
2-16-2018

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Recommended APA Citation

Morrissette, P. (2018). Pursuing a Dream: The Lived Experiences of Early Leavers and Their Return to Alternative High School. *The Qualitative Report*, 23(2), 422-438. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol23/iss2/10>

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Abstract

This article describes a phenomenological study that explored the experiences of early leavers who chose to return to high school in order to pursue their diploma. Eighteen students, including males and females, participated in individual tape recorded interviews, during which they described their experiences, yielding written protocols that were thematically analyzed. Results from this study revealed seven prominent themes that included the following (a) facing reality, (b) launching process, (c) determination, (d) overcoming barriers, (e) supportive influences, (f) proving self, and (g) learning context. Findings and implications for educators and future research are included.

Keywords

Alternative, Education, Diploma, Qualitative, Research, Phenomenology

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Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge Mr. Jim Ferguson, Susan Gilleshammer and Dr. Donna Michaels, former CEO and Superintendent of Schools, Brandon School Division for their interest and support of this research. I am especially grateful to the participants for their invaluable contribution.

Pursuing a Dream: The Lived Experiences of Early Leavers and Their Return to Alternative High School

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This article describes a phenomenological study that explored the experiences of early leavers who chose to return to high school in order to pursue their diploma. Eighteen students, including males and females, participated in individual tape recorded interviews, during which they described their experiences, yielding written protocols that were thematically analyzed. Results from this study revealed seven prominent themes that included the following (a) facing reality, (b) launching process, (c) determination, (d) overcoming barriers, (e) supportive influences, (f) proving self, and (g) learning context. Findings and implications for educators and future research are included. Keywords: Alternative, Education, Diploma, Qualitative, Research, Phenomenology

The importance of completing high school cannot be overestimated. It is well documented that failing to do so can have far reaching consequences for the individual and society in general (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009; Montmarquette, Viennot-Briot, & Dagenais, 2007; Polidano, Tabasso, & Tseng, 2015). Levin, Belfield, Muenning, and Rouse (2006) underscored the implications associated with education and asserted, “An individual’s educational attainment is one of the most important determinants of their life chances in terms of employment, income, health status, housing and many other amenities” (p. 2). As noted by the Canadian Council on Learning (2009), although most people understand the fundamental importance of completing high school, less may appreciate the intangible and tangible costs associated with leaving school early. Cited costs highlighted by the Canadian Council on Learning include diminished personal growth, a reduced sense of control over one’s life and life circumstances, and decreased personal satisfaction.

According to Ferguson, Tilleczek, Boydell, and Rummens (2006) a universally accepted definition of early school leaver or dropout does not exist. Consequently, these authors define early school leavers as, “students who leave school (not including transfers) before they graduate with a regular diploma” (p. 3). They also point out that students can leave school before entering the ninth grade however, most withdraw during high school.

To provide some context regarding this topic, the Province of Manitoba (Manitoba Education and Training, n.d.), reports that the provincial high school graduation rate for 2016 was 78.3%. However, a distinction between non-Indigenous and Indigenous populations can be drawn. More specifically, the graduation rate for non-Indigenous students was 86.2% and 47.6% for Indigenous students.

Ferguson, Tilleczek, Boydell, and Rummens (2006) investigated early school leavers. In doing so, they identified a myriad of factors that contribute to young people leaving school prior to graduation. These authors note that early school leaving is the consequence of a long process of disengagement and alienation, and they provided a detailed conceptual framework that considers macrosystem (e.g., societal and cultural influences), microsystem (e.g., neighborhood, family and peer/school factors), and mesosystem (e.g., relationship between school and home) factors. They also underscore that the risk factors associated with early leaving are multilevel, systemic, and cannot be isolated to one single issue.

Although substantial attention has been directed toward the personal and societal consequences associated with leaving high school prematurely, minimal attention has been devoted to the learners who return to school (Berliner & Barrat, 2009; Terry, 2008). Regarding the latter, Barrat, Berliner, and Fong (2012) elaborated, “The customary perception is that students who drop out vanish from school enrollment rosters for good. This is an incomplete picture of the complex dropout story; dropping out is not necessarily a permanent high school outcome” (p. 217). Despite less favorable academic experiences, personal challenges, and obstacles, there are early leavers who decide to return to school in pursuit of their high school diploma.

