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# Academic Resilience: A Retrospective Study of Adults With Learning Difficulties

*This article reports qualitative analyses of two sets of retrospective interviews with adults with learning difficulties. The purpose of the study was to examine the high school experiences of these adults from a holistic perspective to understand possible factors that contributed to one group staying in school and the other group leaving school early. One set of interviews was conducted with adults who had returned to complete high school at an adult learning center (the late successful group). The second set of interviews was conducted with the early successful group, adults who had completed high school during adolescence. Interview questions focused on interests, friends, and general aspects of the high school experience. Analyses yielded three themes: intrapersonal support, interpersonal support, and institutional support. These data suggest that schools might act in a number of ways to counter the high rate of early leaving by adolescents with learning disabilities, including building strong teacher-student relationships, using students' interests to develop curricula and structured activities, and fostering a sense of purpose.*

*Cet article expose deux analyses qualitatives de deux séries d'entrevues rétrospectives auprès d'adultes présentant des difficultés d'apprentissage. Le but de l'étude consistait à examiner, dans une perspective holistique, les expériences qu'avaient vécues ces adultes quand ils étaient au secondaire, pour ensuite déterminer si des facteurs avaient influencé le fait que certaines personnes étaient restées à l'école alors que d'autres avaient décroché. Une série d'entrevues a été effectuée auprès d'adultes qui avaient repris leurs études secondaires dans un institut d'apprentissage pour adultes (le groupe de diplômés tardifs). La deuxième série d'entrevues a eu lieu auprès d'adultes ayant terminé l'école secondaire alors qu'ils étaient adolescents (le groupe de diplômés précoces). Les questions d'entrevues portaient sur les intérêts, les amis et les aspects généraux de leur expérience à l'école secondaire. Trois thèmes sont ressortis des analyses: l'appui intrapersonnel, l'appui interpersonnel et l'appui institutionnel. Ces données donnent à penser que les écoles pourraient intervenir de diverses façons pour contrer le taux élevé de décrochage chez les adolescents ayant des difficultés d'apprentissage. Parmi ces stratégies notons la création de*

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*rapports solides entre les enseignants et les élèves, le développement de programmes
d'études et d'activités structurées basés sur les intérêts des élèves et le fait de favoriser des
buts bien précis.*

For some adolescents, school is not a warm, friendly place. Some students, who
are unsuccessful academically and who receive insufficient attention from
peers and adults start to act as though they were quietly invisible. Others in the
same situation will act out until they receive the attention—albeit
negative—that they crave. In either event, unless the youngster is attended to,
it will be only a matter of time before he or she drops out of high school.
(Testerman, 1996, p. 364)

Testerman, a former secondary school teacher, poignantly describes the situa-
tion faced by many academically unsuccessful students in our schools today.
Their interactions with school are not positive, and rather than continuing in a
hostile environment, they withdraw from that environment, initially through
poor attendance and eventually through dropping out (deBettencourt & Zig-
mond, 1990; Worrell & Hale, 2001).

Faced with what appear to be identical circumstances, other students have
proven to be academically resilient. Bosworth and Earthman (2002) describe
resilience as the ability to flourish despite adverse conditions. Similarly,
Markstrom, Marshall, and Tryon (2000) state, "resiliency is an adaptive stress-
resistant personal quality that allows the individual to thrive despite unfor-
tunate life experiences" (p. 693; see also Henderson & Milstein, 1996). Although
these definitions suggest resilient persons will do better than they might have
done without the obstacles, using words such as *thrive* and *flourish*, other
definitions seem to indicate little benefit to having the obstacles, using words
such as *cope* (Emery & Forehand, 1996), *adaptive functioning* (Freitas & Downey,
1998), and *overcome* (Rak & Patterson, 1996). Our definition of resilience is more
in line with this second understanding. Following Garnier, Stein, and Jacobs
(1997), we define resilience as the "capacity to overcome obstacles to healthy
development and the ability to spring back from adversity" (p. 398).

Several schemas have been developed to classify the factors that support
academic resilience. Morrison, Robertson, and Harding (1998) list four
resilience factors: (a) personal resilience, (b) social support, (c) school bonding,
and (d) parent support, although the boundaries between categories are per-
meable. Other authors subdivide these categories, with Catterall (1998) propos-
ing nine resilience factors and Garmezy (1996) six. In contrast, Gore and
Eckenrode (1996) identify only two factors: personal factors and emotional
resources. Although each classification schema has its merits, in moving recur-
sively from our data to the literature, we believe our findings are best repre-
sented by three factors: (a) intrapersonal support, (b) interpersonal support,
and (c) institutional support (factors similar to those proposed by McMillan
and Reed, 1994). These factors can be categorized further as either pulling
students back to school or pushing them away from school (Obasohan &
Kortering, 1999; Scanlon & Mellard, 2002).

