools I work with through the High School Completion Program. As schools across Vermont adopt these standards and develop PLPs for their students, it will inevitably impact the relationship between the public school system and the High School Completion Program. While the main focus of this study is student perspectives on the program they are attending, it is necessary to place student experience within the broader context of this shift. Therefore, in addition to interviewing students about proficiency-based learning in general, I asked them to consider what impact this change will have on Vermont's public schools. I now turn to this topic in the section below.

### **Relationship Between HSCP and the Public School System**

In order to facilitate understanding of the High School Completion Program and its relationship to the public school system, I will briefly describe the process of creating a PLP and the role of my position, Plan Manager, in that process. The primary role of the Plan Manager is to develop a PLP with the student, to connect

the student with learning opportunities that will meet their personal, academic, and career goals, and to support the student through the process of completing the Plan. The first step is for the student to attend orientation. During orientation, the student learns some basic information about opportunities to earn their high school credential through the High School Completion Program or through the GED and then takes a state-mandated math and literacy assessment. They also learn about SMART<sup>2</sup> goals, take a career interest survey and a learning styles inventory, and start thinking about what their next steps after earning their credential will be. If a student plans to earn their diploma through the High School Completion Program, they will meet with a Plan Manager, who will continue to guide them in their goal setting process. The Plan Manager will get any transcripts they have and identify how many credits the student needs to meet the graduation requirements of their assigned school.<sup>3</sup> The Plan Manager then works with the student to write a PLP that integrates both the student's goals and the schools graduation requirements. Because most schools are still in the process of transitioning to proficiency-based systems, many of these plans contain credits. Adult Education programs throughout the state also integrate proficiency-based standards into the plans. Most centers use Equipped for the Future (EFF) standards<sup>4</sup> designed specifically around the needs of

---

<sup>2</sup> While there are some variations on the acronym SMART, the center where I work defines SMART goals as goals which are Specific, Measurable, Accurate, Reasonable, and Time-bound. Students and Plan Managers use SMART goals as part of the advising process.

<sup>3</sup> Schools are assigned based on town of residence.

<sup>4</sup> In addition to the graduation requirements of the area high schools, students must meet all 16 of the EFF Standards in their plans. These standards are divided into four categories: Communication Skills, Decision-Making Skills, Interpersonal Skills, and Lifelong Learning Skills (Equipped for the Future, 2016). While writing student plans, Plan Managers correlate students' graduation requirements with the EFF Standards. Please see Appendix A, a sample plan, for more detail.

adult learners and some centers use Education Quality Standards<sup>5</sup> (EQS), the same standards used in the Vermont public school system. The use of these two sets of standards ensures that PLPs align both with best practices in the field of adult education and the standards set by the Agency of Education for Vermont high schools. A sample PLP in the appendix illustrates the format used by most of the Plan Managers at the center where I work, although the plans vary significantly in content and structure depending on the Plan Manager and the region (Appendix A). Once a plan is complete, and meets the approval of the student, the Plan Manager will bring the plan to the student's high school for approval from the Director of Guidance. After the plan is approved, the Plan Manager continues to explore and develop options for personal, academic and career goals with the student, and adapts the plan in order to connect the student with more relevant opportunities whenever possible. Once the learning activities in the plan have been completed, the student submits a final transition plan and earns their diploma.

### **Literature Review**

In order to support my study, I conducted extensive research on proficiency-based learning, personalized learning plans, career exploration, and Vermont Act 77. Inspired by Rodman's International Education Matrix (Weidman & Jacob, 2011, p. 54), I explored relevant literature to support my study on macro, mezzo, and micro levels. Macro-level explorations focused on the nationwide shift toward proficiency-based learning. This macro-level literature often explored an implicit tie proficiency-

---

<sup>5</sup> EQS Standards are set by the state of Vermont to ensure consistent quality in educational opportunities statewide. See State of Vermont Agency of Education, 2016b.

based learning has to theories of holistic student development, human capital theory, or, somewhat inexplicably, both. Mezzo-level explorations focused on Vermont's transition to proficiency-based graduation requirements, and examined resources available through the Vermont Agency of Education and a number of collaborating organizations. These resources range from legislative documents to student testimonies to implementation guides. The micro-level component of my study is my own fieldwork, interviewing HSCP students about their perspectives on proficiency-based learning. I intend to contribute to the ongoing conversation on proficiency-based learning in Vermont by offering the unique perspectives of students earning their diplomas through the adult education system.

Literature on PLPs that focuses on student experiences of education, student voice, or empowerment can be viewed through the lens of holistic student development. While writing about holistic student development, Gillespie, Brascamp and Dwyer (2009) suggest "students' intellectual, social, and interior lives are inextricably linked" (p.445). When PLPs are designed with a whole self of the student in mind, they take into account the academic, social, and emotional needs of the learner, as well as any barriers to access they might face. While exploring literature on PLPs in Vermont, or on the mezzo level, I found that much of the literature had a strong connection to theories of holistic student development. The Vermont Agency of Education requires Plan Managers to include educational, personal, and career goals in every plan, and describes the PLPs as follows in the text for Act 77:

“Personalized learning plan” and “PLP” mean documentation of an evolving plan developed on behalf of a student... the plan shall be developmentally appropriate and shall reflect the student’s emerging abilities, aptitude, and disposition. The plan shall define the scope and rigor of academic and experiential opportunities necessary for a secondary student to complete secondary school successfully, attain postsecondary readiness, and be prepared to engage actively in civic life (Vermont Legislature, 2013, p.6).

While the goal of Act 77 is to “increase rates of secondary school completion and postsecondary continuation in Vermont” it hopes to achieve that goal “through high-quality educational experiences that acknowledge individual goals, learning styles, and abilities” (Vermont Legislation, 2013, p.1). Rather than prescribing a singular path for student success, Flexible Pathways provides Vermont students with a wide range of options to meet their personal, academic, and career goals.

When exploring literature on the national, or macro, level most of the available literature on adult learners and PLPs focuses on transferrable skills, employability and transitions to the workforce. Therefore, this literature can be critically analyzed through the lens of human capital theory. When describing human capital theory, Kubow and Fossum (2007) detail a human capital approach as when “education planning models may link education programs and instructional design in anticipation of workforce needs” (p. 41). An example of this can be found in a study of four states’ implementation of Individualized Learning Plans (ILPs, another term for PLPs). Three of the four states worked directly with the Department of Labor or other economic agencies to pass legislation implementing ILPs (Phelps, Durham, & Wills, 2011). When returning to the mezzo level, focusing specifically on proficiency-based learning in Vermont, most literature available emphasizes post-secondary readiness. However, it is easily argued that creating a

workforce with a higher level of education is in and of itself “anticipation of workforce needs” as Kubow and Fossum (2007) described (p.41).

Again, returning to macro level, or national analysis of the impact of PLPs, Kosine and Lewis (2008) suggest that there is some connection between career development and holistic student development, another indicator that these two areas can be linked. Citing multiple studies, the authors argue that “individuals who possess well developed career interests also display an overall stronger sense of self” (Kosine & Lewis, 2008, p. 231). In a 2014 study conducted by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, authors concluded that student-centered learning is an approach that addresses the learning gaps in American educational achievement (Hess, Gong, National Center for the Improvement of Assessment, Bayerl, 2014). Citing a study by Gonzalez, Rooseboom and Stout (2011), the authors note “college and career readiness is a multidimensional construct, with academic content knowledge representing only one of several key dimensions” (Hess et al, 2014, p. 7). By analyzing the success and failures of the current educational paradigms in place, in this case, the Common Core State Standards, the authors are able to suggest specific student-centered approaches addressing not only knowledge gaps, but skill gaps for students entering post-secondary education and the workforce. Citing Conley (2007), they emphasize the need for cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal development (Hess et al, 2014, p.9) and suggest three propositions “that could enable full implementation of rigorous academic content and the college and career readiness skill sets” (Hess et al, 2014, p. 15). While the three propositions vary in terms of approach, they are all grounded in student-centered

learning, and “adhere to four broad principals” of being “personalized, competency-based, take place anytime, anywhere,” and that students “exert ownership over learning” (Hess et al, 2014, p.16).