Although a comprehensive literature search revealed that information regarding the lived experiences of early leavers is unavailable, alternative education has a long history and can be traced back to three European philosopher/educators: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, and Friedrich Froebel (Miller, 1995). Miller (1995) cites Rousseau’s 1762 influential book on alternative education, Pestalozzi’s work in the early 1800’s as well as the early work of Maria Montessori in the early 1900s. According to Miller (1995), alternative education evolved into a widespread social movement during the 1960’s. Essentially, alternative education was developed to resist the impulse to standardize and mechanize learning (Miller, 2005) and to provide an educational setting conducive to non-traditional education and learning. In comparison to traditional education that teaches to the mass, alternative education affords students an opportunity to learn within their own style and at their own pace. At its roots, the alternative school strives to meet the needs of individuals who have not been optimally served by traditional education and represent varying degrees of departure from standard school organization (Raywid, 1994).

This paper discusses a phenomenological study that explored the experiences of early leavers who entered an alternative high school in order to pursue their diploma. The purpose of this study was threefold: (1) to afford participants an opportunity to share their experiences regarding their return to school, (2) to provide preliminary information and insight regarding early leavers, and (3) to prompt interest and future research regarding early leavers.

Researcher

The author is a systemic therapist, qualitative researcher, and professor. During his career, he has interacted with young people who have left school prematurely only to find themselves struggling to achieve their personal goals without a high school diploma. When turning to the literature, however, it was discovered that the lived experiences of young people who leave school early and eventually return to pursue their high school diploma remained unexplored. Thus, in an effort to (1) better understand the experiences of these young people and (2) contribute to the literature, the present study was initiated.

Method

Research Orientation

A phenomenological research orientation (Cerbone, 2006) was selected for this study. This qualitative orientation was chosen in order to provide participants an opportunity to share and expound on their experiences. It was assumed that a conversation-based method of inquiry would encourage dialogue, invite a deeper description of experiences, and elicit valuable information. The benefits (e.g., self-acknowledgement, sense of purpose, self-awareness) associated with sharing personal experiences was also recognized (Hutchinson, Wilson, & Wilson, 1994).

Phenomenology is primarily associated with the foundational writings of the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1970, 1973). Phenomenological research searches for a deeper understanding and insightful descriptions of experiences that can be shared by participants.

Phenomenologists do not seek universal laws that propel behavior but rather, work toward describing subjective experiences that mediate behavior. Thus, by gaining insight into individual experiences, they can begin to appreciate both the commonality and the uniqueness of human behavior. Experiences themselves are made up of both the actual occurrence and the meaning associated with these occurrences. Finally, phenomenological orientation does not offer a theory with which to explain the experiences of research participants rather, it provides a way of arriving at insights into their world.

Participants

Criteria for participant selection included individuals who (a) were currently enrolled in the alternative high school program, (b) were over 18 years of age, (c) were willing to share their experiences, and (d) were willing to illuminate the phenomenon of interest. The recruitment of participants originated with a letter of intent from the author and verbal invitation from a program teacher. Learners were informed about the purpose of the study, were invited to participate, and provided consent. It was explained that the purpose of the study was to gain an understanding of the experiences of learners who had returned to school in order to pursue their diploma.

An ethics approval process was followed in order to protect participants' safety, privacy, and confidentiality. Permission to conduct this research was granted by the Brandon School Division and Brandon University.

Procedure

To accommodate their schedules, participants were informed that the interviews would be conducted at their preferred time. Space was allocated for interviews at the alternative high school and permission was obtained from the participants to audio-tape the interviews via an informed consent form. Eighteen learners participated in the study which consisted of males and females. Of the 18 participants, eight were male and 10 were female. Narrative collection occurred over a three-month period. The ages of participants ranged from 18 to 21 years.

This study began with an indeterminate number of participants and interviews continued until redundancy among the narratives was heard. It should be noted that although additional participants could have been recruited, it appeared unlikely that new information would be revealed based on the striking commonalities among participant narratives. When new descriptions regarding the phenomenon no longer emerged, it was determined that a saturation point had been reached and consequently, the collection phase of this study ended.

Interview

The interview format was based on a three-phase model proposed by Osborne (1990) and included (1) the establishment of rapport, (2) sharing of narratives, and (3) appropriate closure. During the engagement process with the participants, roles were clarified and issues of confidentiality and anonymity were reviewed. To encourage participant involvement, the actual interviews were open-ended, minimally structured, and without time limitations. The research interviews and subsequent analysis was conducted by the author.

Each individual interview was approximately one hour in duration, and each interview was conducted by the author in person. All interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed

verbatim. To enhance research credibility, the participants were asked to clarify and confirm experiences during the course of the interview. The research question that guided this study was the following: *“Could you please describe for me as completely as possible your decision to return to school in order to obtain your high school diploma?”* Participant names have been altered to ensure confidentiality.