Intrapersonal support encompasses those "personality characteristics, dis-
positions, and beliefs that promote [students'] academic success regardless of
their background or current circumstances" (McMillan & Reed, 1994, p. 139).
Benard (1993) listed social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and

sense of purpose as the critical intrapersonal factors in resilience (see also Johnson, 1997; Rak & Patterson, 1996). McMillan and Reed (1994) included six intrapersonal factors in their resilience model: self-efficacy, goals orientation, personal responsibility, optimism, internal expectations, and coping ability. More recently Close (2001) reported that factors drawn from social cognitive theory (self-efficacy) and self-determination theory (relatedness, autonomy, and control) were related to outcomes on distress, achievement, and retention. Students who displayed low levels of achievement and students who reported high levels of distress (physical and psychological) were at a greater risk for dropping out.

Johnson (1997) asked teachers and principals to describe the characteristics of resilient students. One teacher's response reflected the general findings across many teachers: "The greatest single factor in overcoming the odds is a caring and compassionate person who takes a special interest in the student and makes an extra effort to help" (p. 44). Interpersonal support for resilience can come from parents, teachers, and peers. Each of these sources of support can pull students toward school or push them away from school, although there may be a greater tendency to see interpersonal support as a push factor (Egyed, McIntosh, & Bull, 1998). Teachers create an emotional climate in the school that makes students feel welcome or unwelcome and thus influences their possibility of graduation (Freeman & Hutchinson, 1994; Ukaga, Yoder, & Etling, 1998; Worrell & Hale, 2001). Positive parental attitudes can instill in students a commitment to school and help them continue when they otherwise might not (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997), whereas dropping out can be a solution to mitigate differential family and school values (Okey & Cusick, 1995). Peers can influence dropout behavior through their own relations to schools. Students whose friends remain at school tend to stay, whereas students whose friends drop out tend to leave (Bull, Salyer, Montgomery, & Hyle, 1992). In addition, if students do not find peers at school with whom they feel comfortable, they may leave school to escape an uncongenial atmosphere (Parker & Asher, 1987).

Institutional support can be curricular, structural, or extracurricular. Interesting curriculum may help students remain engaged in school by showing them its meaningfulness (McPhail, Pierson, Freeman, Goodman, & Ayappa, 2000; Zahorik, 1996). The school structure, including the presence of alternative programs, may encourage students to stay in school or to return later (Metzer, 1997). Finally, extracurricular activities, particularly athletics, may be a strong motivation for students' coming to school (McNeal, 1995), a motivation that is withdrawn when athletics are no longer available (Bull et al., 1992). Extracurricular activities also may not be equitably accessible for at-risk students (Britt, 1995).

In the past, resilience studies have emphasized risk factors such as race (Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994; Kitchen, Velasquez, & Myers, 2000), family dynamics (Emery & Forehand, 1996; Motsinger, 1993), and socioeconomic status (Stewart & Porath, 1999). However, "factors related to resilience for individuals with learning disabilities have received little attention" (Morrison & Cosden, 1997, p. 54). Indeed, we located only three empirical studies that directly examined the resilience of persons with learning disabilities.

Kortering and Braziel (1999) interviewed 44 students with mild disabilities (including 31 with learning disabilities) who had dropped out of secondary school prior to completion. The students cited "the need to change one's attitude or effort" (p. 81) as the major factor that would have kept them in school. Thus *pull* factors (pulling them to school) from their perspectives included personal attitude change, dropout retrieval programs, and teacher and family support. *Push* factors, those pushing them away from school, were teachers, peers, and school policies on attendance and discipline (see also Kortering & Braziel, 1998).

Similarly, Scanlon and Mellard (2002) interviewed school leavers with and without learning disability/emotional behavioral disability (LD/EBD) and compared them with senior high school students with LD/EBD. *Lack of interest* and *attendance problems* were frequently cited by all groups as contributing to school problems. Individuals with exceptionalities also indicated that disability-related problems hindered them at school. Social or cultural problems were mentioned infrequently. Finally, Seidel and Vaughn (1991) focused on social alienation to distinguish dropouts with LD from school completers with LD. In comparison with those who finished school, those students with learning disabilities who dropped out had poorer relationships with teachers and classmates.

