Academically Capable Students who are Failing in High School: Perceptions about Achievement

Kenneth R. Ponsford
School District No. 91 (Nechako Lakes)
Judith C. Lapadat
University of Northern British Columbia

ABSTRACT

A sub-group of at-risk learners, familiar to high school counsellors, consists of students who have demonstrated academic capability yet begin to fail in their senior years. Although they do not fit within a high-risk profile, such students are at risk of not completing their secondary school education and may acquire inadequate preparation for post-secondary education or rewarding careers. Our goal was to describe the achievement perspectives of three such students from a small rural community, using qualitative interviews. We found that academic, social, family, and peer factors influenced their decision making. We suggest ways to modify school practices to provide better support for such students.

RÉSUMÉ

Un sous-groupe d'apprenants à risque, connus des conseillers des écoles secondaires, est constitué d'étudiants ayant démontré des aptitudes académiques mais qui commencent à échouer pendant les dernières années du cycle secondaire. Sans posséder un profil à grand risque, ces étudiants risquent néanmoins de ne pas terminer leurs études secondaires ; de plus, ils ne recevront peut-être pas une préparation adéquate leur permettant de poursuivre des études postsecondaires ou d'avoir une carrière enrichissante. Nous avions comme but d'examiner, à l'aide d'entrevues en profondeur, les perspectives de réussite de trois étudiants à risque provenant de petites communautés rurales. Il en ressort de ces entrevues que les facteurs académiques, sociaux et familiaux de même que les pairs influent sur les décisions prises par ces étudiants. Nous suggérons des façons de modifier les pratiques scolaires afin de donner un meilleur soutien aux apprenants à risque.

While many researchers have described means of identifying students who chronically underachieve or who are at risk of leaving school, and educational

initiatives to address their needs (Baker & Sansone, 1990; Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Fitzpatrick, 1984; Carr, Borkowski, & Maxwell, 1991; Griffin, 1988; Martin & Murphy, 1993; Sapp & Farrell, 1994; Yard & Vatterott, 1995), there is a subgroup of at-risk students that has had relatively little attention in the research literature. This subgroup, familiar to senior secondary counsellors, consists of students whose history suggests that they are capable, yet they are at risk because their performance drops to failing or near-failing levels in core subjects in the later years of their secondary schooling. While they share some of the attributes of students labelled underachievers, their overall history of school performance precludes identifying them as underachievers according to generally-accepted definitions (Mandel, Marcus, & Dean, 1995). Their poor academic performance late in their schooling may place them at risk of dropping out, but, more typically, they proceed to graduation with a low level of achievement that results in inadequate preparation for post-secondary education or desirable careers. The goal of this study was to understand these students better, to examine their perceptions and performance in terms of achievement motivation theory and within a Canadian educational context, and to suggest ways in which they might be supported within the school system.

AT-RISK LEARNERS AND DROPOUTS

These students constitute a subset of at-risk students. While a multiplicity of definitions of "at risk" have gained acceptance, there are certain common descriptors. These include poor academic performance, deficient social skills, poor interactions with most aspects of the school system, poor self-concept, and low self-esteem. At-risk students may have inadequate support systems, personal crises, risk behaviours, and excessive out-of-school demands on their time and energy. They show escalating disaffection with school, paralleling disciplinary problems and a likelihood of failing to complete graduation requirements (Fitzpatrick, 1984; Martin & Murphy, 1993; Sapp & Farrell, 1994; Yard & Vatterott, 1995).

School dropout studies provide a picture of those students who have gone beyond simply being at-risk to having left the system without acquiring school-leaving credentials (Ouellet & Deshaies, 1997). Students decide to drop out for three main reasons (Tanner, Krahn, & Hartnagel, 1995). School-based reasons for dropping out include: disliking school, finding school boring, being truant, not getting along with teachers, or having had negative experiences with school. Wanting to find a job is a second type of rationale cited by dropouts. Third, students drop out for personal reasons, such as not getting along with parents, being expelled from their homes, having friends who drop out, abusing drugs or alcohol, being in trouble with the law, or becoming pregnant.

School dropout studies suggest that indicators that students will need help if they are to avoid dropping out are observable early in their schooling (Baker & Sansone, 1990; Coleman, 1990; Downing & Harrison, 1990; Neilson & Ward, 1991). Indicators related to family characteristics, socio-economic status, attendance, frequency of discipline referrals and declining grades tend to be well known

to school personnel. The implication is that they are not being acted upon early enough or adequately (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Westbury, 1994).

Dropout prevention programs often attempt to improve student attendance and achievement by changing students and their behaviours. However, understanding and changing the environment in which the student functions is also an essential part of an effective intervention strategy (Baker & Sansone, 1990; Blum & Jones, 1993; Downing & Harrison, 1990; Lehr & Jeffery, 1996; Mayer, Mitchell, Clementi, Clement-Robertson, & Myatt, 1993; Neilson & Ward, 1991). Exemplary dropout prevention programs address student disaffection and make school a place where at-risk students can function effectively to overcome risk factors. Such programs are characterized by active student participation in learning and positive personal relationships between students and teachers (Blum & Jones, 1993; Mayer et al., 1993). They provide both challenge and experiences of success for a wide range of students (Covington & Teel, 1996), minimize barriers for at-risk students, and implement a curriculum that students consider relevant.