Following this request, the participants were invited to reflect and elaborate on their experiences for further articulation. To enhance research credibility, the participants were asked to clarify and confirm experiences during the course of the interview. When the participants appeared to become detached from the topic, they were gently re-directed with such comments as: *“Can you share more about what that was like for you?”* When the participant’s experiences had been fully articulated, the following question was asked: *“Is there anything else that you would like to add that has not yet been addressed?”*

Stages of Analysis

To synthesize the participant’s experiences into a logical and coherent whole, a narrative analysis was based on guidelines set forth by Morrisette (1999). First, immediately following each interview, the audiotape was carefully listened to and reviewed in an attempt to gain an awareness of the experiences described by the participants. Second, each interview was transcribed into a written protocol and was then read in its entirety several times. Third, the significant statements, paraphrased meanings, and thematic descriptors were placed in a tabular form and were referred to as the first order thematic abstraction of each participant experience. This step was essential in order to capture the unique experiences of the participants and to compare experiential similarities and differences among the participants. Fourth, a second order thematic cluster was developed that involved clustering identified participant themes. Once established, this information was placed in tabular form and a general description for each cluster was provided. These descriptions reflect the essence of the experience within the prepared themes of each participant. These thematic clusters formed the basis for synthesizing the participants’ experiences. Fifth, a within-person analysis was developed. This analysis involved summarizing each participant’s overall experience. While completing this process, various themes surfaced and brought the researcher back to the original text and to the overall story that was described. Sixth, the various themes that emerged from each interview were reflected upon. This process provided another way of understanding the essential structure of each participant’s experience while discerning the uniqueness of her or her experience. The resulting overview provided an opportunity to compare experiences in a descriptive format.

Finally, the clustered themes for all participants were presented in a grid format. The purpose of this format was to provide a quick visual reference regarding specific themes within each participant’s experience. This process was helpful when comparing experiences among participants and in formulating a global picture of their experience.

Trustworthiness of the Study

The fact that researchers frequently select topics that are personally meaningful is well documented in the qualitative research literature (Berg, 1995). Consequently, working toward achieving trustworthiness is essential to qualitative research. Nutt and Morrow (2009) underscored the importance of trustworthiness and contended:

You may have just completed the most clearly articulated, reasoned, and balanced qualitative study in the history of psychotherapy research; however, if

you cannot clearly communicate what you have found and why it matters, we suggest that your study is not considered trustworthy. (p. 580)

Presuppositions and biases toward the phenomenon had to be identified and bracketed prior to the commencement of the research. Fischer (2009) elaborated on the concept of bracketing:

Bracketing typically refers to an investigator's identification of vested interests personal experience, cultural factors, and assumptions, and hunches that could influence how he or she views the study's data. For the sake of viewing data freshly these involvements are placed in brackets and shelved for the time being as much as possible. (p. 583)

The purpose of bracketing was not to achieve a state of absolute disinterest or objectivity, but rather to realize how personal interests in the topic could influence the research activity (Colaizzi, 1978). In short, beliefs about the phenomenon under study were stated and temporarily set aside so as not to obstruct a view of the narratives (Kvale, 1996).

The dependability/auditability of this study was based on a decision trail (Koch, 1994) that involved coherent presentation, including (a) described interest in the study, (b) purpose of the study, (c) participant selection, (d) narrative collection and its time line, (e) the context of the interviews, and (f) narrative analysis. To enhance credibility (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), participants were consulted during the collection phase of the study. This process enhanced accuracy by providing participants with opportunities to add or clarify information.

Results

Theme I: Facing Reality

While out of school, participants reflected on their decision to leave school early and weighed their options against the backdrop of a bleak reality and precarious future. In short order, they began to understand the implications of their decision and the limitations confronting them without a high school diploma. Betty recalled how she would sit alone and question her self-worth after leaving school early. Jen elaborated:

It felt boring because like you do nothing all morning. In the evening you're still wondering what to do. Eventually after like a year of doing nothing it just felt like – you feel kind of bad for yourself and you feel like you're not doing any productive things in your life.

Tim reiterated:

It was good for the first week. It was like "Let's party kind of thing" and after that it was a bummer. I started to miss it. I started to have regrets – guilt. After leaving school I had no sense of purpose. I just lost that spark in me.

