Secondary level re-entry of young Canadian adult learners

Cassandra MacGregor
Sudbury Adult Learning Centre, Ontario, Canada

Thomas G. Ryan
Nipissing University, North Bay, Ontario, Canada

This paper illuminates and details some of the traits, pressures and semi-autonomy of the young adult between the ages of 18 and 24 who must confront the barriers and challenges upon returning to secondary school within the high school and the adult education centre context. Focusing on these young adults is fundamentally important to begin to understand and appreciate the many variables such as gender, early school-leaving, re-entry and needs that impact students who are re-entering secondary school. We present the negative experiences that many of our young adult students have had in a manner that is summative yet touches on the underlying socio-economic challenges that have forced their hand and placed them not only at risk but caused them to leave the secondary school program before program completion. A number of personal insights and qualitative collective observations present an accurate picture of the situation in one central Ontario (Canada) site.

Introduction

This paper illuminates and details the barriers faced by young adult learners who return to secondary school (high school). Focusing on adults between the ages of 18 and 24 is fundamentally important to this discussion in order to understand the many challenges of secondary school reentry. Early school leavers are repeatedly labelled 'dropouts', however the term needs further attention. In the past, the term 'dropout' was applied to:

> … any student, previously enrolled in a school, who is no longer actively enrolled as indicated by fifteen days of consecutive unexcused absence, who has not satisfied local standards for graduation, and for whom no formal request has been received signifying enrollment in another licensed educational institution. (Chuang 1994: 1073)

This understanding is used henceforth within this critical area which is omnipresent for us as authors, as we are both also educators. One author was a secondary educator who currently teaches adults at the post-secondary level and the other is currently a vice (assistant) principal with responsibilities for an adult education centre. The adult education centre has been experiencing declining enrolment in recent years in spite of the increasing facilities for drop-outs within the jurisdiction of central Ontario (Canada). This writing effort developed from discussions with current adult students at the centre in order to understand how to support this group of learners in pursuit of personal goals that often results in the awarding of an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD).

Many adult students have overcome obstacles in their lives and believe it takes a lot of courage to come back to school. Nonetheless, surprisingly, little research has been directed towards finding factors that influence the decision of a dropout, aged 18 to 24, to re-enrol, as well as strategies and programs that need to be in place to support these learners (Bradley & Goldman 1996a, Chuang 1994, Skaalvik &

Skaalvik 2005). We believe that this age group is often overlooked by various researchers and community stakeholders.

Within Ontario there are many programs to keep students aged 16 to 18 in school, for instance, the Learning to 18 initiative developed by the Ontario Ministry of Education, but there are many students who do not achieve an OSSD by age 18. These students often leave high school in need of only a few credits to complete secondary school and graduate. We believe it is vital that educators acknowledge this problem and step forward to help students achieve an OSSD so that they have more options when considering future education or career paths.

The young adult: pressures

Often employers want their employees to have an OSSD; however, young adults are confronted with many pressures. For example, Chuang (1994: 1071) explains that 'dropouts are disproportionately from low socio-economic status and racial or ethnic minority groups, and their grades are poorer than those of their peers' when they are in middle school and high school. The need to step out of the academic life and into the world of work is considerable, we believe. Similarly, Raymond (2008: 7) found that dropouts are more likely to come from low-income, single-parent households or from a family where the parent(s) do not have a post-secondary diploma or degree. The Ontario Ministry of Education (2005: 1) has characterised the situation as follows:

> Adult learners live complex lives. Their re-entry into the learning environment, in many instances, requires a profound leap of courage, and yet their learning success is integral to the health of our communities and our economy ... They are young adults who want to contribute but need to find a way back into the education system before they can enter the workforce. Often, they are students at risk of leaving school, even 16- and 17-year olds, who can benefit from strategies used in adult programs.

The broad strokes of this characterisation to some extent ignore the individual nuances of each learner and their unique needs; however, in order to serve more than one person at a time, a broad portrait made up of a small number of traits needs to be put forward herein as is often the case within government frameworks.

