

## **The Effects that Family Members and Peers Have on Students' Decisions to Drop Out of School**

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*In 2003, a study of two Canadian adult literacy programs included 37 learners who revealed a variety of reasons for having dropped out of school as teenagers and younger adults. Chief among these were the influences of parents, siblings, and peers both in and out of school. This article considers these research findings, in light of the educational literature, as a catalyst for recommending ways that high school administrators, counselors, and teachers can (1) make students' families and out-of-school friends feel comfortable with the school setting, (2) teach students' parents and guardians how to support their children's educational efforts, and (3) teach students how to engage in positive interactions with peers.*

### **Introduction**

A 2003 qualitative case study examined the perspectives of 70 stakeholders connected to two community-based adult literacy programs in rural and northern Manitoba, Canada. The research purpose was to develop an understanding of regular school dropouts' participation in these programs. Within the context of describing their learning experiences, the 37 learners in the study revealed a variety of reasons for having dropped out of regular school as teenagers and younger adults. Chief among these were the influences of parents, siblings, and peers both in and out of school. This article considers these research findings, in light of the educational literature, as a catalyst for recommending that high school administrators, counselors, and teachers pay particular attention to the relationships that students-at-risk have with family members and peers.

There is little in the research literature that records the story of dropping out from the retrospective of students who have taken this journey and are now seeking a second chance to improve their academic skills. This original research report thus adds a critical dimension to the existing literature. All given names are pseudonyms. The following definitions of terms apply, in

accordance with their use by program stakeholders: *adult learners* are adult literacy students, *regular schools* are private or public grade schools, *students-at-risk* are regular school students who are at risk of dropping out, and *youth-at-risk* are individuals under the age of 21 years who have already quit or are at risk of doing so.

### **Research Methodology**

The two research programs were selected from 37 adult literacy programs that received provincial funding in 2002-03. Although both programs were obligated to follow the community-based program model endorsed by the Government of Manitoba, they had somewhat different foci for program delivery. One program offered adult high school courses as well as basic literacy. It had a reputation of helping adult dropouts complete grade 12, as well as blending adult literacy and high school curricula, and delivering internationally recognized MicroSoft computer courses. The other program offered instruction ranging from beginning literacy to post-secondary tutorial support. It had a reputation of accepting every learner who asked for help, and of successfully meeting the special needs of students with learning disabilities and other learning challenges.

The 70 research participants who volunteered for the study belonged to seven program stakeholder categories, as follows: 37 learners (adult literacy students), 2 coordinators/instructors (equivalent to teaching principals in regular schools), 11 other staff members (instructors and office support staff), 7 parents and other close relatives of learners, 2 program administrators (equivalent to regular school board members), 8 referral agents (from community organizations and government agencies), and 3 provincial funding agents (civil servants responsible for government funding).

Data were derived from three sources: official documents, personal documents, and one-to-one interviews. The official documents were the programs' year-end reports for 2001-02 and 2002-03, including information about program hours, teaching methods, learning resources, and finances. The personal documents were short compositions by learners, other staff, and one provincial funding agent in response to open-ended questions about their

program experiences. The interviews were 45-minute conversations with individuals from every stakeholder category, based on more detailed questions about their program experiences.

The learner composition and interview questions prompted answers that included information about students' relationships with family members and peers at the time that they dropped out of school. The first of the learners' 8 composition questions was a general query:

“What was happening in your life when you left school?”

The first 4 of the learners' 32 interview questions were more specific:

“What grade were you in when you left school?”

“How old were you then?”

“Were you living with your parents when you left school?”

“Why did you drop out of school?”

More details about the circumstances surrounding students' decisions to leave school were prompted by the last interview question, which followed 27 questions about the adult literacy programs in particular:

“Is there anything else you would like to tell me – anything else that I didn't ask about, or that you would like to add to something we've already discussed?”

### **Results of the Study**

Within the context of answering their composition and interview questions, the learners in the study contributed information about their home lives and the effects that parents, siblings, in-school peers, and out-of-school peers had on their decisions to drop out of regular school.

#### *Parents*

Parents are children's first teachers (Helfield, 2001), and they rank

a close second to peers in influencing children's dropout decisions ("Parenting," 1995). Lack of parental support to stay in school ranges from evincing generally unsupportive attitudes (Amstutz & Sheared, 2000), to watching too much television and having too few reading materials in the home (Williams, 1999), to actively encouraging students to quit (Burtman, 1990). According to Manitoba Education and Training (1994), parental endorsements of school foster their children's academic self-esteem, self-discipline, and long-term goal planning, but poor attitudes toward school completion seriously compromise their children's chances for graduation. The Steering Group on Prosperity (1992) concluded that parental attitudes toward education are more influential than parental/sibling education or family socioeconomic levels in determining a student's relative degree of dropout risk.