Bill addressed his lack of foresight, how unanticipated change became disconcerting, and expanded on his cognitive transition while out of school:

I thought, "I do not want to live a normal life, I don't want to pay taxes and work some job." I thought, "Man that was not for me." But I got to the point where I wanted to live a normal life. I needed to get back into school or I wasn't

going to go anywhere. You take everything for granted. You take going to high school for granted. I wasted time doing nothing.”

It appeared that in their quest to return to school, participants learned that the process was far from straightforward and there were steps involved in the process. Bob discovered that negotiating a return to school required patience and persistence and said, “Education is the most important key. It is also so much harder to get back into school than it is dropping out.”

Several participants referred to increased standards within the workforce. For example, they were surprised to learn that some businesses within the fast food industry would only entertain applicants who possessed a high school diploma. They noted the incongruence between what they perceived to be work-related duties that required limited skills and actual employer expectations. While out of school, and searching for employment, several participants discovered the necessity of a high school diploma. Lynn recounted:

A couple of jobs I went and tried to apply for that I was really interested in—I had the qualifications for it and everything—I just needed my grade 12. It was required. I had to have my diploma when I applied.

The element of competition for entry level jobs within the workforce and the significance of a high school diploma was a revelation for some participants. Bob remarked:

I feared that if I didn’t finish high school I was just going to keep this dish washing job for the rest of my life. Yea there are jobs but if you want a career that you want to do in your life you need an education. You need it.

Participants referred to the lack of future potential in what they considered to be *dead end* jobs that held little opportunity or personal reward. Interestingly, with experience, participants eventually drew a distinction between a *job* and a *career*.

Theme II: Launching Process

While gradually experiencing academic success, participants eventually began to look beyond their initial goal of obtaining a high school diploma and envisioned the vast opportunities that awaited them and the future contributions that they could make. Several participants perceived completion of high school as a stepping stone toward a better future and were grateful for the opportunity. Lucy expressed delight when reflecting on the fact that she was moving forward in life and remarked:

Honestly, coming back—it’s made me extremely happy. Just like coming here every day and knowing that I am a step forward to almost being done to almost having a new adventure in my life, to having a future. It makes me happy to come here.

Upon completion of their academic studies, some participants intended to follow in the footsteps of family members (e.g., becoming a teacher or tradesperson) while others wished to pursue an entirely different path. Sue, for example, noted:

I didn’t want to be like the rest of my family and take a minimum wage job for the rest of my life and knowing that I could be doing something and enjoying my life. I always dreamed of becoming a doctor for the longest time ever. If I

enjoy this process, I will go to university and pursue my dream of becoming a doctor.

Lynn referred to the process of individuation from her family-of-origin and added:

It will be like an accomplishment. Like something that I would feel really proud of doing. Like not being the same as my family. But you know, kind of drifting away and like doing better for myself. I feel like getting grade 12 would help me get farther in life.

During the interview process, participants realized that as they were sharing their experience their primary goal of returning to school was becoming a fading memory and their thoughts were now directed toward future ambitions. A common observation made by several participants pertained to the fact that despite their previous challenges and obstacles, future goals were now possible. Lana said:

I don't know. It feels different. It feels good. I didn't picture myself to be (age concealed) and not graduated yet, but I'm not too far behind. Like I still have enough time to get everything I need in order and done and get on track.

An unexpected benefit of achieving a high school diploma was the ability to explore unknown territory. For Tim, just the idea of being able to apply to post-secondary schools was rewarding. He elaborated:

It would be nice to be even able to apply to other schools after this. Even that would feel good. Even if I don't get in any of them. Just to say that I applied and tried. Doesn't mean I can't try again. Just to say those doors are open now.

Although envisioning and discussing potential opportunities was exciting for some participants, a number of participants expressed anxiety and felt somewhat overwhelmed with future choices and the impending decision-making process upon which they would have to eventually embark. For example, Lana commented

After I get my diploma I have to decide what path to go down. There's so much out there. I just don't know where to go because I have all these interests.

Her experience was similar to Steven who noted,

There's too many doors, so which one do I take?

In general, participants found themselves having to focus on their current studies while simultaneously considering their future options. Remaining focused on immediate tasks while entertaining potential opportunities was anxiety provoking. While some participants expressed anticipatory excitement, others were tentative about their future direction.