ACHIEVEMENT MOTIVATION

Poor academic achievement is common to almost all definitions of "at risk" and "dropout." Poor academic achievement ranges from marginal passes in subjects to failed courses or grades. Student underachievement, a significant problem, accounts for many students' poor performance at school (Carr et al., 1991; Griffin, 1988; Rimm, 1986; Tomlinson & Cross, 1991). While definitions and descriptions vary, a common characteristic is that these students achieve below expected levels. They are:

> adolescents with talent who are somewhat flat, disengaged, or distracted in school . . . they drift along at a mediocre level, if that: far below, it seems what they could be achieving if they put their minds to it . . . well-intentioned young people who, despite good potential, just do not get off the mark in their classes. (Griffin, 1988, p. ix)

Those who study underachievement agree that behavioural changes have to be made by the students themselves, whether of their own volition or with the impetus, guidance and support of adults (Bruns, 1992; Griffin, 1988; Rimm, 1986; Tomlinson & Cross, 1991). Motivation, therefore, is a key issue. Understanding what motivates students to make particular choices or to change their behaviour helps educators to design appropriate educational settings and to provide support to stimulate behavioural changes (Mandel et al., 1995).

Many current writers on the subject of achievement motivation begin with goal theory and relate it to achievement behaviour. Goal theory focuses on three types of goals that motivate student behaviour. To improve learning or achieve mastery, students pursue *learning goals*. They pursue *performance goals* if their primary aim is to show evidence of their ability. *Social goals* are pursued if their objective is to enhance their position in the group (Ames, 1992; Maehr & Anderman, 1993; Raffini, 1993; Stipek, 1993; Urdan & Martin, 1995).

Students who believe that effort enhances ability and school success are more likely to pursue learning or mastery goals than those students who attribute success primarily to a static ability trait or to other factors such as luck (Dweck & Leggett, 1989; Freeman & Schopen, 1997; Lapadat, 2000; Weiner, 1992). In their striving for mastery, such students tend to adopt metacognitive learning strategies, resulting in stronger achievement. School staff can enhance learning goal orientation among students by rewarding effort, curiosity and improvement rather than emphasizing the product (Ames, 1992; Covington & Omelich, 1979; Covington & Teel, 1996; Kaplan, Peck, & Kaplan, 1994; Maehr & Anderman, 1993; Raffini, 1993; Stipek, 1993). Freeman and Schoper recommend that school counsellors recognize and build on at-risk adolescents' social need for peer acceptance, help them to correct self-defeating attribution patterns, and aid parents and teachers in understanding how students' self-perceptions relate to their achievement.

AIMS OF THE STUDY

Key to counsellors' and teachers' enhancement of learning goal orientation among students is an understanding of students' perceptions about achievement and their motivations to achieve (Freeman & Schopen,1997; Lapadat, 1998, 2000; Mandel et al., 1995; Ouellet & Deshaies, 1997). School staff can use their knowledge of students' views and beliefs to identify support strategies and to modify the educational environment. Research has addressed ways of supporting highly at-risk students and chronic underachievers, but relatively little attention has been given to academically capable students whose performance flags toward the end of their secondary schooling. By understanding their perceptions, experiences, and motivations, counsellors and teachers can take preventive action to support them through their period of being at risk.

The purpose of our research was to gain a greater understanding of this subset of at-risk students. We asked: how do academically capable at-risk secondary students describe their school experiences? What educational practices and factors outside school do they believe enhance or inhibit their achievement? Finally, how can school counsellors and teachers modify educational practices or act to support or mitigate outside factors?

METHOD

Design

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) principles of naturalistic inquiry guided the study's conceptualization as an inductively grounded multiple case design, and provided a framework for data collection and processing. We followed Miles and Huberman (1994) in the analysis, as our aim was neither to formulate substantive theory (as in grounded theory), nor to seek the participants' felt meanings (as in phenomenology), but rather to induce patterns reflective of the participants'

descriptions and perceptions of their experiences through thematic analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Morse, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

Participants

The study was conducted at an elementary-secondary school in rural British Columbia enrolling approximately 450 students. Of these, 250 were secondary students, with about 80 in grades 11 and 12. We defined "academically capable" as including students with a Grade Point Average (GPA) in the B range prior to grade 11, who had been successful across subject areas, whose academic program had not been modified to accommodate physical or learning disabilities, and whose teachers expressed a belief in their ability to be successful. These academically capable students were additionally identified as being at risk if they had achieved failing or near failing grades in two or more core academic subjects in the previous school year, that is: F, "In Progress," or C- in Math, English, Science, Social Studies or French.

The three participants, Renée, Brandon, and Neil (pseudonyms), were grade 12 students who fit this profile. Their teachers described them as capable of higher achievement in the courses in which their grades had dropped. They were selected for the study from 15 potential participants, the rest being excluded based on lack of close fit with the criteria, being at insufficient arm's length from the interviewer in his professional role at the school, or unwillingness to participate.

Ethics and Role-Relationships

Researcher-participant role relationships and ethical considerations impact qualitative studies at every stage. One of us is an "insider" living in the community and professionally employed at the school, whereas the other is an "outsider" from the university. Potential issues included: the perception of the university as a powerful entity, the possibility of coercion arising from an imbalance of power between interviewer and students, and the degree to which our insider professional presence and knowledge influenced data collection, interpretation, and reporting of the research (Lapadat & Janzen, 1994). We addressed such issues through bracketing (Hutchinson, 1990) and building in safeguards. One safeguard against the imbalance of power was that we fostered a sense of shared ownership by inviting the students to be partners in the research project and offered each transcript back to each interviewee for triangulation and member checking before proceeding with successive stages of the research. In reporting, we have used the participants' verbatim words or paraphrases that they have approved.

Data Collection and Stages of Analysis

We gathered the data in four to five semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1996) of individual participants from October to March, 1996-97. These 45-60 minute interviews were audiotaped and transcribed, and brief field notes were prepared. In the first interview, the interviewer asked: "How do you describe your-

self as a student?" "Please tell me about your school experiences, " and "How do your experiences relate to your development as a student?" We used salient themes and ambivalent comments in the transcripts to focus subsequent interviews and elucidate the research questions. For analysis, we followed procedures of unitizing, categorizing, discerning patterns, and doing member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The steps were identifying idea units, coding descriptively, presenting the emerging categories to participants, synthesizing and paraphrasing, re-presenting to participants, analyzing, and then coding for patterns. We continued this cycle until informational redundancy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was achieved.