Based on my above survey of available literature, I was confident in my ability both to pursue my research question and contribute to the ongoing conversation about proficiency-based learning in Vermont. This study attempts to address the gap in the literature on the learning preferences of high school-aged learners earning their diplomas outside of the public school system. Undoubtedly, there are alternative education programs using proficiency-based models, but the majority of literature on proficiency-based learning and PLPs is rooted in the context of public schools or technical education programs. While alternative programs, like the one I work for, have an opportunity to learn from studies conducted in public school settings, the experiences of students in alternative programs also have much to contribute to educational researchers and policy-makers, especially when it comes to proficiency-based learning and PLPs.

### **Research Design**

To answer the question, “How do students in the High School Completion Program view proficiency-based learning and its impact on their education?” I conducted a qualitative research study focused on in-depth interviews with program participants and, school guidance counselors, and the Administrative Coordinator at the learning center where I work. Students included in the study were three current High School Completion Program participants and two recent



graduates. All student participants entered the program within a year of the interviews as a result of direct referrals from area high schools. I conducted interviews with the Administrative Coordinator of the program, who conducts orientation, and the Directors of Guidance from the three schools granting diplomas to students in my caseload. Student participants were selected using typical case sampling (Glesne, 2011, p. 45). I interviewed all participants using semi-structured interviews. Interview questions can be found in Appendix B. I then manually transcribed and coded all interviews using thematic analysis to identify trends that emerged in the interviews. Below, the reader will find more detailed information on the participant selection process, an introduction to the participants, and information on the methodology used for analysis as well as a discussion of the limitations of this study.

### **Participant Selection**

This present qualitative study investigates students' experiences of proficiency-based learning in the High School Completion Program in Vermont. Using typical case sampling (Glesne, 2011, p.45), I selected and interviewed a total of five current students (see Table 1) and recent graduates who had been referred to the program within the last year. All of the students in my study were 18 years old. Bearing in mind good ethical research practices, I excluded students who I considered to be vulnerable. For example, students struggling with unstable housing, overcoming addiction, or severe anxiety were not invited to participate. I also focused specifically on students referred from high schools in order to better understand what the high school referral process looks like, to contextualize their

experience within Vermont's transition to proficiency-based learning, and because the majority of my students come to the program as a direct referral from the high schools I work with.<sup>6</sup> The selection of participants was designed to replicate the overall student population of my caseload. While searching for participants, I tried to balance the number of male and female participants in the study, and included students of color and in the study. Unfortunately none of my students who openly identify as LGBTQ fit the other criteria for participation in the study, so this characteristic is not represented in my findings here. Among the five participants, three participants were from my largest sending school and there was one participant from each of the other schools I work with. In addition to the students I interviewed, I also interviewed the Administrative Coordinator of the High School Completion Program, who runs the intake and orientation sessions, and the Director of Guidance at each of the three schools with which I work. This was done to gain a greater understanding of the process each student undergoes when entering the program and what information is shared about proficiency-based learning.

---

<sup>6</sup> In the past year, the majority of students in my caseload have to come to the program as a direct referral from area high schools. Other methods of referral include referrals from friends and referrals from social service organizations like Vocational Rehabilitation. The Administrative Coordinator interviewed in this study estimates that approximately twenty-five percent of students who enter the program come through referrals from friends (Interview).

TABLE 1: Participants in study:

<u>Category of Participants</u>	<u>Number of Participants</u>
Students	5
School Guidance Counselors	3
HSCP Administrative Coordinator	1

### Meet the Students

The five student participants in the study had diverse characteristics as learners. In the following section, I provide a brief description of each of the participants including his or her academic level, reason for joining the program, and details about his or her long term goals or current academic pursuits. In order to protect the anonymity of the participants, I have given them pseudonyms.

Daniela left school in the middle of her junior year. When she first came to the center, she needed to do remedial math and literacy work through the Adult Basic Education (ABE) program before she could enter the High School Completion Program.<sup>7</sup> She connected strongly with her teachers and met many of her

---

<sup>7</sup> When students enter the adult education system in Vermont, they take a math and literacy assessment called the Test of Adult Basic Education, or TABE. In order to enter the High School Completion Program, students must earn scores of NRS (National Reporting System) 5s and 6s on the TABE, which is roughly equivalent to a high school level. Access to funding for services outside of our center becomes available once a student is at 5s and 6s on the TABE and can be designated as “Special Group Enrolled” on our program. Special cases may be made for students under NRS 5s and 6s if students need to access services outside of the center which require funding.

graduation requirements through classes in the ABE program. She is currently taking American Sign Language at a local Community College to meet the foreign language requirement at her high school and doing an independent project on Technological Apps in Education. She left school because of what she described as “girl drama” (Interview) and would like to be a teacher.

Elijah came to the center in the middle of his senior year only needing two credits to graduate. He entered the program with low math and literacy skills and worked with the ABE program on building skills between January and August of this year. In our interview, he expressed that his teachers in the past “skipped over” things he needed to “go back and learn” and he was thankful for the opportunity to address some of his knowledge gaps. He is currently working on a physical education project and an interdisciplinary project on molecular gastronomy to meet science and fine art requirements from his high school. He wants to be a long distance trucker.

Ashley came to the center after not completing her senior year of high school. She says the main reason she was not able to complete school was because she had to miss a lot of school due to chronic migraines and other health issues. She enjoys the flexibility of being able to complete her schoolwork while maintaining a job in the food service sector. She is currently working on a project on environmental sustainability to meet the science requirements of her high school and completing a course in Financial Literacy. She is interested in ecology, journalism, and working in study abroad.

Kyle is a 2016 graduate who started the High School Completion Program around the beginning of his senior year. He remained enrolled in a technical education program on residential building for the duration of his time in the program. He completed the remainder of his academic work through at our center, and was one of the most consistent students at the center in the past year. According to Kyle, he was “in a slump” (Interview) when he started the High School Completion Program and didn’t feel motivated in school. He had trouble sitting in classes, especially lectures, and didn’t like doing homework. While in the program, he took courses and projects in Civics, Financial Literacy, Career Readiness, and Physical Education. He is now working for an electrician and going to college to be a journeyman electrician.

Nathan is a 2016 graduate who started the High School Completion Program around the beginning of his senior year. He originally planned to incorporate learning opportunities through our program into his classwork at his school, but by midyear, he had dropped his classes at the high school. According to Nathan, he “hated school” (Interview) and expressed that with the help of his family, he had taught himself everything he needed to know and that school didn’t teach him anything (Interview). While in the High School Completion Program, he completed Civics, Financial Literacy and Career Readiness courses. He also participated in a Chili Festival to meet his practical art requirement from his high school. In addition, he applied to a Hospitality and Hotel Management program through one of the area colleges, but decided to defer and is working.

### **Meet the Schools**

In the following section, I have included information about the three schools that refer students to my caseload. I compiled the data on the schools from school profiles on their websites. Guidance counselors make school profiles to highlight information about the programs at their schools, and colleges can use these profiles to get a better sense of the academic environments their applicants come from. According to the popular website, College Board (2016), schools are expected to include some standard information in the profile, but can use the school profile as an opportunity to differentiate themselves from other schools. I collected data on the three schools I work with in order to gain a better understanding of what information they want to put forward. For example, one of the schools below includes extensive information about alternative programs within their school, which shows that they foster inclusivity and multiple paths to learning goals. Other schools only emphasized programs accessible to academic high achievers. Statistical information on the schools and information from their school profiles follows.<sup>8</sup>

The first school in the study, Lincoln High School, is a rural school of around 800 students serving five communities. Their profile includes information on student access to technical education, honors and AP courses, and a list of recent college acceptances. Out of the three schools I serve, Lincoln has the lowest percentage of students planning to attend a four-year college after graduating at 69% in 2016. However, that number has risen steadily from 56% in 2013.

---

<sup>8</sup> I have changed both the names of the schools and their Directors of Guidance to maintain the anonymity of the participants.