Theme III: Determination

Having the courage to return to high school is one thing, remaining in school despite daily life challenges is quite another. Unsurprisingly, due to a variety of factors, the attendance of some participants was intermittent. Nevertheless, the ability of participants to persist and

complete their studies speaks their intrinsic motivation. The latter proved particularly relevant for participants with parental obligations, employment responsibilities, or unstable living accommodations. Participants who shouldered added responsibility or had to manage unfavorable personal circumstances in addition to academic demands described their ability to organize and multi-task. These participants exuded praiseworthy resiliency, determination, and focus. Participants also described finishing what they have started. Al asserted:

Because I felt that I needed to get something accomplished that I started—I didn't get to finish it—so I felt that I had to come back to school to finish it so that I could go ahead in my career. I have a very bright future—a deadline actually that I am hoping to meet really soon.

Participants also wrestled with internal (cognitive processes) and external (added responsibilities) challenges concurrently. Throughout this process, participants remained positive. Deb commented:

It was kind of hard I guess. I just kept doing it and doing it. And I am almost there, and I am so happy. I am finishing courses. I am accomplishing something. I don't know, just follow my goal. I will finish it—I will. I just kept telling myself, "I will." It's all about what you're thinking, it is what you're telling yourself."

Betty spoke to the need to continually challenge oneself while forging ahead during his or her academic studies:

If you could alter your thinking. It's you that needs to step up your game and be able to push yourself forward into alternating your mindset. It's all in your mindset. It's all in how you perceive what your goal is in life. Who tells you that you can't do anything? Who says that?

The influence of unfavorable past life experiences served as a reminder and motivating factor for several participants. Others described the influence of future goals. Tim also reflected on his past and projected into the future and said:

I want to better my future. My future wasn't looking too bright before I decided to come back to school. So, this is a whole new opportunity for me to, I guess, get a better job and more education afterwards.

Having the ability to secure gainful employment in order to assist their families in the future also provided motivation. Lynn remarked,

I always tell myself that when I get older and get a good paying job that I am going to help my mom out and help my sister out, so they don't have to worry about anything.

To some, rituals (e.g., ceremony, pictures, and dance) inherent in the graduation process may seem trivial. However, several participants expounded on the symbolic importance of these events. Tim stated:

A big motivator for me was seeing my friends and cousins in grad pictures and not being with them in any of them. That hurt. You know, that was something I

thought about doing growing up. I wanted to be in graduation pictures, go to the grad dance and do that kind of thing.

Although not specifically addressed by participants, it appeared that the graduation ceremony would afford them the opportunity to finally celebrate a significant accomplishment and milestone. Not doing so may have left them with a sense of unfinished business.

Theme IV: Overcoming Barriers

Unsurprisingly, participants had to conquer various obstacles in order to return to school and remain focused on their academic quest. A transient lifestyle, limited financial resources, and personal issues were prevalent among participants. Lynn discussed a sense of disorientation and the slippery slope upon which she found herself and stated:

There was a point in my life where I felt that I was lost, and I didn't belong. It was outside issues that were affecting the way I was attending school. I dropped out not knowing what I was going to do for a job and funds were low. Things were going downhill from there.

The peer group in which participants were involved figured prominently in their decision to leave school early and eventually return. Bob elaborated,

Your peers, who you hang around with—it's an influence. I learned it the hard way, everyone who you hang out with is skipping class, and you do what they're doing.

While acknowledging the influence of peers, Lucy assumed ultimate responsibility for her academic performance and the role it played in their decision to leave school early. She addressed her overall well-being and remarked:

I ran into the wrong crowd. And I wasn't really caring about school work, I wasn't really caring about my family at the time. And I was only thinking about myself. At the time I thought it was a way out of the problems I was going through. But it kind of got to the point where I was doing it so much that I felt myself getting sicker. I just kind of came to a point where I didn't want to put myself through that because I knew I had a better mind set rather than going down the wrong path.

Jen addressed intrapersonal factors when saying,

Probably some friends and peer pressure. Having friends that wanted to skip school I guess. It wasn't about the work or anything or teachers. It was the way I felt—my self-esteem, my confidence.

While discussing their current challenges and circumstances, some participants reflected on behaviors that contributed to their eventual departure from school. In essence, the participants were discussing the gradual process of leaving school early. Lana said:

It started slow. I stopped going to classes. I would go fewer and fewer times, and I would wake up and say "Oh, I'm late. I'm not going today." Stuff like that. I got too used to staying at home that I stopped going in general.

The large number of students within the traditional classroom and/or school contributed to heightened participant anxiety and discomfort. Several participants discussed their uneasiness in large classrooms and school environments. Jen said:

And I got a lot of anxiety from just being like too over crowded with people. I would like have panic attacks before school and even at the breaks. I skipped a lot, and I felt really like weird to go back to school after so many weeks of being gone.