The young adult: traits and outcomes

One characteristic trait of this age group is that they enjoy the freedom of adult life but avoid typical adult responsibilities, such as parenting and marriage. This period of emerging adulthood is a period of semi-autonomy where many draw on parental resources, while trying to find their place in the world (Marcotte 2008). Eckstein and Wolpin (1999: 1335) concluded that 'youths who drop out of high school have different traits than those who graduate'. In addition we have found that specifically they have lower school ability, motivation and lower expectations about the rewards they will receive from obtaining a high school diploma; they place a higher value on leisure and have a lower attendance rate while still in school. We have realised that attendance issues can contribute to a student leaving a high school setting because students who have reduced attendance also demonstrate diminished achievement on assessment and evaluation events and therefore depart without completing the OSSD requirements.

There is a need to find out what motivates young adult students and to understand why they discontinue studies. What is the reason or reasons for remaining a student versus the reasons for departing the secondary school environment? We know that students in a high school setting do not spend as much time with individual teachers as they do in Ontario elementary schools and, as a result, teachers may not be aware of some of the struggles and issues they face out of school (Raymond 2008). Parental involvement is also less in high school (Marcotte 2008). Perhaps one message worth sending

to parents is that increased parental involvement at the high school level may enhance or ensure completion rates. As well, providing parents with information about course options (e.g. high skills major and programming pathways) and other current information would help parents support their child (Raymond 2008). The high skills major initiative is one of several steps taken by the Ontario Ministry (2007: 1) to help more students graduate:

> In 2006, the province launched the first five majors—construction, hospitality and tourism, arts and culture, manufacturing and primary industries (landscaping, agriculture, forestry and mining). This September, most school boards will offer at least one of the nine majors. Students enrolled in a major are required to complete a bundle of classroom courses, workplace experiences and industry certifications to receive a special designation on their diploma.

In addition some schools in the central Ontario jurisdiction have started to send home an information page with each monthly newsletter that helps support the link between parents and secondary schools. This enhanced communication initiative is cost-effective and we are monitoring outcomes at present in our central Ontario region.

Dropping out of high school before program completion (early) often is the threshold for failures across a wide range of areas, including employment, involvement in crime and substance use, as well as unsatisfactory personal relationships (Eckstein *et al.* 1999, Marcotte 2008). This situation only serves to enlarge the number, currently over 13 percent, of young adults who were unemployed in the province of Ontario in 2004 (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities 2008). This is troublesome, since occupations with the fastest expected growth in the next decade will require post-secondary credentials, and those with the greatest expected decline will require only on-the-job training (Kazis *et al.* 2007: 9). For these reasons, we support the need to establish retention policies, school practices and instructional strategies to sustain this group of adults aged 18 to 24

in obtaining a high school diploma, and assisting these same young adults in achieving a fulfilling and rewarding life beyond school.

Gender and age differences

According to Raymond (2008), high school dropout rates have been falling over the past fifteen years from 19 percent in 1990/1991 to approximately 11 percent in the 2004/2005 school year. There is a difference, however, in the rate of dropouts according to gender. In 2004/2005, the rate of dropouts declined to 14 percent for males and nine percent for females. Between 15 percent and 18 percent of dropouts aged 20 to 24 return to school every year, with females returning in greater proportions then males (Raymond 2008). In a study conducted by Norman and Hyland (2003), it was found that those who dropped out of high school at the age of 16 did not engage in future learning at a greater rate then those who dropped out at age 17 or 18. It was also found that the longer a dropout stayed away from school, the less likely they were to return, and of those who did return, 70 percent did eventually complete high school requirements (Chuang 1994, Raymond 2008). On the other hand, Bradley and Goldman (1996a) found that the younger students who re-enter high school are less successful than older ones and concluded that, if students re-enter too early after first leaving high school, they tend to follow previously unsuccessful behavioural patterns. We believe this variable has much to do with the maturity of the student. In our program many adolescents develop a pattern of behaviour which becomes a routine that is easy to follow, such as sleeping in. As these students mature, they realise the significance and necessity of obtaining a secondary education diploma, especially once they realise they can not support themselves the way they would like on a minimum wage (Norman & Hyland 2003). Conversely, we have also witnessed students who leave school and return a few months later just to follow the same pattern that led to their withdrawal from high school in the first place. If they follow this pattern, they

are unsuccessful once again (Bradley & Goldman 1996a). We have theorised that it may be viewed as a combination of two variables: motivation and determination. Our theory suggests that once they are motivated to reach their goal of an OSSD, then they can break the pattern of maladaptive behaviour that initially led to their withdrawal.