Of the three schools, King High School is the largest high school I work with, with 1,200 students, and they also refer the largest number of students to our program. Unlike the other two schools, many of the students from King enter the High School Completion Program looking for credit recovery, or to earn two credits or less through the program. This option is available to students in their senior year who are at NRS 5s and 6s on the TABE. King High School is a suburban school, and on its profile it states that the majority of the residents of the towns it serves work in professional sectors like business and education. According to the school profile, 76.5% of King students who graduated in 2016 intended to attend college, 16% intended to work, 1% intended to join the military and 6.5% had other plans. King features a STEM Academy, and an Academy of Visual and Performing Arts in addition to convenient access to a technical education center. Information on alternative and remedial programs offered at King is not available on the school profile.

Lastly, Union High School is a suburban school serving 900 students. According to their 2015-2016 school profile, 77% of graduates planned on attending college. Students at Union scored higher than Vermont and national averages on both the SATs and the ACTs, and their profile features a wide range of extracurricular activities. Union offers alternative programming including an international student exchange program, a project-based learning program, ELL programs, supported learning programs, and an early college program among others. Union High School students only need to earn 20 credits to graduate, as opposed to Lincoln students, who need to earn 22 credits, and King students, who

need to earn 24. During my interview with the Director of Guidance at Union, he pointed out that many students earn almost 50% more credits than they need to. Having a lower number of required credits and a wide variety of alternative programs supports flexibility for students, especially those who feel the traditional high school experience is not a good fit.

TABLE 2: Schools in Study

<u>Name of School</u>	<u>Overview</u>
Lincoln High School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rural</li> <li>• Student population: 800</li> <li>• Director of Guidance: Melissa</li> <li>• Increasing number of students transitioning to college over last 3 years.</li> </ul>
King High School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Suburban</li> <li>• Student population: 1,200</li> <li>• Director of Guidance: Robert</li> <li>• Sends highest number of referrals to HSCP.</li> </ul>
Union High School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Suburban</li> <li>• Student population: 900</li> <li>• Director of Guidance: Charlie</li> <li>• Provides wide variety of in-house alternative education programs.</li> </ul>



### **Meet the Administrative Coordinator**

The High School Completion Program Administrative Coordinator, Sandra,<sup>9</sup> is usually the first point of contact for students entering both the High School Completion Program and the Adult Basic Education Program at our center. Students attend two sessions of orientation with Sandra before connecting with a Plan Manager or Ed Advisor (the Plan Manager counterpart in the ABE program). In part one of orientation, students receive a short introduction to programs and services offered at our center and take the TABE test. In orientation part two, students take a learning styles survey and a career interest survey to encourage them to start reflecting on their educational and career preferences and are introduced to GoogleDocs, where they will house their academic work. Following orientation part two, Sandra introduces students to their Plan Manager in the High School Completion Program or Ed Advisor in the Adult Basic Education program.

### **Methods**

My main source of data collection was semi-structured interviews that I conducted either at my office or at the offices of the school guidance counselors. As a reminder, I interviewed five program participants, the three Directors of Guidance at the schools that I work with, and the Administrative Coordinator at the program where I work. (Please refer to Appendix B for a list of the main interview questions I used in my study). Each interview lasted approximately half an hour, with the

---

<sup>9</sup> Name changed to protect anonymity of participant.

longest interview lasting 39 minutes and the shortest interview lasting 17 minutes. I manually transcribed and coded the interviews. As I was coding, I identified that participants were discussing their experiences in relation to public high schools, the High School Completion Program, proficiency-based learning, or Act 77. In response to this observation, I created a four-sheet Excel document where I could track what themes emerged as the participants discussed these four topics, which can be seen in Appendix C. I listed the participant ID along the top of each sheet, and the themes along the left hand column, so that I could highlight which participant mentioned each theme and in relation to which topic. This helped me to identify if participants shared themes from interview to interview. While my original intention was to correlate student responses question by question, I found that each interview, while it did address the original questions I proposed, tended to take its own course based on the participants' interests and experiences. Through the coding method I used, I was able to find a way to visually recollect more rich and nuanced details that the participant may have mentioned as a "theme" in their interview. It also left space to record idiosyncratic themes as they emerged. While I focused more on thematic rather than semiotic analysis of the interviews (Glesne, 2011, p. 186-187), I designed my coding process to look closely at the language participants used and the context in which they used it.

### **Limitations**

While this study aims to contribute to ongoing conversations about the transition to proficiency-based learning in Vermont and the perspectives of students earning their diplomas outside of the public school system, it is clearly limited in

scope. Using typical case sampling, I set selective criteria of students over the age of 18 who had entered the program via a referral from their high school within the past year, which is typical of students in my caseload. Even with such narrow criteria, I was able to interview students with diverse educational backgrounds and post-graduate aspirations. However, the students in my caseload do not necessarily represent the perspectives of other participants in our program statewide or even in the county, where I work. Two other Plan Managers serve the remaining students at our center. One Plan Manager serves schools with a high ratio of English Language Learners, while the other works with a school where a high number of students are affected by inter-generational poverty. I designed this study in response to a trend I saw in conversations with my students in an effort to contextualize their knowledge in relation to our program and the greater transition to proficiency-based learning in Vermont. Were I to design my study around center-wide, program-wide, or organizational factors, I may have chosen a different research topic. Based on my experience working with my students, I felt that understanding what they know and don't know about proficiency-based learning would allow me to better inform and support them in the process of developing their PLPs.

### **Presentation and Analysis of Data**

In the section that follows, I will present an analysis of the interviews I conducted with High School Completion Program students, the guidance counselors who referred them to the program, and the Administrative Coordinator who conducted their orientation. First, I will look at themes that emerged in interviews

with the guidance counselors and the Administrative Coordinator. Specifically, I will look at the criteria guidance counselors use when connecting students to the program, then look at language used in the referral process and in orientation, and finally look at how Act 77 is impacting the three schools, and how the themes that emerged in these interviews connect back to the literature supporting this study.

After presenting my analysis on the voices that may influence student perspectives on proficiency-based learning, I will then turn to the students themselves, and examine the themes that emerged in their interviews. First, I analyze student perspectives on the public school system and the social, emotional, and academic barriers they faced. Then, I will present what students knew, and didn't know, about proficiency-based learning. Finally, I will connect the themes that emerged in the student interviews to theories of holistic student development and human capital theory.

### **Educator Perspectives on the Referral Process**

I started the interviews with all three Directors of Guidance by asking about how they identify a student who would be a good fit for the High School Completion Program and what the referral process would look like. While answering questions about student fit, the guidance counselors described some characteristics of their schools that can be challenging for students. All three pointed specifically to issues around the environment of the school as challenging, and two guidance counselors felt that homework, in particular, was an issue for students who they recommended

to the program. Melissa<sup>10</sup>, the Director of Guidance and Lincoln High School, felt that students who are a good fit for the High School Completion Program are often students who enjoy learning, but don't always follow through with their academic work (Interview). Robert, the Director of Guidance at King High School, identified two "types" of students whom he would consider referring to the High School Completion Program. The first is "a student who struggles to be successful in high school" and the second is "a student who just doesn't respond well to a traditional classroom type setting and is more project-based in their learning" (Interview). Charlie, the Director of Guidance at Union High School, would most likely refer a student "who is struggling to tolerate the regular classroom setting either because of anxiety or because of work challenges or family challenges so they need a more flexible way of earning their [sic]... of demonstrating their competencies" (Interview). It is interesting to note that Charlie changed his response mid-sentence. It seemed as if he was originally going to discuss credits, but shifted to discussing proficiencies. It is unclear whether he corrected himself in response to his audience or a shift in his perspective.