Participants associated a sense of relief with their upcoming graduation. They discussed the self-imposed and external pressure they experienced to fulfill their academic obligations and eventual goal. Realizing that they would no longer have to carry this burden was a welcome relief. Lana said it was like a weight being lifted from her shoulders.

Theme V: Supportive Influences

While discussing their academic journeys, participants described individuals who were part of their support system. Most participants pointed to family members, relatives, friends, mentors, and teachers. Although Lynn was expressing self-pride, she acknowledged the support she received along the way:

I'm pretty proud. I think I've come a long way. I wouldn't have done it by myself, but I'm glad with all of the support that I had and those who stuck with me until the end to help me become the person that I am today.

Not surprisingly, parental/family support played an instrumental role in participants' academic pursuit. Lana recalled her mother becoming tearful and saying,

Wow, I'm crying at work. It feels good. You have got to get this done. It will be so good for you.

Bob spoke about the supportive influence of his grandparents and noted,

My grandparents always told me to stay out of trouble, and get your education, and live your life the way you want to live it. A day doesn't go by when I don't hear their voices.

Siblings also played a significant role in influencing participants as revealed by Jen remarked,

My younger brother was more concerned. My younger brother was always telling me, "Just to go and graduate." Get it over and done with. So, I said, "OK, I may as well."

However, not all participants were able to identify significant others who supported their decision to complete high school. For example, Jen stated:

There were not a lot of people telling me to go to school. My parent never really pressured me to go to school. He was like, "well if you're going to stay home can you watch your sibling and I am going to go out to the store." And I said OK.

As illustrated above, the degree of parental/family support regarding a return to school differed among participants. Some participants shared how significant others rallied behind them, while others did not enjoy the same encouragement.

Theme VI: Proving Self

The need to prove something to oneself and his or her family motivated participants. Several participants emphasized the need to demonstrate that they could actually take the necessary steps to return to high school, fulfill their academic obligations, and eventually obtain their diploma. Bill commented on his transformation and self-pride:

I am proud that I can be an example of someone who changed. It's all about a mindset. Just put your mind to it. It's all self-discipline. Once you're an adult there's no one telling you what to do. You have to tell yourself what to do.

The process of proving oneself to his or her family was important to several participants. Tim commented:

I feel a need to prove it to my family and I can do this. And that I can get somewhere in life other than where I was before. That I can be just like them. I could be in the workforce. I could be a productive member of society.

Obtaining their diploma was also way of thanking people who encouraged participants and demonstrated unwavering supported throughout their academic journey. Lana commented:

It feels good. I feel like I'm not only going to make myself proud, but I feel like I'm going to make my mom proud. And family that's been very supportive. They have been trying to get me to go back for a long time, but I never listened. But now I can finally be like, "I'm done."

The need to accomplish their academic goal in order to prove others wrong also served as a motivating factor. Lucy noted:

When I was living with my sister she would say, "Oh, you're not going to graduate this year." So, I was very motivated to come to school. I am working full time right now plus going to school right now. To be able to get more hours I need to finish school. I want to be proud of myself that I got myself there.

Being the first to obtain a high school diploma within one's family was a milestone and very meaningful for some participants. It also allowed them to serve as role models. Lynn commented,

I'll be the only one in my whole family. My mom and dad never graduated high school and my sister dropped out. So, I'd be the first one in my family to actually get their high school diploma. So, I was really looking forward to that.

Lana considered the influence she could have on her sibling when stating:

For me, it's good to get my diploma because my 12-year-old brother has been talking about quitting school and then he brings up me and how I stopped, and I don't want to be that role model. And so just doing this just shows that I can do it and make him do it too.

The ability to prove others wrong also provided motivation. For example, Betty described the paradoxical effect that the criticism of others had on her and remarked:

When people tell me that I can't do something or that I can't amount to anything that makes me angry. My motivation is my anger. I think about myself and I think, "Wow, I'm doing this!" It's hard because there is always the temptation of not doing this.

As described by the aforementioned participants, the drive to prove oneself was fueled by both intrinsic motivation and external forces. The desire to prove oneself to family members appeared particularly important.

Theme VII: Learning Context

A young person's decision to return to high school, and more importantly his or her completion of graduation requirements, hinges on several factors; perhaps, the most prominent being his or her comfort level with school personnel and with a new learning environment. Throughout the interviews, participants recalled previous situations where they felt uncomfortable or marginalized within the traditional classroom and/or school environment. Their reflections were not intended to criticize former educators but rather, to express their general sense of emotional unease or discomfort within the traditional school setting.