Descriptive coding involved reviewing the verbatim transcripts to identify "idea units," or meaningful chunks of information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which ranged from a self-explanatory phrase or sentence spoken by the interviewee to several episodes of turn-taking between the interviewee and interviewer. We sorted idea units into descriptive categories using thematic labels (Miles & Huberman, 1994), such as Support Systems, Out-of-school Demands, Motivation, and so on (see Table 1). Categories were added to, relabelled, and restructured as needed, yielding 17 in total. This preliminary categorization was presented to participants for member checking until each was satisfied that the categories reflected their meanings accurately and completely (Ponsford & Lapadat, 1998).

From the descriptive categories we developed individual participant profiles, and compared across participants to identify perceptions and explanations they held in common. Finally, we regrouped these commonalities or key themes into three overarching "pattern categories" (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Pattern categories reflect explanatory patterns rather than simply describing the data. We labelled these main influences on participants' decision making as Academic Factors, Social/Family Factors, and Peer Factors.

RESULTS

We present here the participant profiles. We then describe commonalties across participants and the three interpretive pattern categories that emerged.

Participant Profiles

In the following profiles of Renée, Brandon, and Neil, we provide contextualizing and summarizing remarks to frame the recurrent themes for each student that emerged across a series of interviews. In keeping with our aim of letting the students' voices be heard, we quote the students' words directly, and resist extensive interpretation.

Renée. Renée described herself as "polite, and things like that, but . . . not really, really smart in my academic courses. I like more things like art and woodwork." This was in spite of a GPA in the B range, and A's and B's in all core academic subjects until grade 11. In grade 11 she failed Math 11 and received C- in Chemistry 11, placing her at risk as defined in this study. In her elementary

and junior high years, she described having a positive attitude towards school: "I just liked it. And thought if I did really good I could be what I wanted when I grew up." Her peer group and family were supportive.

TABLE 1

Descriptive Categories

Category	Description
Motivation	Student's reasons for choosing to behave a certain way.
Support systems	Where the student turned for support.
Teaching practices	Teacher actions pertinent to the learning experience.
Teacher relations	How the student related to teachers.
Peer considerations	Behaviour towards school given peer actions or expectations.
Relevance	How valuable a student viewed coursework to be.
Responsibility attribution	Whom the student considered responsible for his/her academic achievement.
Learning practices	How the student conducted him/herself as a learner.
Self description	General description of him/herself over the course of schooling.
Out-of-school demands	The student's priorities outside of school, including such risk behaviours as use of tobacco, alcohol, or drugs.
In-class behaviour	Descriptions of his/her actions and reactions in class.
Family considerations	Aspects of home life that affected the student's school life
Pressures	Stress factors related to his/her schooling.
Degree of subject rigour	Beliefs about level of performance expected in a subject.
Health considerations	Rest, diet, exercise, and general health as they influenced the student's school experience.
Course load	References to distribution of academic load.
Prior knowledge	How well previous experiences had prepared him/her for current academic demands.

Renée moved to the community between grade 7 and grade 8, and found the double adjustment to high school and a new community somewhat frightening, although she continued to enjoy school. In junior high, Renée's parents allowed her increasing freedom in her social life, but it did not interfere with her school work at first. She began to perceive the arts as her strength. "I enjoyed doing my art and my woodwork and things but when I had [academic classes] I didn't like it all that much because I couldn't do what I wanted." She appreciated teaching practices matched to her strengths. "I think teachers can make classes more interesting by giving activities and projects, and for me, more drawing activities or diagrams and things that I can draw can help me understand." Having choices was also important. "Since I like to work independently, I like it when the teacher lets me do that."

In grade 11, Renée said she underwent major changes in attitude. "I didn't like school quite as much as I had before. I thought homework was boring. Didn't feel like doing it all the time. And my parents let me go out, like all the time, so I didn't get my homework done anyway." Her changes in attitude were particularly apparent in her comments about math and science: "Math got harder. And, uh, sciences . . . just . . . got boring for me."

Although she still saw school as important, Renée was motivated by other factors such as rebellion, pleasure, and her self-concept as a young adult. "At that time I didn't care; I just wanted to rebel. School was getting boring and I thought I was becoming a young adult, so I thought I could do what I wanted and it didn't matter." She said: "As long as I was happy, that was all that mattered, and not doing my homework made me happy." She no longer relied on her earlier support systems. She was less responsive to her parents' guidance: "I was rebelling at the time, so what my parents said didn't matter to me. They were bugging me to get my grades up, but I just didn't want to so I wouldn't listen." Nor did Reneé seek help from school sources, as she felt that the existing types of support would not be helpful to her.

Her relations with teachers were generally positive. "I think I've been treated fine. Nobody has treated me really bad. Some teachers get mad at the way I act or something, but that's understandable." However, she remarked several times on the issue of respect: "When I got in trouble for bad marks, I would be angry with the teacher. I didn't feel I had to respect them as much because I didn't feel they respected me by giving me such low marks." Her concern about respect was related to feeling cared for, and thus motivated to try: "When my marks were dropping and my attitude was changing, I thought the teachers would notice and say something, but they didn't, so it seemed they didn't care about it. I don't think I would have changed much if they had, maybe if I got in a lot of trouble, but I don't know."

In summary, Renée identified grade 11 as a period of rebellion against expectations of parents and school. She saw herself as making the transition to adulthood, which involved making her own choices about whether to pursue academic achievement. Her decision not to strive was also influenced by her enrollment in

math and two sciences in the same semester (subject areas that she identified as not her areas of strength), teaching practices in some courses that she found unhelpful and boring, and her perception that some teachers did not seem to care about her declining performance.