This lack of attention to the resilience of individuals with learning disabilities is lamentable. Many students with learning disabilities are disengaged and alienated from secondary school, with traditional programs failing to meet their needs (Palladino, Poli, Masi, & Marcheschi, 2000). Moreover, LD adolescents have a higher rate of leaving school before completion than the general secondary population. Rates of early leaving for adolescents with LD range from 38% (Wagner & Blackorby, 1996) to 56% (Malcolm, Polatajko, & Simons, 1990) whereas estimates for the general population range from 10% to 18% (Jancek, 1999).

On leaving school, adolescents with learning disabilities are more likely to be employed in moderate- or low-paying occupations and are less likely to be enrolled in postsecondary education programs than their nonexceptional peers (Wagner & Blackorby, 1996; Jancek, 1999; Kortering & Braziel, 1998; Rojewski, 1999). These post-school outcomes are generally poorer for those who drop out than for those who complete high school. LD students who leave school prior to completion do not gain access to educational programs such as career-oriented training programs that are necessary to help them cope in the world of work after high school. Consequently, LD students who drop out of school early miss many valuable learning opportunities that could have helped them gain employment (Zigmond & Thornton, 1985).

Given the scarcity of earlier research on resilience factors for individuals with learning disabilities, especially in the light of the negative consequences associated with dropping out, we decided to interview adults with learning disabilities who had either completed high school in the traditional fashion or had subsequently returned to an adult education program. Unlike Kortering and Braziel (1999) and Scanlon and Mellard (2002), we included both dropouts and non-dropouts with learning disabilities in our sample. In contrast to Seidel

and Vaughn (1991), we broadened our focus to include a range of resilience factors.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the academic resilience factors of persons with learning difficulties as revealed through retrospective interviews. Three research questions guided the study:

1. What factors influenced decisions to leave high school (*push* factors)?
2. What factors influenced decisions to remain in high school (*pull* factors)?
3. What factors distinguished between those persons with learning difficulties who left high school and those who remained?

## Method

### Participants

There were 16 participants in the study; eight (5 men: Scott, Jack, Jim, David, Ted; 3 women: Mary, Josie, Alice; all names are pseudonyms) were attending an adult learning center (*late successful* group), and eight (5 men: Alan, Brett, Bob, Gary, Ryan; 3 women: Ann, Agnes, Keri; again all names are pseudonyms) had already completed high school through the traditional route (*early successful* group). Participants in the late successful group ranged in age from 19 to 43 at the time of the interviews, whereas those in the early successful group were from 21 to 35. The coordinator of the adult learning center informed us that the late successful participants had learning disabilities, although the center did not formally test students. Despite this assurance by the coordinator, we as researchers could not be sure how accurate the identification of learning disabilities was. Therefore, we decided to change the terminology to adults with *learning difficulties*. In contrast, the identification of the second group as having learning disabilities was clearly documented. While still in school, the early successful students had all been identified as having learning disabilities according to provincial standards in the province of Ontario (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1990).

### Procedure

Data collection took place through semistructured audiotaped interviews (later transcribed verbatim) with participants, all of whom provided informed consent. Each participant was interviewed once each for between 30 and 45 minutes. The students were asked to reflect on their high school experiences (see Coté, 1999 for another use of retrospective interviews).

Interviews were structured around open-ended questions (Seidman, 1991, p. 62). They began with descriptive questions such as grand tour questions (questions that give participants the freedom to explore widely) and continued with structural and contrast questions (Spradley, 1979). Questions focused on interests, friends, and overall experiences during secondary school and were altered slightly for the two groups of participants to match their high school leaving patterns (see Appendix for questions). The primary alteration was in the addition of questions for the late successful group to describe the circumstances of their initial leaving and eventual returning to high school. Rubin and Rubin (1995) described the interview as "a window on a time and a social world that is experienced one person at a time, one incident at a time" (p. 11). By asking people to talk about their lives, we tell them that what they say is

important. Interviewing is about building a relationship between researcher and participant. The researcher learns about the participants' lived experience by listening, and the participants learn about their own lived experience by talking.