Overwhelmingly, participants referred to the alternative high school as *a second home* and a place of safety and acceptance. The latter appeared particularly important for participants who felt marginalized within the traditional school setting. Sue shared:

I actually like going to school. And I like going to school even more now because it is like a second home. Coming here makes me feel better. Most students who do not want to go to school and who leave school—I think they will come to this school because it is more understanding. You can discover who you really are.

In addition to the welcoming environment, the maturation and personal development of participants was influential and allowed them to appreciate their learning environment. Nina, for example, referred to her new-found energy and perspective when stating:

But maybe because I dropped out I now have this love for school that was never there—I thirst for it now. I would say I love school now. It makes me feel kind of weird, I like to learn.

Lynn mentioned finding peace within herself and noted:

And then I woke up one day, and I just felt like I didn't need to be angry at the world anymore. And all these ideas came shooting forward at me. I felt like I

needed to be more accomplished at something—better than I was before. I found my peace, it felt like it was what I needed to do.

The need to feel respected and safe within a learning environment was highlighted by several participants. Tim and Jen, respectively, underscored this element of the learning environment. Tim said:

I want to better my life. I don't want to end up in the situation I was in before. So, coming here is nothing but beneficial for my life. It's a safe place. Everybody here is awesome—100% best people I have ever met in my life. I feel equal.

Jen noted:

The road has been hard you know, that's why this place is a safe place to come to. It is very different here. It is very flexible. I like the work. The feeling of the school is really calm.

The aforementioned commentary regarding the alternative high school speaks volumes about the educators and support staff who devote themselves to these young people while establishing a welcoming environment. Al, for example, commented on the positive ambiance that engulfed the learning environment when saying:

There's an open door. There's always a "yes" answer now. Yes, I can do this, Yes, I am going to push myself, Yes, I can work toward that, you know. It's the energy, it feels nice—I like it. Being here, I feel like I am at home. Feels like a family here.

Like several other participants, Lynn and Matt commented specifically on the influence of teachers and their ability to co-create a supportive and comfortable learning environment. Lynn said,

The teachers. They actually had quite a bit of an effect on me. _____ helps me by saying that I can graduate. So willing to help.

Matt remarked,

I feel really comfortable here, and, like, I am not afraid to ask for help.

Sue summarized the overall experiences of the participants nicely when saying,

I feel like you don't really have an excuse not to go to school when you're coming here. Which is pretty great.

As expressed in the above narratives, participants appreciated the genuine care and interest demonstrated by the teachers and support staff. Feeling welcomed and having the opportunity to interact and learn in a safe and respectful environment contributed to their sense of belonging.

Discussion

As discovered in this study, a number of factors influenced participants' eventual return to school including real life experiences and maturation. Polidano, Tabasso, and Tseng (2015) noted, "time out from school gives early school leavers life and labor market experiences to better appreciate the benefits of further education" (p. 359). Being away from school afforded participants the opportunity to explore and consider their new reality. As shared by some participants, a vast difference existed between what they anticipated and their actual lived experiences. For these participants, realities of a dead-end job were sobering, career opportunities were bleak, and a directionless life was discouraging. Following a period of introspection and soul-searching, participants decided to alter their life course through education. It appears that this process was, in part, influenced once participants began to recognize the intangible and tangible costs associated with leaving school early (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009).

The determination of participants to work toward their goal, despite unexpected challenges and setbacks, was obvious. In short, the participants alluded to hard work and perseverance. When returning to school, participants remained goal-directed, motivated, self-controlled, and positive toward their circumstances and future. Although surprised, participants welcomed this newly discovered internal impetus. For some, a new energy was unleashed as they reclaimed personal power and regained control over their lives.

The need to prove something to themselves and significant others was underscored by participants. This appeared especially true for participants who were demeaned as youngsters, perceived themselves as outcasts, and lacked familial support during their formative years. With each incremental accomplishment, a sense of pride grew within the participants, and they began to appreciate the systemic effect of their success on others. They recognized and appreciated the support they had received from others and realized how others shared their success. In essence, participants began to look beyond themselves and began to appreciate the greater context of which they were a part.

In addition to their sense of pride, and rather than simply yearn for a brighter future, participants began to actually articulate and formulate plans toward future goals. They also appeared to benefit vicariously when listening to others share their dreams, plans, and small successes. Interacting with teachers, staff, and peers, for example, who discussed potential academic and employment opportunities proved very meaningful. The latter seemed to motivate participants while igniting their imaginations.