Brandon. Brandon's GPA in junior high was in the B range, occasionally dipping to high C+. His at-risk designation resulted from near-failing grades (C-) in Math 11, Biology 11 and Physics 11. He described himself as a good student who learns quickly but who is easily bored, which results in acting-out behaviours. "I just get really fidgety and start talkin' and makin' noises and stuff. Which gets me into trouble usually." If he could give advice to a new teacher about how to deal with him, he would tell them to "just realize what I'm like and understand that and . . . if they're mean to me, then I'm not going to cooperate with them at all but if they cooperate with me, I'll cooperate with them."

Brandon considered himself self-motivated. "I don't like to keep being told that I have the ability to do better. I think I know what I can do; it's just that I don't want to, so I don't think they should keep telling me that. If I don't want to learn how to do something, then it's kind of up to me." He pointed out that whether he perceives a course as relevant is an important factor influencing the degree of effort he expends. "If I can't think how I'll use something later in life, I get bored and tune it out." However, marks and his placing in the class also are important: "I always like to have a good mark, and being up in the top of the class. I don't like really having a low mark. Unless I know that I've been trying my hardest and if that's the only mark I can pull off, then I'm fine with that." Brandon did not like to miss school. "I always figured that they'd be doing something . . . really important or really fun in class or something would be happening that day, with my friends or something, that I'd end up missing out on something. I'd always come, usually."

Brandon entered grade 11 with some trepidation, having been told that Math 11 was different than Math 10: "I already wasn't doing that well in Math 10, so if Math 11 is . . . even harder, then I sure, God, there's no way I'm going to be able to do that! I just figured as long as I could pass the thing, that would be fine, I think." So, although Brandon generally seemed to see himself as a capable learner who was motivated to achieve, he also described anxiety and low self-expectations for math.

Brandon reported that teachers' treatment of him was pivotal in his performance: "If I got along with them . . . I'd try hard because they're doing their best to get me through it, so I'll try for them too. But if they have a bad attitude toward me, then I'll just do the same thing back to them." He felt that teachers formed early judgments about him and were resistant to changing them: "There's just some teachers that have built up an attitude towards me that, like it doesn't really matter what I do, they're still going to treat me in the exact same way." He also felt that his reputation in the school was based partly on the actions of his older sibling: "I've heard people say it to my face, that, that, 'Oh boy, another [surname] in our class.'" Family honour was important to Brandon. "I'm kind of

trying to get things good for my younger [sibling] and kind of fix my older [sibling's] trail. [My parents] knew my older [sibling] didn't try very hard . . . I knew exactly how they felt . . . so I didn't want them to have the same attitude towards my work."

When discussing whether the school system had worked as hard as it should have for him, Brandon noted, "It's kinda up to me. It's not up to them. If I would have wanted to really have a lot of extra help, then I could have . . . done something." He saw his parents, not the school, as his primary support system. In fact, he described a clear boundary around what ought to be the school's appropriate sphere of influence: "The school can encourage a student with low marks, like ask them about it, but not really try to get into their life and ask what's going on. That's not the school's place." In his view, responsibility for achievement should rest primarily with the student. "At some point the school should back off and let the student sink if they're sinking."

Although he described teacher-student relationships as very important, Brandon felt he did not have positive relations with teachers. His perceptions of teachers' caring often hinged on disciplinary issues. "I think when a teacher is angry with me over discipline, they don't seem to care whether I learn or not." With respect to seeking and accepting extra help, he remarked, "I just don't get along with teachers in certain courses, so I wouldn't want to spend extra time with them for extra help." Brandon commented on the importance of teachers taking an interest in him outside of routine instructional interactions. "Having teachers congratulate me for doing a good job, even if it's not in their class, like when I do well in sports, makes me think they want to be on my side and maybe get along with me."

Brandon said that he responds well to teaching practices that include flexibility, individualized pacing, and personalized instruction. "In the courses I was doing badly in, I could get the things we'd spend a while on, but if we had to move on to something new right away, I couldn't understand it and I'd get behind and the next day there'd be something new and I'd be even further behind and not able to catch up." He said, "teachers have to realize that not all students can learn at the same pace. They are going to have to take time with certain students to make sure they understand."

In summary, Brandon described himself as a capable student who was motivated to participate and achieve in class by external markers of achievement such as grades and class standing, by social goals, and by intrinsic interest in most subject areas. Brandon emphasized that students should be allowed to take responsibility for their performance at school. The decline in his achievement during grade 11 seemed to be related to both a course load heavily weighted in math and science, and to his perceptions about how teachers treated him. Although acknowledging that his behaviour was not always appropriate, he also believed that teachers judged him negatively because of a sibling's prior history in the school. Brandon lacked trust in teachers' evaluations of him, which affected his cooperation level and willingness to accept help. His "bottom line" seemed to be — does this teacher respect me?

Neil. Through grades 7-9, Neil's GPA ranged from high C+ to high B, and he obtained marks from C to A in core academic subjects. His marks had begun to slip by the end of grade 10, notably in math, yet his teachers continued to express confidence in his capability to maintain good marks with a full academic load. He fits the at-risk designation because he failed Math 11 and Physics 11. Neil said of himself, "I have a bit of drive, but I'm not a scholar. I think most teachers think I'm smarter than I think I am. It makes me feel good when teachers tell me I can do better even if I'm doing well."

Neil said that school was important to him: "Right now school is my biggest priority . . . my goal is to leave here with good grades and go on to college or university." The opinions of others mattered to him. "I'm concerned what my parents and the teachers think. I want to do well for their sakes, for what they'll think of me." Also: "When I do badly, I feel that I've let myself down, but even more, I feel that I've let other people down." In grade 11, though, Neil's attitudes about school changed: "Last year when I wasn't trying, I got bad marks. I lost my confidence and I gave up." One reason for the change was that Neil became romantically involved: "We were pretty much like we were married almost . . . had my mind on her all the time. That's basically what kept my marks down so low. Not concentrating on school."