*Data Analysis*
Data analysis was completed in three stages. In the first stage three researchers read each interview independently. The transcripts were thematically analyzed by identifying, interpreting, comparing, and refining the categories of data (Arsenault & Anderson, 1998). The researchers collaboratively identified 10 categories (relationships with parents, relationships with teachers, relationships with other adults, relationships with peers, in-school interests, outside school formal interests, outside school informal interests, making plans and setting goals, self-efficacy/confidence/autonomy, and competences). These 10 categories seemed to reflect three underlying themes (intrapersonal support, interpersonal support, and institutional support). In the second stage, four researchers independently coded the transcripts using these categories. They also coded any piece of the transcript that did not fit the categories as *other*. Two researchers coded each interview. The coders/researchers were paired to ensure that as far as possible different combinations of coders were used. They then met in pairs to resolve any discrepancies in coding. This method provided the opportunity for researchers to compare interpretations and reassess their own perceptions (Glesne, 1999). The final stage of analysis involved the research team (all four persons who completed the coding plus the two principal investigators, who had not been involved in coding) discussing the commonalities and differences within and across groups as revealed by the coded transcripts.

## Results

Our results are presented in three sections. In the first section we describe the high school experiences of the late successful group using our three themes of intrapersonal support, interpersonal support, and institutional support. We then investigate the experiences of the early successful participants in a similar manner. In the discussion section we compare the two groups and suggest possible directions for further research.

*Late Successful Group*
The five men (Scott, Jack, Jim, David, Ted) and three women (Mary, Josie, Alice) who were attending an adult learning center to complete their secondary school education held lasting impressions of their high school experience. They spoke extensively of the people who influenced them when they were adolescents (social relations), of the activities in which they had engaged (interests), and of the goals for the future they had recently acquired (individual characteristics).

*Intrapersonal support*
"[I left school initially because] I was young and foolish, I guess you could say. I didn't really apply myself, I guess you could say. It [school] was a big social gathering" (Ted).

When this group of adults with learning difficulties discussed the psychological beliefs that affected their school decisions, they tended to stress their present reasons for returning to school, with an implicit contrast to their high school experiences as adolescents. Therefore, they told of their current maturity and their setting of long-range personal goals without direct reference to a lack of goals in high school. The specific question that elicited goal responses was, "Why did you return to school?" Ted answered, "Because I figured that education is a very important part of a person's life and, if you want to get any further ahead in life, you'll need your education." Scott replied, "Because I have goals.... To go to postsecondary and to have a good life and make money." Jack wanted "to go back to, well, go to university, get an MBA or become a chef." Josie "was tired of menial labor and having people step all over me because I was only getting minimum wage. And I thought, no, no more. I'm worth more than that."

These responses indicate a stronger sense of purpose (Benard, 1993) that these adults had developed since their time in high school with a greater understanding that they needed a high school diploma to achieve occupational aspirations. Their goals orientation (McMillan & Reed, 1994) helped them to pursue more distal goals such as having a good life and becoming a chef through the accomplishment of the more proximal, although still quite distal, goal of obtaining a high school diploma. In addition, Josie's answer might point to greater self-efficacy (Close, 2001) in that she felt she was "worth more than that."

*Interpersonal support*
"It was like every little thing I couldn't do right according to the school or the teacher, so I guess that's why I dropped out. Because I could not handle the stress from her" (Alice).

The teachers of the late successful participants strongly affected their dropout decisions. Although the participants often mentioned teachers who had a positive effect on their lives ("He's just, he's more like a teacher should be.... More of a friend than a teacher," Scott), they also described uncaring teachers who pushed them away from school (Obasohan & Kortering, 1999; Scanlon & Mellard, 2002). Teachers "embarrassed you and made you even more despondent" (Mary). Alice was unable to continue in school when a teacher interfered in Alice's home life by inappropriately discussing confidential matters behind her back. Josie stated of a teacher, "He told me I was so stupid I shouldn't be in his math class and he refused to explain any of the things to me." Jack also complained, "It was mostly the teacher. He made things very uncomfortable for me. He wouldn't say it in as many words but he made me feel like I was stupid." Thus as Egyed et al. (1998) suggested, teachers were more a push than a pull factor for the late successful participants.

Relationships with parents were not the determining factor for these adults in deciding to drop out. For Jack, on one hand, "like they've always supported me and encouraged me, but they never really helped unless I asked for it, which is something I really appreciated." On the other hand, Jack claimed, "My mother, she's a high school dropout as well.... She said ... Try to get a job and maybe go back to school.... She didn't fret about it." Similarly, Jim said, "My parents were too busy with the farm so you didn't feel very supported, not

really. They weren't happy [about dropping out] but there's not much they could do about it." In contrast, David's parents were not at all influential in his dropout decision: "I didn't feel no support from them, really, nothing.... I made my own decisions, good or bad." Thus although parents did not seem to increase attachment to the school by promoting educational values (Alexander et al., 1997), neither did they create a value conflict with the school (Okey & Cusick, 1995).