### **Language Used in the Referral Process**

While Charlie was the only guidance counselor to specifically mention proficiencies in regard to the referral process, Sandra, the HSCP Administrative Coordinator, felt that proficiency-based learning played a large part in the referral process. She noted specifically that the role of referrals from friends contributes to

---

<sup>10</sup> As with previous sections, all names have been changed.

students' knowledge of the program and of proficiency-based learning. When I asked her to estimate what percentage of students knew about proficiency-based learning when they attend orientation, she guessed that about 25% of students had some understanding of what proficiency-based learning is. She also estimated that 25% of students entering the program have a friend who is currently enrolled or graduated recently. According to the Sandra, students "love that it is not about seat time and that they can do things educationally, take advantage of educational opportunities that they are interested in" (Interview). Sandra has limited time to describe the programs at orientation, but she is careful to outline the differences between the High School Completion Program and a typical high school experience:

We're not even a school. We are a learning center. And we differ from the K12 system in that you don't spend X amount of hours and you're pretty much guaranteed either a pass or some kind of another. You complete the class, you get a credit. But here, it's not about seat time. It's about you developing that plan with your High School Completion Plan Manager and then carrying out what you need to do. But I said the very best plans are written connecting you to learning opportunities to things that you are really interested in and ideally what you want to transition into. Some career opportunity or job opportunity or educational endeavor that you want to go on with in terms of college or work after you are done with us. (Interview)

Based on the information provided by the Administrative Coordinator in her interview, students should have some knowledge of how proficiency-based learning differs from the credit-based system in the public school system after attending orientation. It is not uncommon, especially for students coming directly from the high school, to approach Sandra at the end of orientation to let her know that they "only need one or two credits" in order to meet their graduation requirements. Sandra says usually these students have been told, "You can just get those taken care

of through [Program Name].” (Interview) She makes an interesting point, however, in regard to these low credit students, that they often miss out on all the program has to offer because they are so focused on earning credit: “I think, generally, my experience is that when they have a lot more credits then they are really, really interested in what they can do as part of their plan and less fixated on the credits.”

When asked directly whether they described the High School Completion Program to students in terms of credits, proficiencies, or both, the guidance counselors often mentioned projects or project-based learning and the use of a proficiency-based model. However, they also described it as an opportunity to earn credits outside of school. Robert’s answer to the question was fairly straightforward, as he describes the program in terms of alternative credit accrual. Melissa explained how she describes the relationship between credits and proficiencies in terms of the relationship between the two schools:

I sort of say that the work that they do through [Program Name] is through a proficiency-based model, however, through our collaboration and our work we have this agreement that kind of translates into what they need to be able to earn credit or post that credit to their transcripts. (Interview)

Her explanation of the relationship between credits and proficiencies in the way the program works with the schools most closely aligns with how I describe it to students in my own role as Plan Manager. Like Melissa, Charlie describes the program in terms of proficiencies, but was clear to add that when students are considering the High School Completion Program they are not very interested in proficiencies. In fact, he says that students tend to focus on whether the program will take them more or less time to complete and the fact that they have an

opportunity to earn their high school diploma outside of school. From his perspective, students “just want to know what they are supposed to do so they can get out of high school” (Interview). Charlie felt that because student PLPs contain credits, they are credit-based, and that students identify with the credits because “it’s a language that the kids understand because we’ve told them you’ve got to count as we go” (Interview). When I asked Charlie about the quality of the plans later in the interview, he stated that the plans themselves are not the important part of the program, and that the important thing is “building a bridge” and finding something that “whets their appetite for further learning”(Interview). Charlie’s perspective on students’ PLPs stood in contrast to Melissa’s perspective. She expressed that the format of the plans was helpful, and that she had used them as one approach to understanding PLPs. While the plans for all three schools contain both credits and proficiencies, the guidance counselors from two of the schools had very different interpretations what is emphasized in the plans. Based on Melissa and Charlie’s interpretations of the PLPs, it is clear that it is a matter of how a person reads the plan, rather than the content itself, which guides their interpretation.

### **Impact of Act 77 in Schools**

While all three schools were in different stages implementing the changes mandated in Act 77 at their schools, there were many common features to the themes that emerged in their interviews and the dilemmas they are facing. All three schools were concerned about the impact the change would have on teachers, what would happen with students who failed a class but passed a proficiency, and how they would address students who completed a proficiency at an early point in the



semester for a year. For the time being, all three schools are embedding the proficiencies within courses, so early completion is not an issue. This could become problematic in later stages of implementation, depending on how students will demonstrate proficiency in different subject areas. While the schools are still determining what their proficiency-based system will look like, the current freshman are the first class that will graduate based on proficiencies. For the time being, all three schools have integrated proficiencies into Physical Education and Health classes taken in the freshman and sophomore years. All remaining proficiencies will be earned in the junior and senior years. This allows schools an opportunity to try out proficiencies on a smaller scale while developing the upper class level proficiencies as needed.

### **Student Response to the PLP Process in the Public School System**

The guidance counselors at all three schools are just starting to get a sense of what student response to these changes will look like. Charlie suggested that at this point, the change has had little impact on students:

Because kids are still in classes and still getting grades and we don't intend for them to stop being in classes or getting grades, at least for the near future, I think most of them don't care. (Interview)

Melissa has noticed that some of her students who have been working on proficiencies in their Health classes have been using the language around proficiencies when they come to her for advising. Robert has had a somewhat unique experience; while middle schools were required to start the PLP process with 7<sup>th</sup> graders last year, schools in his district also wrote PLPs with 8<sup>th</sup> graders,

meaning that the incoming freshman class at his school already have PLPs. These students have brought a lot of excitement about the PLP process with them and may end up being the drivers of the process at their school. According to Robert:

The incoming 9<sup>th</sup> graders though, we were talking to them last spring and they were like “Hey! Can we keep our PLPs going?” so clearly they are going to take us down the path whether we are ready or not. (Interview)

During the interviews, none of the guidance counselors discussed involving students in the planning process of implementing the changes around Act 77. While Charlie did not feel that students were interested, Melissa expressed concern that students voice was not included in this process:

I think that if we were to look critically at our process where we did fall short. We really took this on as a staff and we do a lot of committees at the school where we have students regularly a part of them and you asked that question and I didn’t even realize until you asked that we didn’t bring students in to this process of creating these proficiencies and creating this kind of work. It’s a really great reminder that especially after a year of living through it and possibly making changes that student feedback is critical. (Interview)

As the current ninth graders advance in their studies, schools will continue to develop and refine their proficiency-based systems and student PLPs. While the guidance counselors at the schools I work with are still getting to know these students, they have the potential to be important contributors to these ongoing changes.

### **Theoretical Frameworks in Educator Interviews**

At several points in the interview, the Administrative Coordinator touched upon the theoretical frames I identified in the literature review above: holistic

student development and human capital theory. Evidence of human capital theory was present throughout the interview, because of the strong emphasis Sandra placed on developing skills to enter the work force. In part two of orientation students take a career interest survey, and learn how to write SMART Goals. These steps lay the groundwork for their professional development. In terms of holistic student development, students take a learning styles inventory as part of orientation part two. This development of intrapersonal awareness is part of their holistic development. As we were winding down the interview, the Sandra began reflecting on how we can continue to develop our program to better serve our students:

We can always do better and bring so many opportunities for the student and really hone in on who are you as a learner? Who are you? What do you like and what are you interested in? To really make them interested and really get that right from the beginning. (Interview)

By developing greater intrapersonal awareness, or sense of self, students will have a better sense of how they can transition from our program post graduation, and echoes the study by Kosine and Lewis (2008) which suggested a connection between career development and self-awareness.

### **Student Perspectives on the Public School System**

As a reminder, interviews with students focused on several topics. First we discussed mitigating factors in their decision to leave the public school system. Then we discussed proficiency-based learning. Finally, we discussed Act 77 and its impact. One of the outstanding features of the student interviews was the students' ability to articulate the factors that prevented them from being successful in the

public school system. Regardless of whether or not students were familiar with the term proficiency-based learning when the interviews started, they were able to articulate how a proficiency-based learning system may or may not have worked for them or their peers in the public school system. Finally, students were able to make connections between proficiency-based learning and their experience in the High School Completion Program. In the section that follows, I will highlight themes that emerged from interviews with students.