Neil responded to influences of friends: "I was friends with everybody that was like a year or two older than me . . . I wanted to hang around with them . . . they were on spare, so I'd decide to go for coffee too, skip out and whatever." Neil considered his peers to be an important support system: "If my friends had said something to me about doing better last year, I probably would have listened." Also: "I would talk to people my own age rather than teachers or counsellors. People my own age would have more influence on me." Neil's older sibling provided encouragement and advice once his marks began slipping seriously: "My [sibling] kind of gave up in grade 12. I'm lucky I did it in grade 11. [He/she] said, 'Don't, you better get doing it better cause you don't want to happen what happened to me.'" Neil's parents also tried to intervene: "My parents would always give me lectures about doing better last year but I'd just let it float by my head."

Neil recognized that support was available from the school: "If I wanted help I could have asked for it. My teachers always said they were available for help. If you never take that opportunity, it's your own fault." On the other hand, Neil also perceived that at least one teacher gave up on him: "Last year the teacher helped me quite a few times but finally just gave up, so I figured, okay, now it will be easier to skip out, 'cause the teacher doesn't care whether I'm there or not." When asked if a more personalized attempt to reach him, such as the offer of specific appointment times for extra help, would have made a difference, he replied, "Yeah, I would have [gone], 'cause that's an appointment, and . . . you don't miss a, a doctor's appointment or anything." He also liked the idea of having a mentoring adult: "If you have a mentor, you're not going to let him down . . . if he's your mentor, and he's watching over you, you kind of probably want to please him."

Neil identified the teacher-student relationship as important to his attitude and school performance. For example, he relates well with teachers who use humour: "A teacher can establish a good relationship with a student by being able to take a joke and laugh with the student." He pointed out that positive relationships with teachers influence his school attendance and effort. "If you're in a good relationship with a teacher, you're going to want to come to class, because they're basically like a friend and you wouldn't want to let them down." However, he emphasized that, although teachers can offer help, students are responsible for their effort.

Regarding teaching practices that encourage him to try harder, Neil described ways for teachers to increase students' confidence, make learning more interesting, and establish a positive classroom atmosphere. "If the teacher can do something at the beginning of a new topic to make me feel confident, then I will be able to do better on it." Also: "It makes it easier to learn and pay attention, for example, if they make a study situation into a game." Also: "If a teacher is kind of up and giddy, really happy all the time, that makes me want to go to class."

In summary, Neil described himself as valuing education as a route to future goals, and wanting to achieve in order to please his family and teachers. However, he did not express confidence in his academic ability. He attributed his low grades in grade 11 primarily to lack of effort on his part, as he was focused on social goals with peers, including a romantic relationship, rather than on achieving in his school courses. Although aware of family and school support systems, Neil recognized that he was particularly receptive to peers' perspectives. He also identified the teacher-student relationship as an important influence on his attendance, attitude, and effort.

Commonalities

Despite these students' different stories, certain commonalities were apparent. All three described their school experiences in positive terms. None considered dropping out, even when achieving unsatisfactory grades, although research indicates that such grades frequently are precursors to dropout (Baker & Sansone, 1990; Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Fitzpatrick, 1984). Each reported a history of good attendance and eagerness to be at school. A point to note is that, for each of these students, their low grades occurred during a semester when they were enrolled in math, two sciences and an elective.

The three students were aware of the changes in their academic performance. Neil and Renée attributed them to their own changing priorities the previous year. School achievement was less of a priority than exploring newfound freedom and social possibilities. For Brandon, a key factor was that the combination of math and two science courses was intimidating. He faced his studies with little expectation of success and lacking faith that teachers would evaluate him fairly.

All three participants emphasized the importance of teacher-student relationships, and two of the three said they had experienced generally good relationships with teachers. The students indicated that they preferred teachers who did not

try to intimidate or judge them, but with whom they could relate on a personal level both in the formal setting of the classroom and more informally outside of class. They said it was important for teachers to care about them personally, and to treat them with respect and tact. All three preferred teaching practices that provide a variety of learning activities. They felt it was important to have choice in courses, teachers, and class activities.

The common key themes across participants pointed to three overarching interpretive pattern categories that accounted for central factors in these students' achievement-related cognitions and behaviours: Academic Factors, Social/Family Factors, and Peer Factors (see Table 2). Academic Factors indexes the students' experiences at school and their beliefs about academic achievement behaviour and choices. Social/Family Factors describes wider social mores and familial values, attitudes, and support in relation to academic achievement. The category of Peer Factors links the role of peers and the social goal of interacting with them to students' academic choices. These patterns guide our interpretations in the next section.

DISCUSSION

In describing their school experiences, what educational practices and out-of-school factors did these three at-risk secondary students perceive as enhancing or inhibiting their achievement? This question can be answered at two levels. At face-value, these students' views are reassuring to school counsellors and teachers. The students generally described their school experiences in positive terms. They identified educational practices they believed enhanced their achievement, many of which were in use in their school. They accepted responsibility for their own academic situation and absolved the school of responsibility for factors outside the school. All three saw themselves as agents of their own academic achievement. However, commonalities in the participants' experiences reveal that there is room to improve practices and to provide better support. This can be seen in their comments about less than positive teacher relationships, educational practices they believe inhibited their achievement, and alternative practices that might have enhanced their achievement, or encouraged to them to change course.