Friends had virtually no effect on decisions to drop out. Although each person described close high school friends, none saw these friends as contributing positively or negatively to dropout decisions. "I've had a bunch of close friends, actually.... All my friends were pretty cool through everything I've been through.... They didn't really sit there and say 'You shouldn't drop out.' They didn't try to talk me out of it" (David). Primarily, the late successful interviewees discussed the negative behaviors of some high school friends ("We hung out. We smoked a lot of pot actually," Jack; "We did a lot of drinking, a lot of sneaking out, and partying ... Me and my friends liked to cause trouble," David) and poor relations with other peers ("Some of them were a little snippy, thinking they're better than everyone else," Josie).

*Institutional support*

| | |
|---|---|
| Interviewer: | What did you usually do on the weekends, say on Friday night? |
| Josie: | If I wasn't doing homework, I was getting ready for my next day at the riding stable. |
| Interviewer: | And you spent all Saturday at the riding stable? |
| Josie: | Oh, yeah. Saturday and Sunday. I loved it! |
| Interviewer: | What about Saturday nights? |
| Josie: | Saturday nights, I was usually beat. Like I mean exhausted. When you're at the stables at 6 a.m. and you don't get home until 6 or 7 p.m., you're not going out. |
| Interviewer: | Do you still ride? |
| Josie: | No, darn it. I wish. I loved it. |

Institutional support in terms of curriculum, structure, and extracurricular activities can be used to create interest in school. As lack of interest is a contributor to dropping out (Scanlon & Mellard, 2002), how institutions create and sustain interest is important in determining academic resilience.

The late successful participants in this study had various interests while in secondary school. For example, their hobbies varied across a wide range of activities. Josie's hobby was horseback riding. Scott was interested in playing the guitar. "Well, we have a group, but they all play guitar, so that, like we have one bass in our group, and we have one that plays drums. So we always sit around and play" (Scott). Jack's hobbies included "mostly writing poetry and reading serious books." Alice was an arts-and-crafts devotee: "I make year-round calendars. I make bead animals." These hobbies tended to be unstructured and outside the school context. The school did not institutionally support them. In addition, although McNeal (1995) found that athletic extracurricular activities were more predictive of staying in school than arts-based extracurricular activities, these students' pursuits were generally in the direction of arts rather than sports.

Similarly, the late successful participants talked about other unstructured activities (i.e., "hanging out" with friends). "We hung out together, same as any other high school kids today. We'd go to dances, go to parties, go to friends' houses, sit at home, watch TV, stuff like that" (Mary). "We'd usually get together at one of our friends' houses, have a few beers, play cards, whatnot, and then we'd go out" (Ted). "Party. Every night was a party. I didn't really think of school as a responsibility. If there was a party, I'd be there" (David). "We'd go shopping, go to a movie, try to get into a bar where we weren't allowed. But other than that, we were fairly normal kids at that time" (Josie). "Friday night was mostly homework. And Saturday night was when I'd go out and party. Get drunk or smoke pot or go to a show" (Jack).

*Summary*

All the late successful adults with learning difficulties tended to describe their high school experiences in a similar manner. They indicated how their goals had changed and how they now realized the advantages of obtaining a high school education. They talked about teachers who had pushed them out of school and of parents and peers who did not seem to care whether they completed high school. Finally, they described adolescent activities that were unstructured and did not involve the school.

*Early Successful Group*

Eight interviewees, the early successful group, had finished high school conventionally. These three women (Ann, Agnes, Keri) and five men (Alan, Brett, Bob, Gary, Ryan) referred to the personal goals that kept them on course to graduation (intrapersonal support) and fondly remembered their interactions with others in high school (interpersonal support). They also described structured activities organized by the school and other institutions in which they participated (institutional support).

*Intrapersonal support*

"I had a goal. I had a very driven goal in my mind of how my future, how I wanted my future to be. And that really pushed me to do, to succeed in high school. And to work at my personal best. It was the main driving force" (Keri).