I began all student interviews by asking each student how they decided to earn their diploma through the High School Completion Program. In the following section, I will present the social, emotional, and academic barriers to success students faced within the public school system. Daniela remained fairly guarded throughout her interview, but the other four students were very explicit about barriers to success that they faced in the public school system. In some cases, these barriers were quite troubling. While Daniela's explanation was not elaborate, her confession that she did not feel safe in school was alarming. Elijah identified that teachers did not address obvious skill gaps that he had. When he described his experience in the High School Completion Program, he did so in contrast to his experience in school:

All the things I've learned here are definitely things I needed to know and no one really went back and told me that, you know. We needed to go back to do this so you know it. It was always just skipped over. But the teachers here, they told me that they would go back and help me and they did. (Interview)

Elijah entered the program with very low math and literacy skills, and focused intensively on skill-building for a period of several months before entering the High

School Completion Program. According to Elijah, his schoolwork “wasn’t useful or helpful” and he was just doing a lot of packets. Ashley, who had very high skills when she entered the program, expressed frustration around a lack of individualized support in school, and recounted a specific incident where she went to a school guidance counselor who laughed at her when she said she wanted to learn about construction. Due to health problems, she was not able to complete her senior year because of frequent absences. Kyle was failing his classes at school, and was told by his guidance counselor that going to the High School Completion Program was his “last resort.” In the interview, he recalled sitting in classes and listening, but not retaining any information:

Throughout my high school, I retained some, but it wasn’t as much with how school is these days because they tell you you have what, like five classes a day? And you have homework for all these classes and it’s not, I don’t know, I feel like it’s hard to concentrate on each and every one of those subjects when you have all that going on plus your life at home too. (Interview)

When I asked Kyle if he felt like a different structure would have been better fit for him, he was quick to respond that shorter periods and less bookwork and more “intriguing” activities would have helped him. But he felt, overall, that there was an emphasis on “just trying to pass” (Interview). Like Kyle, Nathan struggled to sit through lecture-based classes day in and day out. Unlike Kyle, he didn’t struggle with retention, but was bored. According to Nathan, the things he was learning in school were not helping him to “grow as a person” (Interview).

### **Students' Familiarity with Proficiency-Based Learning**

Out of the five students interviewed, two students, Ashley and Nathan, knew what proficiency-based learning was before the interview. Ashley was confident in her ability to define proficiency-based learning and had strong feelings about the topic. She talked about it as a way to meet students at their own level and to develop “a plan very tailored to the student so it’s something that they are very interested in doing.” Her definition of proficiency-based learning was similar to her description of her experience in the High School Completion Program, and she felt that this process of identifying student interests and supporting them would help them avoid the “hoop jumping” she experienced in school (Interview). What’s more, she identified a link between career development and intrapersonal awareness, and described this knowledge as “empowering”:

I know it will bring students a better awareness of themselves. Like, I guess that I know a lot of people that graduated in my class and they still have no idea of who they are and what they like to do and they don’t know what their hobbies are... and they’re just living life day to day and they have no, like, bigger picture of anything that makes them happy in life. Like they don’t have any sense of self or where they’re going. And I think it’s really empowering to know that. (Interview)

Ashley was certain that a proficiency-based system would help students to get a better sense of who they are socially. She touched upon the third aspect of development (interpersonal, intrapersonal and cognitive) in the “Domain of College and Career Readiness” which Hess et al. reference in their 2014 study. Gillespie et al

cite these same domains as the “intellectual, social, and interior” lives of students (2009, p. 445).

Nathan defined proficiency-based learning as “skipping over what you already know and moving on to what you don’t know” (Interview). He felt this system would have been useful for him because he learned concepts quickly in school and got bored having to repeat them. He felt like the system in place when he was in school didn’t help him to identify his strengths and that he “had people telling me what to do” but those people were not actually helping him. He described it almost as a “reward” for students to be able to move forward when they understand a concept. Nathan had very strong feelings about the potential to track students into career paths, and advocated for students having a generalized education through grade eight and specializing from the beginning of high school onward. In doing so, students could “strengthen all of their strengths and forget about their weaknesses because they don’t need their weaknesses.” Nathan’s vision of students specializing as early as eighth grade may not be too far off from the process students take once Act 77 is fully implemented. Students will begin the PLP process in middle school and transfer their PLPs to the high schools when they enter as freshmen. However, his vision of students being able to “forget about their weaknesses” may not be possible, as students will still have to demonstrate proficiency in the areas in which they are weak. The difference will be that, in an ideal setting, students will have access to a variety of ways to demonstrate those proficiencies. Nathan very clearly articulated what worked for him and didn’t work for him in school:

What doesn't work for me is sitting in a classroom and listening to a lecture and trying to take notes on that lecture for a good two hours straight. That doesn't work. Hands-on works for me. Being active and actually involved in schooling works for me. Visual aids work. But, just talking to your students. At least nowadays really kids zone out no matter what the age. (Interview)

Had Nathan's school offered more flexible options toward meeting their graduation requirements, perhaps he would have been able to connect with learning opportunities which were more engaging and more supportive of his learning style.

The three remaining students in the study did not have a clear definition of proficiency-based learning before the interviews. However, Daniela understood that it had some connection to methods of assessment, and during the interview she asked if it was "based on what you know" rather than on grading. She was aware that some schools used proficiency-based graduation requirements and that others were adopting it. She shared that her boyfriend had been in a school that used projects as a measure of proficiency. According to Daniela, if the project was successful, the school would just "pass" the student. When we discussed how proficiency-based learning works in the High School Completion Program she was not entirely sure, and thought that perhaps it had something to do with being graded on a pass/fail basis rather than letter grades. She then suggested that the way to pass a class at our center was to attend consistently. Daniela's understanding of our assessment system points to the need to greater transparency in the assessment process. Teachers in the ABE program should define the proficiencies students will be working on when introducing courses, and should use rubrics which the students can interact with throughout the course in order for students to self assess their learning. She also argued that while classes can be graded on a



pass/fail basis, passing the class should not be attendance-based.

In addition, while Elijah had no prior knowledge of proficiency-based learning before the interview, he was keen to discuss the topic once I provided him with some basic information about proficiency-based learning in general and in relation to Act 77. He felt that proficiency based learning would be beneficial to both high skilled and low skilled students:

I think that saves a whole lot of... it cuts a whole lot of unneeded wasted time out and also helps... I feel as if it would help the people who need more time as well. Like, it's almost like a double win because when you think about it it's saving people who know the information time and it's showing them that you know the information or if you really don't understand it maybe you do need longer than four years, you know. Maybe you do need more than a year to learn some things. So if it is longer than a year then you have people here to help you. It's not just like you have to learn it, you don't have to feel so anxious it because you don't know. They're gonna learn it then. (Interview)

When asked about the positives and negatives of proficiency-based learning, he felt a proficiency-based system would be especially beneficial for students who were academically behind, who didn't want to complete all of their learning in a typical classroom setting, or for students who want to specialize in a specific field. When asked what some of the negatives could be, Elijah said that it would be difficult for the teachers, who would have to adapt to massive changes in the way that they differentiate with students.

Finally, while Kyle did not know what proficiency-based learning was before the interview, he was excited about how it could lead to greater personalization of students' experiences in education, and to provide them with knowledge that would have direct applications after high school. He quickly related this to his own

experience in the High School Completion Program:

We talked and I feel like when we wrote my plan that was great and we based it on what I was going to do and what I was going to do to get there and what I wanted to do after high school and everything. We definitely got into that and it was just more personalized and everything... You're not just trying to get these credits and everything, you're focused more like you said on the quality of work and everything besides just the credits. The more important thing is the quality of work how you're doing it and if you're happy. (Interview)

Kyle's mention of happiness in the interview stood out to me in contrast to how he discussed his school experience. He struggled to focus in school and had very low motivation. When discussing his experience in the High School Completion Program at a later point in the interview, he described how the structure and personalization of the program helped him to have a better sense of what he needed to focus on. Being able to focus on his work made him "feel good about myself at the end of the day (Interview)." While he was not aware that he was in a proficiency-based system, having a PLP tailored to his needs affected both his ability to complete work and to build his confidence as a student, which are critical to student success regardless of their next steps.