On the whole, findings from at-risk, dropout, and underachievement research about factors that impact on achievement did not adequately describe the situations of these students. We had surmised that they might lack family support and encouragement (Neilson & Ward, 1991), face serious personal issues such as racism, abuse, or pregnancy (Downing & Harrison, 1990), have overwhelming demands placed on their time outside of school (Singh, 1998; Tanner et al., 1995), or have negative attitudes towards school (Fitzpatrick, 1984). In contrast, Renée, Brandon, and Neil told us that they received encouragement from their families, felt their peers were supportive, did not have time-consuming duties outside of school, valued education, and liked being at school. Despite these positive indicators and their history of school success, they were beginning to fail their courses and were worried because of it. They were not turning to the school

TABLE 2

Key Themes Coded by Pattern Category

Academic Factors	Social/Family Factors	Peer Factors
Response to teacher	Family expectations	Friends, social demands
Teachers as support	Family as support	Prestige/ "in" group
Recourse	Rewards for achievement	Rebellion
Respectful treatment	Parental influence	Prefer friends over school
Student-teacher camaraderie	Pressure of expectations	Increased freedom
Fair consequences	School-parent contact	Independent choice
Reciprocal responses	Teacher follows up contact	Copycat choices
Preconceptions (teacher)	Reputation	Public vs. private attitude
Must like teacher to do well	Goals for future	"Geekdom"
Acquire education/graduate	Study groups	Popularity
Like school	Involvement in sports	
Subject difficulty	Competition	
Content value		
Subject boredom		
How marks weighted		
Positive outlook		
Success and confidence		
Math/science overload		
Variety in presentation		
Teacher engages in subject		
Projects, activities		
Time adjustments for topic		
Positive singling out		
Alternative learning settings		
Teacher explains, justifies		
Choice		
Marks reflect achievement		

for help, but rather to their social networks. They were starting to "slip through the cracks" and they knew it.

Academic Factors

Academic Factors featured prominently in all three students' discussions about achievement. The importance of caring teacher-student relationships was frequently mentioned. These students appreciated teachers who took time to know them personally and who solicited their perceptions, rather than basing decisions on past performance, family history, or reports by others. They did not like to let their teachers down, appreciated teachers who made an extra effort with them, and were more willing to accept help from teachers they perceived as caring. There was a special note of disappointment in their voices when describing situations in which they felt teachers had given up on them. Also, both Brandon and Renée pointed out that students rarely had real recourse in the face of unfair treatment by teachers.

This important link between students' perceptions of pedagogical caring and their school achievement supports Noddings' (1992) challenge to develop caring schools, and echoes Wentzel's findings that students are more likely to strive for achievement and prosocial behaviour when their teachers care about good teaching, communicate democratically, treat students equitably, recognize students as unique persons, individualize instruction, and provide nurturance (1997, p. 416). Caring, and respectful relationships with teachers meet fundamental psychological needs of students (Covington, 1984; Raffini, 1993), and are fostered through counselling initiatives such as mentoring programs (Driemeier, 1994), as well as by curricular and policy emphases of school leaders (Stringfield, 1994).

Second, consistent with findings from cognitive motivation research (Stipek, 1993), these students valued choice and variety in learning activities. Teachers' willingness to adjust the introduction of new material to the students' readiness, vary approaches to teaching, give students choices about how to demonstrate knowledge, and explain why a topic was important helped motivate them to perform well. At an institutional level, the students wanted choices in learning environments, delivery options, courses, teachers, time allocations, and marking schemes. As an example, this school's approach to math and science and how they were scheduled appeared to be a precipitating factor for the three students. Such feedback can help school personnel to focus change processes.

Epstein (1989), Ames (1990), and Covington and Teel (1996) describe the importance of these educational practices for student motivation, and provide implementation suggestions for highly at-risk students. Our findings suggest that reserving our most effective teaching strategies, caring, and institutional flexibility as "last ditch" interventions for use with students in crisis is counter-productive. Academically capable students also need consistent nurturing, choices, and classrooms and schools in which they can succeed (Wentzel, 1997). Instructional approaches that are multidimensional, adaptive, engaging, and reflective result in enhanced achievement for all students (Meichenbaum & Biemiller, 1998).

A third Academic Factor is the importance of soliciting and taking seriously students' perceptions. Renée, Brandon, and Neil told us that their attitudes toward educational tasks and school in general determined their academic achievement behaviours, which supports the theoretical stance that students' perceptions of their schooling experiences mediate their motivations to achieve (Covington, 1984; Lapadat, 1998, 2000; Urdan & Martin, 1995; Weiner, 1992). Students' beliefs and perceptions are a starting point for counsellors and other school staff in designing interventions to improve achievement, and their ongoing involvement in developing and evaluating such intervention strategies is crucial.

Social/Family Factors

Renée, Brandon, and Neil viewed family support and expectations as important to their social and academic achievement choices. They told us that school-parent contact is important but that the school's role should not be intrusive. Contrary to indications that students from rural settings are more likely to devalue education and drop out (Tanner et al., 1995), these students and their families valued education and academic achievement. Also, the students cared about not disappointing their parents. School counsellors can capitalize on these values by assisting parents' efforts to support their children, rather than emphasizing disciplinary contacts. Involving parents in goal setting, course selection, post-secondary planning, and school decision making and events are examples.

Our findings show that an understanding of students' motivations to achieve must go beyond an examination of academic goals to a consideration of "the varied and often multiple outcomes that students are trying to accomplish at school" (Wentzel, 1994 p. 180), including their social goals. Mandel et al. (1995) suggest that students are not unmotivated; rather, they are motivated in nonacademic directions. These students' comments about family, friends and school illuminate their perceptions of opportunities, thus their achievement motives (Urdan & Martin, 1995). Although Brandon said, "Education is really important. You have to have it to get out of a small town," and Neil noted that school "is the way that you're going to get your life," we can only speculate about the effect of small-town life as their social context. In their small community, everyone knows everyone, students attend the same school from kindergarten to grade 12, teachers have taught in the same school for thirty years, resource extraction drives the economy, and getting post-secondary education means going away to a city and perhaps never returning. Our study has reaffirmed the importance of examining goals related to social and family factors, but further ethnographic and large scale research is needed to come to clearer understanding of the social and cultural contexts of achievement perceptions and motivations in rural and small-town Canada.