Most of the early successful adults mentioned goals they had set for themselves during high school. Alan "had aspirations for higher study. I didn't know in what but I knew I wanted to get a college or university degree." Brett "figured out: 'I was going to go to college for acting and music.'" Ann realized "in grade 9 or grade 10, I wanted to really do nursing. And, I think, that's what sort of kept me going through all that." Ryan's "major influence on getting me through was just myself and my own motivation. Wanting to succeed, to be able to go on to university. Um. That was my ultimate goal." They had developed an attitude that allowed them to succeed (Kortering & Braziel, 1999), a sense of purpose that gave them direction (Benard, 1993), and a sense of autonomy that they could accomplish their goals (Close, 2001).

*Interpersonal support*

> The gym teacher. He was great. We just got along really, really well and he was a fun guy. He was older but he was also a lot of fun and always had a smile or a joke for you, and a very patient man. So that's what was important. (Ryan)

Early successful adults generally had positive relations with teachers, parents, and peers when in high school. They all remembered teachers who had a positive influence on them.

> Finally hit a teacher who just inspired me. And I don't remember what the mark was, but it was certainly, probably, it was probably a B+ for English, which for me was pretty exceptional. But this teacher just had a way of bringing the words to life and making it interesting. (Brett)

"I remember a couple of teachers in particular, a math teacher and another teacher I had for a number of different subjects.... Both had sort of an outgoing personality and they were able to connect with the kids" (Gary). "There were a few teachers that I got along with really well. Um. My co-op teacher.... She was always like really encouraging and stuff" (Ann). In other words, the teachers created a welcoming environment for these students (Freeman & Hutchinson, 1994; Ukaga et al., 1998; Worrell & Hale, 2001).

Parents provided strong encouragement for these individuals to stay in school (Alexander et al., 1997). As Brett commented, "Both my mother and father were teachers. Gosh, they can't have a son who's a dropout. I think I may have thought that they would have disowned me." Bob's parents "were always clear to me that the effort that I put in was more important than a grade that I got out at the end. And that a grade didn't necessarily reflect my learning experience." Agnes received "a lot of support through my family. Definitely a lot of support." Keri's "family was very supportive. Um. They were always there for me, although being a teenager, you're not always receptive to that form of support." Alan's "Dad would kill me, I'm sure, if I dropped out of high school." Parental values were congruent with school values.

These participants described themselves as getting along with the other students in the school. "We weren't the most popular kids in the school. We weren't the losers in the school. We had good associations with everybody" (Ryan). They also had developed a network of school friends. "I think the people who I found later on appreciated me for who I was, as opposed to someone who was just tagging along" (Bob). Finally, they had close friends with whom they associated frequently.

> It was the longevity we had between each other. Those close ties, that kind of, that closeness both of us had between each other. Just because we had known each other for so long. It's kind of a comfort level on the greatest level. (Keri)

Given the affiliative ties with classmates (Parker & Asher, 1987), the early successful participants could fulfill their need for relatedness in the school (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

*Institutional support*

> My favourite parts of a typical school day ... lunch, recess, and, of course, any extracurricular rehearsals for band or for choir or for new jazz choir or plays or for anything like that. Other than that, it [school] was pretty horrendous. (Brett)

These adults as high school students were generally involved in structured interest activities organized by institutions. Some activities were in the high school. "I was in a number of clubs. This UN club I got into for a while. Um. A good chess player. I think those were the only two clubs actually" (Gary). Other

activities were outside school, including church, Scouts, and martial arts. "I was very, very involved I guess from grade 10, 11, and 12 in the church and doing all that stuff. The youth groups of course are a great social place" (Brett). "I was always involved in Scouts or volunteering or doing something of that nature" (Bob). "I've been interested in martial arts since I was 5 years old.... But I started when I was 14, which would have been the summer between grades 9 and 10. And, then, by the end of grade 12, I was a black belt" (Alan).

Even socializing with friends often had an active component. "We had the same interests in music, sports, going out, doing things, outdoor activities, and similar personalities" (Ryan). "We'd go for active things, walks, bike rides. We'd just sit and talk a lot. Not a lot of TV watching. Definitely no video games" (Keri). However, these adults also talked about just "hanging out" with friends. "I had lots of friends. I remember hanging out with them in the cafeteria because it was really big and had lots of tables" (Agnes). Ann "hung around with friends a lot. Went for walks and stuff. And movies. High school, a lot of parties." These kinds of activities demonstrate an interest in athletics, which has been associated with academic resilience (McNeal, 1995, although McNeal was referring to structured sporting activities in school, as opposed to these less structured sporting activities).

*Summary*

The early successful participants had adopted personal goals that allowed them to keep on track. They had strong parental support for continuing in high school. Their teachers and peers seemed to be less influential in graduation decisions. Finally, these interviewees were occupied in a variety of structured, extracurricular activities, inside and outside of school. Even their interactions with friends tended to have an active component.