### **Connecting Student Perspectives to Theoretical Framework**

Having provided a basic overview of the content of the student interviews and students' perspectives on proficiency-based learning, it is now possible to align these student perspectives with the theoretical framework presented in the Literature Review. While most of the participants implicitly or explicitly addressed the holistic nature of proficiency-based learning, Nathan, Ashley, and Kyle connected the proficiency-based model we use at our center directly to transitions

to the workforce or post-secondary education. Kyle expressed that he was nervous about the High School Completion Program until he received reassurance that there would be support for pursuing his career through the program. Ashley, who expressed frustration about her peers' lack of plans after finishing high school (see above) was happy that the programming at our center has a more direct application to transferrable skills. In her interview, she gave the example of math, saying that she would not use algebra or geometry again after high school. She is now taking Financial Literacy, and while she said the actual math functions are easy for her, she is pleased that the skills and knowledge she gains through the program apply to her real life. Nathan emphasized the need for specialization, and for students to determine their career path starting in eighth grade. I will next discuss these findings in terms of social/emotional value.

When the students described the issues that lead them to pursue an alternative program to begin with, these issues affected them on social, emotional, and academic levels. The solutions to the issues they faced in the public school system must address these issues on all three levels. In Daniela's case, she needed a learning environment where she felt safe. From my own observations working with Daniela, it seems that she has thrived in the small community at our center where she and her boyfriend are both students and have many friends. She has become well known among students and staff for her focus and perseverance, and often encourages others in their work. This stands in contrast to how she described her experience in school. In her interview she defined her main reason for leaving school as feeling "unsafe" and "girl drama" with peers (Interview). In his interview,

Elijah emphasized the ability to work at his own time, own pace, and own level, and he felt that this was the most beneficial aspect of proficiency-based learning. While he usually preferred to work alone, he emphasized that he “always had someone there to help me” (Interview) which satisfies both his academic and social needs for support. The support Ashley sought was very much tied into her social and emotional needs, as she did not feel like her previous school valued her interests or took her seriously. She needed flexibility to be able to both work and attend her doctor’s appointments in addition to school. Similarly, Nathan expressed frustration with not having his talents identified and supported in school, and felt that not supporting students’ strength was a “huge part in childhood depression” (Interview). While he expressed this concern in a general sense, it is very likely he is basing his perspective on personal experience. In order for Nathan to be successful in school, it seems that he needed to be in an environment that identified not only his academic skills, but also his need for support and praise. Finally, Kyle, who was in a “slump” at school, was able to identify that he did not do well sitting in class, attending lectures and completing homework. For him, the academic environment at school didn’t work, nor did the social environment, and this was taking a toll on his emotional life as well. When Kyle described his success in the program, he described it not only in terms of the academic work being a good fit for him, but also in terms of “happiness” and “feeling good about yourself at the end of the day” (Interview).

## Conclusion

This Independent Practitioner Inquiry Capstone (IPIC) paper examines student perspectives on proficiency-based learning at an adult education center in Vermont. Through Vermont's High School Completion Program (HSCP), adults can earn their high school diplomas through proficiency-based Personalized Learning Plans (PLPs). I focused this qualitative study on high school-aged students who received referrals to the program from area schools, and framed it within the context of the current shift toward proficiency-based learning mandated by Vermont Act 77. Inspired by Rodman's International Education Matrix (Weidman & Jacob, 2011, p. 54) I designed my literature review to explore my topic on micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Specifically, I explored relevant literature on Vermont Act 77, as well as literature on the nationwide trend toward personalized learning and proficiency-based learning. Throughout, I used holistic student development and human capital theory as frames for analysis.

The specific question I posed was "How do students in the High School Completion Program view proficiency-based learning and its impact on their education?" I answered this question through a thematic analysis focused on in-depth interviews with student participants and the guidance counselors who referred them to the program, as well as the Administrative Coordinator at the center where I work. My findings indicate these students who have left the public school system are eager to contribute to conversations on proficiency-based learning and are able to identify ways proficiency-based learning has benefited

them in terms of their professional and academic development. Despite the enthusiasm I encountered from students in the research process, I found that the voice of out-of-school teens trying to earn their diplomas was under-represented both in literature and in the process of implementing Act 77 at the three schools I work with. I will discuss this in greater detail below.

## **Discussion**

My expectation when I began this study was that I would learn about how the schools I work with influence my students' perspectives on proficiency-based learning. I did not realize that I would spend so much time thinking about how my students' perspectives could, and perhaps should, influence their schools. For many schools, the process of making this transition, and the short timeline within which these changes needed to be implemented, may have precluded them from including students in this process. Moreover, it may have posed too much of a challenge to integrate students into the process of change. While Melissa, the Director of Guidance at Lincoln High School, noted in her interview that she now wishes students had been included in this process, it is not something that Charlie and Robert emphasized. I often remember a phrase Charlie used during his interview. He told me that it was like building an airplane that's already flying (Interview). Based on the information Charlie provided, Union High School is well on its way to meeting the guidelines set by the state, even if the haphazard nature of this transition lingers.

Undoubtedly, students are the most important stakeholders of Act 77. There will always be students who don't thrive in the four walls of their school, lecture-

based lessons, or the same ticking clock in each classroom. Similarly there will always be students who face barriers such that attending a traditional high school is not possible. Because of Act 77, Vermont high schools face an imperative to change. The question remains: if students are, in fact, offered the flexible pathways that Act 77 promises, will this improve secondary school retention? One way to answer this question is to ask the students who have left the public school system. The students I interviewed, many of whom had no previous knowledge of proficiency-based learning, were eager to share the difficulties they faced in school, and to explore the potential impacts of Act 77. If schools in Vermont believe that Act 77 has the power to increase retention in the school system, working with out-of-school teens in this process is one way to identify their strengths and weaknesses. If schools are already aware of the challenges their dropouts face, how can they align the changes mandated in Act 77 with real change that will keep at-risk teenagers in school?

While it is too soon to answer that question, I believe greater emphasis on student participation will result in more buy-in from students and community partners. As I stated in the literature review section of this paper, most literature available on PLPs focuses on the public school system and technical education centers. This study fills a gap in literature on PLPs in the adult education center as well as on out-of-school students' perspectives on Act 77. As Vermont moves toward proficiency-based graduation requirements, students in the High School Completion Program offer a critical, evidence-based perspective on what is and isn't working in the public school systems. My hope is that in the future increased collaboration between the adult education centers administering the High School Completion

Program and the public school system can result in greater representation of these lesser heard voices in the process of developing and implementing change around Act 77.



### Bibliography

- College Board (2016). Creating your school profile. Retrieved from :  
<https://professionals.collegeboard.org/guidance/counseling/profile>
- Equipped for the Future Standards. (2016). EFF content standards. Retrieved from :  
[http://eff.clee.utk.edu/fundamentals/eff\\_standards.htm](http://eff.clee.utk.edu/fundamentals/eff_standards.htm)
- Gillespie, J., Braskamp, L. & Dwyer, M. (2009). Holistic student learning and development abroad. In R. Lewin (Ed.). *The handbook of practice and research in study abroad: Higher education and the quest for global citizenship* (pp. 445-465). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Glesne, C. (2011). *Becoming qualitative researchers* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Hess, K., Gong, B., National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment, & Bayerl, K. (2014). *Ready for college and career? Achieving common core standards and beyond through deeper, student-centered learning*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nmefoundation.org/resources/scl-2/ready-for-college-and-career>
- Kosine, N. R. & Lewis, M. V. (2008). Growth and exploration: career development theory and programs of study. *Career and Technical Education Research*, 33 (3), 227-243.
- Kubow, P. K. & Fossum, P. R. (2007). *Comparative education: exploring issues in international context* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Saddle River: Pearson Education, Inc.
- No. 77. An act relating to encouraging flexible pathways to secondary school completion, VT LEG #292178 v.1. Retrieved from:  
<http://www.leg.state.vt.us/docs/2014/Acts/ACT077.pdf>
- Phelps, A., Durham, J., & Wills, J. (2011) Education alignment and accountability in an era of convergence policy: insights from states with individual learning plans and policies. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 19 (31) Retrieved from:  
<http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/article/view/921>
- Posner, M. (2011). The impact of a proficiency-based assessment and reassessment of learning outcomes system on student achievement and attitudes. *Statistics Education Research Journal*, 10 (1), 3-14.
- Solberg, S. V., Phelps, L. A., Haakenson, K.A., Durham, J.F., & Timmons, J. (2012). The nature and use of individualized learning plans as a promising career intervention strategy. *Journal of Career Development*, 39 (6), 500-514.