Nine learners in the study said that their parents played active roles in their decisions to quit school. Helen reported that her parents, who waited until she was 9 years old to send her to grade 1 and then kept her home for two years before sending her back to grade 1 at the age of 12, did not object when she refused to start grade 6 at the age of 15. Martha's mother let her quit to help with housework when she was 15 years old at the end of grade 6, and Dean and Amy had divorced fathers who did not encourage them to attend grade 7 at the age of 15. Amy added that her father promised to procure home-schooling that never materialized. Rhonda's mother welcomed her home to work on the farm when she "just didn't feel like doing any more homework" after finishing grade 8 at the age of 17. After several years of keeping Delores home for extended periods to help care for home daycare children, Delores's mother asked her to stay home full-time when she turned 15 in the middle of grade 9. Steven and Ken had parents who also supported their decisions to drop out of grade 9: Steven at the age of 15 and Ken at the age of 16. Brad started a full-time home business with his father partway through grade 10 at the age of 19. All of these learners admitted that they were not doing well in school when they quit; all but Delores expressed gratitude to their parents for endorsing their decisions to quit.

Eleven learners traced their academic problems to having

been moved repeatedly by parents who seemed either uncaring or unaware of the negative effects that such moves could have on their classroom experiences. Warren reported living with a variety of non-parental relatives in different communities through grades 7 to 10. Sandra, Eve, and Gloria were uprooted and moved to new schools when their parents relocated in unsuccessful attempts to save their marriages. Dean and Kate changed schools each time they moved back and forth between their divorced parents, and John attended several schools in three different provinces during his desperate attempt to establish a relationship with his nomadic drug-addicted mother. Randy blamed his parents for having “moved too many times” for him to concentrate in school. Stacey deeply resented her mother’s misplaced efforts to salvage her high school education by moving her from school to school and residential treatment center to group home. Ken acknowledged that attending elementary and junior high schools in two different countries had not prepared him for grade 9 in a Canadian high school.

Most regular school dropouts come from households headed by single or divorced parents (Bloch, 1991). Thirteen learners in the study traced their dropout decisions to the sudden removal of at least one parent from the home. Donald’s mother died when he was a young teenager, and his alcoholic father was unable to cope with raising three sons alone. Gladys and Joanne quit high school to work full time in order to supplement the family income after their fathers died. Allan and Delores were in elementary school when their fathers died: Allan’s alcoholic mother became so abusive that he ended up living in a series of foster parents and group homes, between bouts of running away and living on trains and on the street as a teenager; Delores’s grieving mother kept her home from school for most of grades 6 and 7 to help look after her younger siblings. Byron had not seen his biological father for several years when the man passed away when Byron was 15 years old. Five other learners also lost parents through separation or divorce. For Kate, the disruption was compounded by her divorced mother’s repeatedly moving from community to community – and hence from school to school – during the elementary grades. She

explained, "Moving was just something that my mother decided to do, so we would all have to move." Emily's father had needed her to stay home from grade 10 with her younger siblings after her mother deserted the family. Ida said that her "whole family kind of fell apart" when her parents divorced. Warren and Curtis essentially lost both parents when they turned 13 years old: Warren's parents sent him to live with a series of different relatives in different communities; Curtis's parents left him to fend for himself in a farming community while they left to seek employment elsewhere.

According to Helfield (2001), adolescents use apathy and rebellious behaviors in school as foils to mask the turmoil elsewhere in their lives. Family turmoils include patterns of physical/sexual/drug/ alcohol abuse (Bagley & Bolitho, 1997), violence (Johnson, 2000), and generally discordant (Merton, 1999) or chaotic (Helfield, 2001) homes. Nakhaie, Silverman, and Lagrange (2000) noted that the rewards and punishments that schools use to control student behaviors depend on children having been socialized at home to have self-control over their actions. Five learners in the study admitted to acting out in school as a response to their negative home lives. John, who was raised by adoptive parents, underwent a rather destructive reunion with his biological mother, and ended up developing a drug addiction from which he was still struggling to recover at the time of his interview – he had been expelled for drinking in his high school. Dean admitted that he "was already involved with alcohol" before he moved in with his father a few years after his parents separated, adding, "It was obvious I wasn't going to finish school, so I jumped in my dad's truck and moved." Sandra lamented that when her mother took her to school counselors in an effort to address her school behaviors after her parents' separation, the counselors "just gave up, too, because they didn't know what to do with me, either." Marlene, who was suspended and expelled several times during junior high school, and who spent time in an adolescent treatment facility during the year that she was officially registered in grade 9, said that her learning problems were compounded by a disastrous family life. Vern also reported that he was having problems at home when

he quit grade 10, explaining, “I was so unhappy at the time, that anything I thought would make it better, I would do it.”