## Discussion

The high school experiences of the late successful adults seem to contrast with those of the early successful in at least four ways. First, the late successful group only developed long-range personal goals after having participated in the work force. Second, the parents of the early successful participants provided strong support and encouragement for them to remain in school. The late successful participants did not experience this same level of parental involvement. Third, teachers of the late successful individuals with learning difficulties tended to push them away from school, whereas for the most part the teachers of the early successful individuals pulled them in. Finally, although both groups of adults reported socializing with friends as a high school interest, the early successful group also enjoyed structured extracurricular activities organized by institutions.

Although other authors have suggested a range of intrapersonal support variables that predict dropout behavior (Benard, 1993; Close, 2001; McMillan & Reed, 1994), we found that one variable had paramount influence on school staying or leaving decisions, which could be called "sense of purpose" (Benard, 1993) or "goals orientation" (McMillan & Reed, 1994). In the present study it appears that the early successful participants had been able to construct and sustain positive goal orientations throughout their high school experiences. However, this positive goal orientation appears to be absent for the late successful group. It was only when the late successful participants changed their

attitude (Kortering & Braziel, 1999) that they were able to reinvest in the schooling process.

Earlier research has indicated the importance of students' relationships with adults in fostering continued engagement in school (Freeman & Hutchinson, 1994; McMillan & Reed, 1994). For example, Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter, and Dornsbusch (1990) found that families exerted an important influence on dropout behavior. Parents influenced their children's academic performance and encouraged them to stay in school by monitoring and helping them with homework, attending school conferences and functions, and providing a supportive learning environment at home. This research extends our understanding by showing that for the persons in this study, teachers acted as push factors encouraging students to leave high school, whereas parents were pull factors enhancing staying in school (Obasohan & Kortering, 1999; Scanlon & Mellard, 2002). In addition, unlike earlier work that has concentrated on parental direct involvement in the school (Wylie & Hunter, 1994), this study illuminates the influence of indirect parental involvement in promoting continuing in school.

Although there has been some evidence that peers play a prominent role in helping students with learning disabilities remain engaged in school (Lévesque & Hutchinson, 1997), peers did not emerge as a way of distinguishing our early successful participants from our late successful ones. Rather it was the means by which students interacted with peers that seemed to help determine decisions about remaining in high school. Students who found structured outlets for expressing their genuine interests (McPhail et al., 2000), whether inside or outside school, were more likely to complete school in the traditional fashion.

Although we did not find evidence for the curricular aspects of institutional support, maintaining curricular interest may contribute to deterring dropout behavior. Kortering and Braziel (1999) found that 17 of the 52 students in their sample indicated that the "best part" of school was the level of engagement in particular classes. Students enjoyed the opportunity to express their interests by participating in structured lessons such as those in the physical education classes. Developing individual interests may be difficult to accomplish in the classroom setting due to the number of students. In this environment it may be more beneficial to develop situational interest (interest arising from stimuli in the environment, that is, in the situation) within the group (Zahorik, 1996). This situational interest may eventually lead to the development of individual interest as the two types of interest can be seen as interactive and influencing each other (Hidi, 1990). A student may originally become interested because of a situational stimulus (such as an exciting lesson) and thereby become introduced to an individual interest. Similarly, having an individual interest may bring a student into a situation that he or she might not normally have experienced (Freeman, McPhail, & Berndt, 2002).

Comparing our work with the three empirical studies examining the same population reveals general agreement in findings. Like Kortering and Braziel (1999), we found that intrapersonal support was a primary determinant in distinguishing our two groups of participants. In addition, similar to the findings of these authors, teacher and family support helped explain decisions to

drop out of secondary school, although we discovered no evidence that differential school policies or programs were contributory influences on staying in or leaving school. As Seidel and Vaughn (1991) discovered, students who did not complete high school in a traditional fashion had poorer relationships with teachers, although not necessarily with their peers. Finally, one of the chief results obtained by Scanlon and Mellard (2002) related to the importance of maintaining interest in school. Students with learning difficulties who found an institutional way to express their interests, whether school or some other institution, had greater academic resilience.