Up For Learning. (2016). Retrieved from: <http://www.upforlearning.com>

Vermont Agency of Education (2016a). Dual enrollment. Retrieved from: <http://education.vermont.gov/student-learning/flexible-pathways/dual-enrollment>

Vermont Agency of Education (2016b). Education quality standards. Retrieved from: <http://education.vermont.gov/vermont-schools/education-quality/education-quality-standards>

Vermont Agency of Education (2016c). Proficiency based learning. Retrieved from: <http://education.vermont.gov/student-learning/proficiency-based-learning>

Weidman, J. C., & Jacob, W. J. (2011). *Beyond the comparative: advancing theory and its application to practice*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

## Appendix

### Appendix A: Sample Plan<sup>11</sup>

<i>Vermont High School Completion Program (HSCP) Graduation Education Plan</i>	
<p><b>Student Name:</b> Hayley Shriner  <b>DOB:</b> 6/28/1998  <b>Town of Residence:</b> Vermont  <b>HSCP Provider:</b> An Adult Education Center  <b>Other Team Members:</b></p>	<p><b>Assigned high school:</b> Portland High School  <b>School District:</b> Cumberland County  <b>H.S. Representative:</b> Melissa Cooney  <b>HSC Plan Mgr:</b> Hayley Shriner</p>
<p>This Adult Education Center uses Equipped for the Future Standards. Each Grad Ed Plan addresses the following purposes for learning:</p> <p><b>ACCESS:</b> To gain access to information and resources so that adults can orient themselves in the world  <b>VOICE:</b> To express ideas and opinions with the confidence they will be heard and taken into account  <b>ACTION:</b> To solve problems and make decisions without having to rely on others to mediate the world for them  <b>BRIDGE TO THE FUTURE:</b> Learning to learn so that adults can be prepared to keep up with the world as it changes</p> <p>Learning goals may be amended if necessary by student, Plan Manager and approval from the partnering school.</p> <p><b>The Equipped for the Future (EFF) Standard, <i>Take Responsibility for Learning</i>, is a guiding principal for a High School Completion Student.</b></p> <p>Through the High School Completion Program, each student will need to do the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assess learning strengths and weaknesses.</li> <li>• Establish learning goals that are based on current and future learning needs.</li> <li>• Identify personal, career and education goals.</li> <li>• Explore career options, complete a career interest survey and create a career plan.</li> <li>• Become familiar with a range of writing styles and compile a writing portfolio.</li> <li>• Complete a civics project and demonstrate competency in financial literacy.</li> <li>• Monitor progress towards goals and modify strategies to achieve goals.</li> <li>• Test out new learning in real life applications.</li> </ul>	

---

<sup>11</sup> In order to protect the anonymity of interview participants, all references to students, schools, and the organization where I work have been altered throughout the sample PLP. I have used my own name, the name of my high school and the name of a fictitious guidance counselor to fill in the PLP.

**A. Student's Goals**

- **Educational Goals:**

Secondary: I would like to have more opportunities for hands on work.

Post Secondary: I'd like to go to college someday, but I'm not sure what I want to study. I like learning about natural medicine, farming and gardening, and other cultures.

Other: I'm interested in learning to build using sustainable design. I'd like to be able to fix small motors.

- **Personal Goals:**

Short Term: I'm trying to save enough money to move out of my ~~parents~~ house.

Long Term: I want to figure out where I want to live. If I don't build my house, I at least want to know how to fix it when things break.

- **Employment Goals:**

Short Term: I don't want to work in retail anymore.

Long Term: I'd like a job where I get to be outside for part of the day.

- **Student's assessment of factors that may support success:**

I'm not working very much right now, so I have some time. I like the things I am learning about, which makes me feel motivated.

- **Student's assessment of factors that may inhibit success:**

It's hard to set a schedule now that I'm outside of school. It's easy to get distracted, especially because my boyfriend already finished.

- **Student's assessment of skills, knowledge and/or experiences necessary to achieve the goals:**

Strengths: I like to learn and I'm creative and energetic. I like writing and editing.

Abilities: I can cook, grow vegetables, ~~make~~ pickles, knit, and speak some foreign languages.

Skills/Knowledge: See abilities.

Core Principles: I don't really know. I'm still trying to figure that out.

Learning Styles/Multiple Intelligence Description: I liked taking this survey. It said that I was a kinesthetic learner, which I already knew. It also said that I had intrapersonal knowledge, which I should have guessed.

Career Interest Description and Results: My Career Interest survey results said that I am artistic, investigative, and social. This makes sense. I've always liked understanding how things work and I like making things. I don't think I'm very good at art, but I like it a lot. The social part didn't make sense to me—I usually prefer working alone. It's good to know that's what the survey results say.

**Statement of Purpose:**

To take responsibility for learning.

**B. Basic Skills Assessments- minimum NRS (National Reporting System) level 5 in Reading, Language (Writing) and Math.**

TABE Survey	Form, Level	Initial Assessment	NRS Level	Final Assessment
Reading:	9, D	622	6	
Writing:	9, D	621	6	
Math:	9, D	566	5	

**Education Quality Standards to be met:**

*Literacy*(critical thinking, language, reading, speaking, listening and writing), *Mathematical Content and Practices* (numbers, operations, concepts of algebra and geometry), *Scientific Inquiry and Content Knowledge* (Concepts of life science, physical science, earth and space science and engineering design), *Global Citizenship* (Concepts of civics, economics, geography, cultural studies, and history) *Transferable Skills* (communication, collaboration, creativity, innovation, inquiry, problem solving, use of tech), *Physical Wellness and Health* (activity and nutrition), *Artistic Expression* (including visual and performing arts)

**Hayley will need to demonstrate proficiency in the Equipped for the Future Standards to meet Milton High School Graduation Expectations.**

- Take Responsibility for Learning
- Guide Others
- Resolve Conflict & Negotiate
- Advocate & Influence
- Cooperate with Others
- Plan
- Make Decisions & Solve Problems
- Use Math to Solve Problems & Communicate
- Use Information & Communication Technology
- Learn Through Research
- Reflect & Evaluate
- Observe Critically
- Listen Actively
- Speak So Others Can Understand
- Convey Ideas in Writing
- Read with Understanding

**E. Assigned high school's graduation requirements for this student to be met:**

Total credits needed: 22      Credits Earned: 15.5      Credits needed: 6.5 (1 English, 1 Math, 1.5 Science, 1 Social Studies, .5 Digital Literacy, .5 PE, 1 Elective)

# RUNNING HEAD: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON PROFICIENCY-BASED LEARNING

## ACCESS

**Statement of Purpose: To take responsibility for learning.**

Equipped for the Future Standards	Learning Objectives	Learning Activities	Evidence of Achievement/Provider	Credits & Target Date	Date Complete
*Convey Ideas in Writing  *Speak so Others Can Understand	Demonstrate effective writing skills.	Engage in the writing process when producing formal pieces of writing.	<b>Written Voice Portfolio</b>	<b>1 English</b>	Complete
	Demonstrate clear speaking skills.	Communicate effectively; know the audience and purpose for speaking.	9 <sup>th</sup> Grade English, PHS	1 English	
*Listen Actively  *Read with Understanding	Demonstrate effective listening skills.	Integrate information from listening with prior knowledge to address listening purpose.	The Beatles and Literature, PHS	1 English	Complete
	Demonstrate breadth and depth of reading and listening.	Demonstrate a command of grammar, usage, and mechanics in writing.	Introduction to College Studies, Community College of Vermont	1 English	Complete
*Use Math to Solve Problems and Communicate	Demonstrate mathematical literacy and reasoning skills.	Develop logical and critical thinking, which will enhance students' problem solving, modeling and investigative abilities.	Algebra I, PHS	1 Math, Algebra	Complete
			Geometry, PHS	1 Math, Geometry	Complete
*Solve Problems and Make Decisions	Demonstrate an understanding of personal finance.	Understand basic business concepts and employability skills.	<b>Math of Personal Finance</b>	<b>1 Math</b>	
* Cooperate with Others	Demonstrate respect for others' ideas, opinions and contributions.	Interact with others in ways that are friendly, courteous and tactful.	<b>Participation in the Blunt Youth Radio Project</b>	<b>.5 Elective</b>	

VOICE

Statement of Purpose: To take responsibility for learning.