The schooling background of parents, including educational attainment levels and degrees of satisfaction with their own schooling experiences, positively correlates with children’s prognoses for high school completion. Most dropouts have dropout parents (McLean, 1999). Wells (1990) cited family histories of dropping out as a common element among early school leavers. Devereaux et al. (1993) reported that twice as many non-completers as completers in the 1991 Canadian School Leavers Survey said that they did not know what their parents’ educational levels were. Amstutz and Sheared (2000) noted the importance of a mother’s educational level as a variable in her children’s acquisition of basic academic skills. Green and Riddell (2001) also found that a mother’s having less than elementary-level education significantly affected her children’s literacy skills in later years. Williams (1997) calculated that each extra year of mothers’ education made a 3-4% standard deviation of difference in Canadian youths’ International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) scores – twice the impact of fathers’ education. Only four learners in the study made a point of revealing how much education their own parents had, within the context of explaining why these parents had accepted their decisions to drop out. Joanne’s mother had attended school only to grade 3, Rhonda’s mother had completed grade 6, Daphne’s mother had quit in grade 8, and Bart’s mother had left near the end of grade 10. From the descriptions that other adult learners gave of their home lives; however, it is reasonable to assume that about half of these learners had dropout parents as well.

### *Siblings*

The literature maintains that having several siblings (Morris, Pawlovich, & McCall, 1991), or older dropout siblings (Wells, 1990), factors into the school leaving formula.

Seven learners in the study noted the roles that siblings played in their decisions to drop out. Delores, Ida, Emily, Gladys and Joanne felt obligated to leave school in order to help recently widowed or divorced parents care for younger children. Delores,

Ida, and Emily quit to stay home with siblings; Gladys and Joanne quit to work full-time so that their mothers could stay home. Mike admitted that he had dropped out of grade 10 with a younger sister. Bart and Rhonda each had three siblings who dropped out before them.

### *In-School Peers*

Peer relations are an integral part of every group learning situation, but many adolescents have interpersonal skill deficits that impact on their classroom experiences (Guerin & Denti, 1999). Call, Hendricks, and Jones (1990) described “unsuccessful students” (p. 6) whose attitudes and behaviors alienate them from peers. Call et al. therefore characterized students-at-risk as being less “conventional” (p. 6) in their social behaviors, less concerned about making positive impressions on others, and less focused on others’ welfare than low-risk students. Wells (1990) also wrote of youth-at-risk who have interpersonal conflicts because they cannot identify with others, and Lovitt (1991) cited “couldn’t get along with students” (p. ix) as a reason dropouts typically give for leaving school early.

Sixteen learners in the study complained of unsatisfactory relationships with their school peers, ranging from emotional discomfort in class to physical abuse in the school yard. Three female students reported having quit due to stress caused by making classroom presentations in front of peers whom they perceived as unsupportive. Sandra articulated, “My whole body started closing down on me. I couldn’t speak, and it was like I was fighting for every breath.” Ten other female students disclosed feelings that their peers saw them as inferior. For example, Martha said that she “hated school” because of the way other students reacted to her speech and mobility problems, and Cheryl revealed, “I was overweight, with low self-esteem, and I didn’t have many friends.” Helen attributed her interpersonal difficulties to a language barrier, because she spoke Michif Cree, a French Métis dialect, and the other students spoke English. Gladys and Eve admitted having dropped out to escape other students’ disapproval of their unfashionable clothing and shabby homes. Three male

students said that they were physically bullied in school. Byron explained, “This

guy was bullying me, trying to fight me on a daily basis,” and Vern reported being “pushed around a lot because I’m such a small kid.”

At least some of the incompatibilities between students-at-risk and their classroom peers may be attributable to age-related differences. The literature describes the typical high school dropout as older than his or her classmates (Merton, 1999), often due to having failed at least one grade (Nakhaie et al., 2000). Twenty-two learners in the study were at least two years older than most of their grade peers when they dropped out, and thirteen were 18 years old by the time they left school. Nine learners reported having quit because they fell too far behind to catch up in time to graduate with their age peers. Sheena, who had repeated just one school grade, complained that her classmates were “immature and too focused on popularity and fashionable clothing.”

Peer relationships are the most influential factor in an adolescent’s life (Manitoba Education and Training, 1993). The literature maintains that identifying with peers in school greatly diminishes a student’s risk of dropping out (Guerin & Denti, 1999). Moreover, about a third of the graduates who responded to the 1991 Canadian School Leavers Survey credited friends with “talking them into staying” in school (Devereaux et al., 1993, p. 31). Early school leavers, on the other hand, often report having followed peer dropouts out of school (Burtman, 1990). Ten learners in the study reported having made very close friends in school. Sheena had asked her parents for permission to switch high schools three times in order to be with a close friend whose family moved frequently. Stephen explained that he was friends with everyone: “the social greasers, the preppie guys” who stayed in school, and the “other ones” who dropped out. Unfortunately, for Stephen and six of the other learners, close school friends contributed to their decisions to leave instead of encouraging them to stay in school. Stephen, Byron, and Mike admitted spending most of their last school year skipping out with school friends who also ended up dropping out. Mike said that he dropped out of grade 10 with the

same group of friends five years in a row before the high school refused them readmission as 22 year-olds. Sheena, Ryan, and Laura spoke of being too discouraged to continue after their closest friends graduated. Ryan explained, "My friends that I hung around with at school graduated and I didn't know anybody else." Annette said that she "just couldn't bear to go back to school in fall" and face the boyfriend whose baby she had borne the summer after grade 10.