Practically, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional supports are interrelated rather than discrete constructs. Having strong interpersonal support can lead students with learning disabilities to have stronger intrapersonal support. Institutional support provides a foundation on which intrapersonal and interpersonal support can grow. Schools can build all three kinds of support by (a) encouraging students to develop personally relevant goals, (b) creating closer relationships between parents and school personnel, (c) recognizing the harm teachers can cause by making careless comments, and (d) providing extracurricular opportunities for all students. Students can be encouraged to develop these goals through closer consultation with guidance counseling staff and more opportunity for personal interactions with teachers in unstructured settings. Closer relationships with parents can be fostered by involving them more fully in the daily life of schools as classroom volunteers, assistant coaches/club leaders, and participants in special events. Teachers can have professional development activities geared toward helping them understand the influence they exert over adolescents.

This study is a part of our ongoing efforts to see people with learning disabilities holistically (Hutchinson, Freeman, & Steiner-Bell, 2002). We are assembling a series of cases (Stake, 2000) that illustrate the fundamental fallacy in seeing individuals with learning disabilities only as people with cognitive deficits. Through this process we hope to influence how adolescents with learning disabilities are viewed in society and are treated in schools. These processes would involve placing less emphasis on the academic aspects of school and more on the social-emotional component. These affective components seem to be lost in our present drive for curricular reform and higher standardized achievement scores.

There remain interesting possibilities for research in the field of adolescents with learning difficulties and their academic resilience. We would like to expand our findings by including a contrast group of high school dropouts with learning difficulties who have yet to return to school. The limitation of using just the two groups that we did is that these students all eventually have a clear goal of finishing high school. Would the dropouts who have not returned have such a goal, or is the goal itself the major component of high school completion? We also need to investigate further whether the factors that distinguished the two groups can be used as components of a holistic dropout prevention program. To this end, we anticipate helping students, teachers, and parents target the factors identified through these investigations so that we can assist students with learning difficulties to remain in school.

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## *Appendix*

### *Background:*

1. When did you come back to high school?
2. Why did you come back?
3. Why did you leave high school originally?
4. What could have been done to make high school better for you? Try to put yourself back in high school.
5. What grade did you complete?
6. How old were you when you left?
7. At what level were most of your high school courses?

### *School:*

This interview will focus on your experiences in high school. We'll start with some general questions and then get into more specific details. Looking back, what were your overall impressions of high school?

1. Can you tell me about your favourite parts of a typical school day when you were in high school?
2. Did you have any classes that you particularly liked in high school? What were they?
3. What did you like about these classes?
4. Did you have classes that you really didn't like in high school? What were they?
5. What didn't you like about these classes?
6. What did you do after school during the week?
7. What were your hobbies or interests while you were in high school?
8. Did you belong to any clubs or activities in school or out of school?

9. Were there any activities that you wanted to participate in but did not? Why did you not participate?
10. Did you work during high school? What was your job?
    (Probe into hours at work, shifts on weekends, during week, missing school for work, responsibilities at work, etc.)
11. In your last year of high school, where did you spend your time when you weren't in school? What did you do?
12. Describe a success you experienced in high school.
13. Describe a disappointment you experienced in high school.
14. How regular was your attendance at school? Why did you miss school? Did you ever skip classes? What did you do when you skipped?
15. What did you miss after you left high school?
16. Can you tell about the kind of supports that you had while you were in high school? Family? Friends? Others?

*Social Relationships:*
1. Can you tell me about your friends while you were in high school?
2. Can you tell me about your closest or most trusted friend while you were in high school?
3. How did you meet your friend?
4. What kinds of things did you do with that friend?
5. Why did you think that person was a good friend?
6. Describe a disagreement you had with your friend. How was the disagreement resolved?
7. How were your relationships with other friends while you were in high school different from your relationship with your closest/best friend?
8. Did you talk to people on the phone? Who did you talk to? What did you usually talk about?
9. What did you usually do on Friday night? Saturday? Saturday night? Sunday?
10. Did most of your friends stay in school?
11. What did your friends think about your decision to leave school?
12. Are you still in touch with any of your friends from high school?
13. How is the way you think about friendships now different from the way you thought about friendships in high school?

*Relationships with classmates and teachers:*
1. A lot of school have groups or cliques like smokers, jocks, etc. Did your school have these kinds of groups? Where did you fit in?
2. Were there any students you didn't get along with? Why?
3. Can you tell me about your relationships you remember with your teachers?
4. Did you have a favourite teacher?
5. Were there any teachers that had a positive influence on your life? Can you tell me about that person?
6. What did your teachers think of your decision to leave school?
7. What did your family think about your decision to leave school?
8. Do you have any advice for kids who are struggling now?
9. Is there anything you would like to add that is related to anything we've talked about today?