The importance of a caring learning environment cannot be overstated. The environment goes beyond the curriculum and teaching methods. Rather, it involves the creation of a safe and comfortable context wherein learners feel welcomed and respected. Feeling welcomed can create a sense of belonging—something that the many participants did not experience in their former schools. Cassidy and Bates (2005) discussed the ethic of care within the educational environment and wrote, "An education with caring at the core gives students the capacity to become caring persons themselves, making education more than merely an academic pursuit" (p. 68). The latter speaks to the quality of relationships between learners and program staff and teachers. According to the participants, the staff and teachers were instrumental in co-creating a nurturing environment that felt like home. Due to its design, the alternative high school accommodated the unique needs of learners. Deschenes, Cuban, and Tyack (2001) remarked that rather than trying to fit a student to a school perhaps, a more promising strategy would be to change the school to match the student. The latter perspective would certainly require vision, commitment, and skill.

Finally, when considering this study, it appears that the reflective process inherent in the interviews was valuable to the participants. More specifically, the interview process

afforded participants the opportunity to reflect on their resiliency, determination, and accomplishments. Frequently, participants would pause when considering the obstacles that they had surmounted in order to return to school and their diligence regarding their studies. Although a fading memory, they recalled their challenges and struggles. Hutchinson, Wilson, and Wilson (1994) described potential ways in which participants could benefit from the interview process and suggested that interviews can provide a voice for the disenfranchised and essentially give voice to the voiceless. These authors further stated that sharing one's story and feeling heard can empower participants and stimulate movement and change. As the participants recalled the sobering reality of life without a high school diploma, they shared their sense of pride, vision toward prospective goals, and optimism for a brighter future.

There remains much to learn about young people who leave school prematurely and eventually return to achieve their diploma at a later date. Additional research could provide important information while bolstering existing data (e.g., Ferguson, Tilliczek, Boydell, & Rummens, 2006). Without additional information regarding the lived experiences of these young people, an incomplete picture persists (Barrat, Berliner, & Fong, 2012). Important questions pertaining to early leavers include: "What are their reasons for returning to high school?" "Why are they returning to school now?" "What internal and external factors motivate early leavers to return to high school?" "How do early leavers remain determined to complete their academic obligations despite mounting obligations and responsibilities?" "What internal and external obstacles do early leavers encounter while completing their academic requirements?" "What specific supports do learners require while pursuing their high school diploma?" Ideally, this study will prompt future research. For example, differences in location, gender, age, and culture may be explored. Ultimately, information garnered from such studies can be helpful to professionals, researchers, and other stakeholders who are invested in better understanding the experiences of early leavers.

Limitations of this Study

In becoming deeply engaged in the phenomenon and experiences of the participants, researchers can be inadvertently influenced by personal subjectivity. Despite the steps that were taken to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study, the subjective nature of this research needs to be acknowledged.

Criticism could be directed toward the sample size of participants. It should be reiterated, however, that the sample size was not predetermined, but rather rested on the response of the participants and on the recurrence of themes. In fact, smaller sample sizes may afford researchers the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of participant experiences (Sandelowski, 1995). Rowan et al. (2014) contended that, "It is of note that studies with low N's might be useful as they are tailored to a very specific people at a very specific time and place" (p. 22). Although common themes emerged among the participants, no claim to universal generalizability can be made. Conducting similar studies in different locations might provide additional information about the experiences of early leavers who return to obtain their high school diploma.

Despite the personal and societal consequences associated with premature school withdrawal, attention devoted to this topic in the literature remains sparse. In an effort to reverse this trend, this study explored the experiences of early leavers who chose to return to an alternative high school in order to pursue their diploma. During the study, participants shared insight regarding their reasons for leaving school early, the challenges they encountered without a high school diploma, and their motivations for returning to school. Although preliminary, the information gathered in this study may provide useful insight to educators and may spawn future research regarding the personal and educational needs of early leavers.

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I wish to acknowledge Mr. Jim Ferguson, Ms. Susan Gilleshammer and Dr. Donna Michaels, former CEO and Superintendent of Schools, Brandon School Division for their interest and support of this research. I am especially grateful to the participants for their invaluable contribution.

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Article Citation

Morrisette, P. J. (2018). Pursuing a dream: The lived experiences of early leavers and their return to alternative high school. *The Qualitative Report*, 23(2), 422-438. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol23/iss2/10>