#### *Out-of-School Peers*

Youth-at-risk seek peers for attention, comfort, and relief from boredom (Stephens, 1997). Some turn to gangs as surrogate families (Stephens). High school dropouts are also more likely than their school-age peers to be married (Steering Group on Prosperity, 1992). The literature describes in-school and out-of-school friends as playing differential push-and-pull roles: in-school friends, who tend to value education and school attendance, "push" students to stay in school, whereas out-of-school friends, who tend to discount the worth of education and to encourage skipping school, "pull" them to quit (Guerin & Denti, 1999). Twelve learners in the study blamed dropout peers for their decisions to drop out. John explained, "I had my own crowd I hung around with outside of school. And the people that were in school had their own little congregations, so they were in their own little classes." Donald described his life after quitting as "just spending time sitting around with my friends and playing video games and Dungeons and Dragons." Jewel admitted, "In the group I was in, dropping out was just accepted. I never really thought about it." Stephen declared, "We thought it was great to be out of school and working. It made me feel a lot better to be working and doing what others do than to be in school." Six female learners reported having quit because of relationships with out-of-school boyfriends. Eve, Gloria, and Leah were already pregnant at the time that they left school, and Jennifer became pregnant within a few months. Stacey quit due to a traumatic experience involving a gang-affiliated boyfriend whose brother attended her school.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The adult literacy students in this study confirmed the literature's contention that families and friends have profound influences over high school students' decisions to drop out. School-based efforts to stop students from leaving school before graduation ought therefore attend to the relationships that students-at-risk have with close relatives and peers. Schools should take the initiative to make students' families and friends feel comfortable with the school setting, and to teach parents and guardians how to support their children's educational efforts, right from elementary through senior high school. Schools also have a duty to ensure that students' interpersonal needs are being met in ways that will nurture these students' development into emotionally healthy adults. The following recommendations focus on executing these responsibilities within high school settings with the understanding that, in order to be successful, these measures should be a continuation of practices that have been activated in earlier school years.

First, students' families and out-of-school friends should be actively welcomed into the school setting. High schools can host such community events as open houses, novelty sports challenges, and student talent productions. Art teachers can host public viewings of student artwork. Physical education teachers can set up open-entry games using alternate sports equipment such as nerf balls and plastic boat paddles for baseball, or volleyballs for soccer. Other teachers can volunteer to coordinate variety nights showcasing students' entertainment skills.

Second, many students' parents and guardians need to learn how to provide academic support. High schools should therefore offer special training sessions, incentives for parents and guardians to attend parent-teacher conferences, and opportunities for them to consult with school personnel in less formal circumstances. School counselors can develop a series of evening workshops designed to orient parents and guardians to the expectations that high schools have of their children, and to give tips for helping students meet these expectations. School administrators can coordinate novelty prize draws as rewards for attending parent-teacher conferences,

and they can schedule evening conference times to accommodate parents and guardians who work during the day. Teachers can telephone parents and guardians to report “good news” and to invite

small groups of these individuals to brown bag lunch discussions of classroom practices.

Third, many students need to learn how to engage in positive interactions with their in-school peers. High schools should therefore provide counseling support for students who have interpersonal problems, and give all students opportunities to interact with a variety of peers in both one-to-one and group situations. Counselors can intervene when students manifest counterproductive interpersonal behaviors, including bullying and being bullied either physically or emotionally. Teachers can arbitrarily divide students into different pairings and small groups for discussion-based assignments, set up clear rules for participating in respectful conversations, and then carefully monitor the discussions to ensure that the rules are followed.

Schools have limited power to change the out-of-school relationships that place students at risk of dropping out, but they have a duty to do whatever they can to ensure that every student who has the potential to graduate will do so. This article’s recommendations are by no means an exhaustive list of the measures that high school administrators, counselors, and teachers can take to counteract the negative influences of students’ families and peers. Rather, they are a set of preliminary suggestions, inspired by the recollections shared by over three dozen dropouts who at the time of the study were attending adult literacy programs in order to finish the education that they had been unable to complete in high school. It is this writer’s hope that other educators will take these suggestions under advisement, and translate them into practices that “fit” their own students-at-risk.

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