Peer Factors

Renée, Brandon, and Neil saw it as their right to exercise freedom to choose social over academic priorities, and described this decision making as independent rather than peer-pressured. They said it was not the school staff's responsibil-

ity either to support or to mitigate outside factors, and that there is a limit to the school's obligation to help at-risk students. School personnel indeed may have little influence over students' lives outside of school, but they need to recognize that meeting social goals directly impacts students' achievement levels.

Counsellors and teachers can plan academic instruction to align with important social goals (Raffini, 1993; Wentzel, 1994). To the extent that schools enhance opportunities for students to pursue social goals congruently with academic objectives, students will view school as a place that meets their needs and will not have to resort to subversion or "skipping out" to gain status with their peers. For example, counsellors can lead collaborative planning and implementation of programs that build school pride and enhance the social desirability of effort and achievement. Approaches that capitalize on social interaction include cooperative learning, peer tutoring, peer counselling, student leadership, and inclusive decision making.

CONCLUSION

The three academically capable students in this study were judged at risk because they obtained some failing or borderline grades in senior high school. However, at this time in their lives, none of them were chronic underachievers. Rather, they attributed their achievement to particular choices they made, which they viewed as time-limited and under their own control. However, a careful reading of their words and common themes points to issues and solutions that can be located in school practices. These students' relations with teachers were fundamental to their attitudes towards school achievement. Educational practices did affect their effort. Their attitudes derived from peer, family, and community values, rather than media-promoted factors such as violence and substance abuse. To the extent that counsellors and teachers attend to students' perceptions and modify practices that students find unhelpful, perhaps Renée, Brandon, Neil, and others like them will not join the ranks of dropouts or be blocked from future educational and career opportunities.

A limitation of this study is that we had only three participants, all from one rural school. Therefore, we cannot determine whether the experiences and perceptions of these three are characteristic of the range of factors influencing high school achievement of students in general, or to what extent these findings are representative of rural schools and communities. A second limitation is methodological. In order to focus on the students' own perceptions rather than draw on insider knowledge, we did not seek information about the participants from their teachers beyond the initial nomination procedure, nor challenge the participants by presenting information from outside of the interview process that the interviewer was privy to as an insider. Restricting our data sources in this way foregrounded the students' perceptions in the analysis, but also precluded examining students' perceptions from other perspectives, thus constrained the potential for systemic interpretations.

Additional research is needed to trace the perceptions of a broader sample of capable at-risk high school students. Research is also needed that contextualizes achievement experiences and intervention outcomes more deeply, such as by recording and contrasting the perspectives of multiple participants in the school and community (for example, by adding counsellors', teachers', peers', and parents' perspectives), or by following students longitudinally. Finally, all types of achievement experiences in Canadian rural settings have been understudied to date, and, as our findings suggest, assumptions derived from urban and American research or the media might not be applicable.

With respect to practice, our findings indicate the potential for positive outcomes for academically capable students whose achievement is slipping. These three students have identified components of the safety net, and the research literature is replete with guidelines for constructing it. It is up to counsellors and other educators to attend to such students' experiences, and to modify practices accordingly.

References

Ames, C. (1990). Motivation: What teachers need to know. *Teachers College Record, 91,* 409-421.

Ames, C. (1992). Classrooms: Goals, structures, and student motivation. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 84,* 261-271.

Baker, J., & Sansone, J. (1990). Interventions with students at risk for dropping out of school: A high school responds. *Journal of Educational Research, 83,* 181-186.

Barrington, B. L., & Hendricks, B. (1989). Differentiating characteristics of high school graduates, dropouts, and nongraduates. *Journal of Educational Research, 82,* 309-319.

Blum, D. J., & Jones, A. L. (1993). Academic growth group and mentoring program for potential dropouts. *School Counsellor, 40,* 207-217.

Bruns, J. H. (1992). *They can but they don't: Helping students overcome work inhibition.* New York: Viking.

Carr, M., Borkowski, J. G., & Maxwell, S. E. (1991). Motivational components of underachievement. *Developmental Psychology, 27,* 108-118.

Coleman, G. J. Jr. (1990). Characteristics of at-risk youth and the library's role in dropout prevention. *TechTrends, 35*(4), 46-47.

Covington, M. V. (1984). The self-worth theory of achievement: Findings and implications. *The Elementary School Journal, 85,* 5-20.

Covington, M. V., & Omelich, C. L. (1979). Effort: The double-edged sword in school achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 71,* 196-182.

Covington, M. V., & Teel, K. M. (1996). Overcoming student failure: Changing motives and incentives for learning. In B. L. McCombs & S. McNeely (Series Eds.), *Psychology in the classroom: A series on applied psychology.* Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Downing, T., & Harrison, T. C. Jr. (1990). Dropout prevention: A practical approach. *School Counsellor, 38,* 67-74.

Driemeier, K. (1994). Love, sweat and tears of mentoring. In R. C. Morris (Ed.), *Using what we know about at-risk youth: Lessons from the field.* Lancaster, PA: Technomic.

Dweck, C. S., & Leggett, E. L. (1989). A social-cognitive approach to motivation and personality, *Psychological Review 95,* 256-273.

Epstein, J. L. (1989). Family structures and student motivation: A developmental perspective. In C. Ames & R. Ames (Eds.), *Research on motivation in education* (vol. 3; pp. 259-295). New York: Academic Press.

Fitzpatrick, N. (1984). Secondary III Core Program is for underachieving average ability students. *NASSP Bulletin, 68*, 94-97.