Equipped for the Future Standards	Learning Objectives	Learning Activities/Provider	Evidence of Achievement	Credits & Target Date	Date Complete
*Plan	Explore creative avenues for expression, innovation and collaboration.	Show evaluation and articulation of perspectives, ideas and values.  Organize activities or arrange activities in order of importance to accomplish a goal.	Orchestra, PHS  Clothing Construction, PHS	.5 Fine Art  .5 Fine Art	Complete  Complete
*Use Information & Communications Technology	Use appropriate technological tools and information literacy skills to solve problems and enhance learning.	Apply technological knowledge, skills, and strategies to use technology tool(s) to locate, process, or communicate information.	<b>Project: Exploring and comparing architectural design software for green design.</b>	.5 Computer Literacy	
*Resolve Conflict and Negotiate	Demonstrate and foster respect, compassion, responsibility and integrity.	Use historical evidence to formulate positions, viewpoints, and to understand current issues.	Contemporary US and World Affairs, PHS	1 Global Studies	Complete
*Reflect and Evaluate	Demonstrate Historical Understanding.	Understand what it means to be a global citizen.	American Government, PHS	1 US History	Complete
*Reflect and Evaluate	Make inferences, predictions, or judgments based on one's reflections.	Analyze the changing role of government in response to economic problems.	<b>Introduction to Anthropology: Community College of Vermont</b>	1 Social Studies	

# RUNNING HEAD: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON PROFICIENCY-BASED LEARNING

## ACTION

Statement of Purpose: To take responsibility for learning.

Equipped for the Future Standards	Learning Objectives	Learning Activities/Provider	Evidence of Achievement	Credits & Target Date	Date Complete
*Solve Problems and Make Decisions	Formulate questions and solve problems.	Become an informed citizen in order to make responsible and ethical decisions about both personal and global issues.	<b>Internship at Vermont Community Garden Network</b>	1 Science	
*Observe Critically	Demonstrate the ability to gather, analyze, and use information.	Analyze the accuracy, bias, and usefulness of the information. Reach a conclusion based on your findings.	<b>Project: Geological History of northern Vermont</b>	.5 Physical Science	
*Learn through Research	Apply scientific method to research and experiment.	Pose a question to be answered or make a prediction about objects or events. Organize, evaluate, and analyze findings. Interpret and communicate findings.	Earth Science, PHS	.5 Science, Physical Science	Complete
*Learn through Research	Effectively analyze and evaluate information in order to draw valid conclusions.	Demonstrate scientific literacy. Challenge assumptions, gather evidence and consider multiple perspectives.	Survey of Biology, PHS	1 Science, Natural	Complete
*Solve Problems and Make Decisions	Make decisions that will positively influence social, emotional, and physical health and well-being.	Demonstrate an understanding of basic techniques and strategies to balance social, mental and physical health.	Health and Fitness, PHS	1 PE	Complete
*Plan	Set and Meet Goals	Make thoughtful decisions.	<b>PE Project at Vermont Yoga</b>	.5 PE	



# RUNNING HEAD: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON PROFICIENCY-BASED LEARNING

## BRIDGE TO THE FUTURE

Statement of Purpose: To take responsibility for learning.

Equipped for the Future Standards	Learning Objectives	Learning Activities/Provider	Evidence of Achievement	Credits & Target Date	Date Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Plan</li> <li>*Take Responsibility for Learning</li> </ul>	Ability to set, carry out, and evaluate goals and assess knowledge and understand its relevance based on individual needs, skills and competency.	Develop a transition plan that addresses the skills, knowledge, experience needed to successfully move to postsecondary education or career.	<b>Student Portfolio, Career exploration, career interest survey, and career plan.</b>  Advisory, PHS  Learning Strategies, PHS	<b>.5 Elective</b>  1 Advisory  4 Elective	Complete   Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Reflect and Evaluate</li> <li>*Resolve Conflict and Negotiate</li> </ul>	Make decisions that will positively influence social, emotional, and physical health and well-being.	Demonstrate readiness for the transition from high school to future life pursuits.	Health, PHS	.5 Health	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Read with Understanding</li> <li>*Use Math to Solve Problems</li> </ul>	Meet the demands of the changing employment market by demonstrating skill and knowledge in work readiness and technology literacy.  Exhibit the skills necessary for success in the modern workplace	Select reading strategies appropriate to the purpose.  Apply knowledge of mathematical concepts and procedures to figure out how to answer a question, solve a problem, make a prediction, or carry out a task that has a mathematical dimension.  Use technology to find, organize and communicate information.	<b>Completed KeyTrain curriculum</b>  <b>WorkKeys Certificate</b>	1 Elective	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Make Decisions</li> <li>*Observe Critically</li> <li>*Use Math to Solve Problems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Listen Actively</li> <li>*Plan</li> <li>*Guide Others</li> </ul>	Develop a transition plan that addresses the skills, knowledge, experience needed to successfully move to postsecondary education or career.	<b>Classes at CCV</b>		

**Statement of Purpose: To take responsibility for learning.**

**Expected Date of Graduation:** June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2017

**Who commits to this Graduation Education Plan?**  
*(Please sign and date below.)*

**Student:**

\_\_\_\_\_ *Date:* \_\_\_\_\_

**Parent, guardian, or surrogate for minor:**

\_\_\_\_\_ *Date:* \_\_\_\_\_

**High School Representative:** *(by signing this document, the high school representative acknowledges that this student is no longer enrolled in school and state that the school's records reflect that fact)*

\_\_\_\_\_ *Date:* \_\_\_\_\_

Position Title: \_\_\_\_\_

**Adult Education & Literacy Representative:**

\_\_\_\_\_ *Date:* \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix B: Interview Questions**

### Questions for Students: Interviews

- How did you decide to come to [Program Name]?
- What did your guidance counselor tell you about [Program Name] before you entered the program?
- Do you know what the term proficiency-based learning means? Can you please describe what it is? (If student is unable to describe PBL, a short description will be provided.)
- What do you remember learning about your orientation at [Program Name]?
- How have you discussed proficiency-based learning with your Plan Manager?
- How has proficiency-based learning impacted your high school experience?
- What would you tell other students about proficiency-based learning?
- Is there anything else you would like me to know about proficiency-based learning?

### Questions for Guidance Counselors: Interviews

- How do you identify a student who you feel would be a good fit for our program?
- How do you describe the High School Completion program to potential participants?
- When you describe the program, do you discuss credits, proficiencies, or both?
- What is proficiency-based learning looking like at your school?
- What have been the challenges you have faced with implementing Act 77 at your school?
- What has student response to this process looked like at your school?

### Questions for High School Completion Program Administrative Coordinator (conducts orientations for program): Interview

- When students come to you as direct referrals from the high schools we work with, are there any trends in the information they share with you about the referral process?
- What kind of information do students share with you about their referral process?
- Could you estimate what percentage of students entering the program are familiar with proficiency-based learning?
- How do you introduce proficiency-based learning?
- What questions do students have about proficiency-based learning?
- Do students ask about credits? How do you respond?
- Is there anything else I should know about student orientation as it relates to proficiency-based learning?