Freeman, B., & Schopen, A. (1997). An analysis of troubled youth: An achievement motivation perspective. *Canadian Journal of Counselling, 31*, 35-52.

Griffin, R. S. (1988). *Underachievers in secondary school: Education off the mark.* Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Hutchinson, S. A. (1990). Education and grounded theory. In R. R. Sherman & R. B. Webb (Eds.), *Qualitative research in education: Focus and methods* (pp. 123-140). Philadelphia, PA: Falmer Press.

Kaplan, D., Peck, M., & Kaplan, H. B. (1994). Structural relations model of self-rejection, disposition to deviance, and academic failure. *Journal of Educational Research, 87*, 166-173.

Kvale, S. (1996). *InterViews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Lapadat, J. C. (1998). Implicit theories and stigmatizing labels. *Journal of College Reading and Learning, 29*, 73-81.

Lapadat, J. C. (2000). Evaluative discourse and achievement motivation: Students' perceptions and theories. *Language and Education, 14*, 37-61.

Lapadat, J. C., & Janzen, H. (1994). Collaborative research in northern communities: Possibilities and pitfalls. *BC Studies, 104*, 69-84.

Lehr, R., & Jeffery, G. (1996). Career support needs of youth: A qualitative analysis of the rural perspective. *Canadian Journal of Counselling, 40*, 240-253.

Lincoln, Y. S. & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Maehr, M. L., & Anderman, E. M. (1993). Reinventing schools for early adolescents: Emphasizing task goals. *The Elementary School Journal, 93*, 593-610.

Mandel, H. P., Marcus, S. I., & Dean, L. (1995). *Could do better: Why children underachieve and what to do about it.* Toronto: HarperCollins.

Martin, M., & Murphy, S. (1993). A Jesness Comparison of high risk jr. high students with high achievers, and with students attending a provincial training school. *Guidance and Counselling, 8* (5), 37-50.

Mayer, R. G., Mitchell, L. K., Clementi, T., Clement-Robertson, E., & Myatt, R. (1993). A dropout prevention program for at-risk high school students: Emphasizing consulting to promote positive classroom climates. *Education and Treatment of Children, 16*, 135-146.

Meichenbaum, D., & Biemiller, A. (1998). *Nurturing independent learners: Helping students take charge of their learning.* Cambridge, MA: Brookline Books.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, M. A. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Morse, J. M. (1994). Designing funded qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 220-235). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Neilson, J., & Ward, R. (1991). *START: Stay in school initiative Fraser Lake Elementary-Secondary School action plans.* Vanderhoof, BC: School District #56 (Nechako).

Noddings, N. (1992). *The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Ouellet, A., & Deshaies, G. (1997). L'expérience du décrochage scolaire à partir du point de vue de décrocheurs: Une étude d'orientation phénoménologique. *Canadian Journal of Counselling, 31*, 219-231.

Ponsford, K. R., & Lapadat, J. C. (1998). *Academically capable senior secondary students at risk for failure: Preliminary results from a qualitative study* (Working Paper Series, Paper No. 5). Prince George, BC, Canada: University of Northern British Columbia: Child Welfare Research Centre.

Raffini, J. P. (1993). *Winners without losers: Structures for increasing student motivation to learn.* Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Rimm, S. B. (1986). *Underachievement syndrome: Causes and cures.* Watertown, WI: Apple Publishing.

Sapp, M., & Farrell, W. (1994). Cognitive-behavioral interventions: Applications for academically at-risk students and special education students. *Preventing School Failure, 38*(2), 19-24.

Singh, K. (1998). Part-time employment in high school and its effect on academic achievement. *The Journal of Educational Research, 9*, 131-139.

Stipek, D. J. (1993). *Motivation to learn: From theory to practice (2nd ed.).* Needham Heights, MS: Allyn & Bacon.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1994). Grounded theory methodology: An overview. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 273-285). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Stringfield, S. C. (1994). Identifying and addressing organizational barriers to reform. In R. J. Rossi (Ed.), *Students and schools at risk: Context and framework for positive change* (pp. 277-295). New York: Teachers College Press.

Tanner, J., Krahn, H., & Hartnagel, T. F. (1995). *Fractured transitions from school to work: Revisiting the dropout problem.* Toronto, ON: Oxford University Press.

Tomlinson, T. M., & Cross, C. T. (1991). Student effort: The key to higher standards. *Educational Leadership, 49*(1), 69-73.

Urdan, T. C., & Martin, M. L. (1995). Beyond a two-goal theory of motivation and achievement: A case for social goals. *Review of Educational Research, 65*, 213-242.

Weiner, B. (1992). *Human motivation: Metaphors, theories and research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Wentzel, K. (1994). Relations of social goal pursuit to social acceptance, classroom behavior, and perceived social support. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 86*, 173-182.

Wentzel, K. (1997). Student motivation in middle school: The role of perceived pedagogical caring. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 89*, 411-419.

Westbury, M. (1994). The effect of elementary grade retention on subsequent school achievement and ability. *Canadian Journal of Education, 19*, 241-249.

Yard, G. J. & Vatterott, C. (1995). The dissimilar learner: A behavioral model that respects diversity. *Teacher Education and Practice, 11*(1), 43-49.

About the Authors

Kenneth R. Ponsford is a school counsellor and teacher in School District No. 91 (Nechako Lakes) in northern British Columbia. His interests include achievement motivation, rural schools, and program accreditation.

Judith C. Lapadat is Associate Professor of Education at the University of Northern British Columbia. Her research and teaching interests include achievement motivation, disability, language and literacy, technology in education, and qualitative research methods.

Address correspondence address to Judith C. Lapadat, Education Program, College of Arts, Social & Health Sciences, University of Northern British Columbia, 3333 University Way, Prince George, BC, V2N 4Z9. Phone: (250)960-6667; FAX: (250)960-5536; e-mail: lapadat@unbc.ca