As noted earlier there is also a difference between males and females and the reasons why they drop out of school. Chuang (1994: 1072) found that 'male dropouts most often cited work-related reasons; whereas female dropouts most often cited family-related reasons [such as] marriage and/or pregnancy'. In Canada, the proportion of young adults 'leaving school due to personal reasons is four times higher among young female dropouts than among young men … The≈proportion of young men wanting/needing to work as the reason for dropping out is double the proportion of young women' (Raymond 2008: 17).

Very few factors influence young women's decisions to return to school; most often they return to school because they still have aspirations to obtain a post-secondary education and the circumstance that brought them to leave in the first place (e.g. birth of a child) is no longer perceived to be an obstacle in their lives (Raymond 2008). Young women will also return to school if only a short time has elapsed since they originally left school. However, young men's return to school depends on their past academic experience and their labour experience (Norman & Hyland 2003). We believe that it is essential to gain a better knowledge and understanding of the gender differences and problems faced by these young adults who drop out of high school. It is imperative that this is done in order to establish policies, services, curriculum and programming that are needed in order to help them achieve a high school diploma. We need to determine what they need, support them and keep these students engaged. We believe that we are on the right path with the implementation of High Skills Major credits and Dual

credit (apprenticeship training and post-secondary courses, earning dual credits that count towards both their high school diploma and their postsecondary diploma, degree or apprenticeship certification) that link students to the post-secondary system. Some students are more suited to a less structured environment such as that found at the college level and that is why they are successful in these new programs. But we must also be flexible with student timetables and offer other options such as correspondence courses or credit recovery to help students catch up on credits missed.

Early school leaving and re-entry

Adult learners live complex lives and it is their 're-entry into the learning environment, in many instances, [that] requires a profound leap of courage, and yet their learning success is integral to the health of our communities and our economy' (Wynne 2005: 1). Many of these young adult learners need to overcome the negative perceptions they maintain of the educational system (Marcotte 2008). Each learner who returns to a secondary school setting to obtain a high school diploma comes with varied memories of their earlier experiences. Adult learners have a variety of reasons for leaving school, and an even greater number of reasons for returning. Once again, in order to support these adult learners, we believe we need more than a simple recipe. We believe that we need to determine what supports each individual either academically or socially. This is frequently missing at many Adult Learning Centers; for example, there is often no guidance counsellor or any other supports within most adult schools and, at our particular adult education centre, even the administration is assigned onsite infrequently (two days per week). This fact has been communicated to upper administration within our education system order to correct this situation.

An Australian study by Bradley and Goldman (1996a) and a Canadian report by Raymond (2008) found that students had many reasons for withdrawing from high school such as financial, family (includes having a baby) and outside school commitments. These young adults also put emphasis on the fact that they lacked motivation and had difficulty coping with school structures. Poor attendance and feeling overwhelmed with the school workload (inability to catch up from work missed) also led to their early departure from school (Norman & Hyland 2003). A number of school dropouts also see school as irrelevant and devalue formal training and attribute effective performance in a job to common sense and experience (Chuang 1994, Gorard & Selwyn 2005).

A variety of reasons can motivate a young adult to return to school such as 'parental pressures, recognition of the economic benefits obtained from the completion of a diploma and disappointing labour market experiences' (Raymond 2008: 7). Chuang (1994) found that an unemployed young adult who dropped out of school was more likely to return to school if there was a high rate of unemployment as compared to an employed young adult in the same situation. These findings are not only echoed by Bradley and Goldman (1996b), but these authors also state that dropouts also return to school for a variety of social reasons that include the need to please their parents and enjoyment of the student lifestyle. It is interesting to note that boredom is a reason that students gave for dropping out of high school, as well as a reason why they returned.

Informal channels such as parents, friends and their own inquiries are the major sources of information regarding returning to school (Bradley & Goldman 1996b). This information is important in trying to help young adults find out about adult education programs and achieving their goals of obtaining a high school diploma. We believe that it is important to have detailed adult education information accessible within the community via radio, print ads, internet

and local community mailing to provide information and support that may prompt and encourage young adults to return to school. Although young adults may not be the ones to read or hear about educational programming, others can pass the messages on. Above all, these young adults must be supported in their decision to return to school by key family and community members.

Adult learners: barriers

Norman and Hyland (2003) place major obstacles and barriers of adult learners into three categories: situational, institutional and dispositional. Situational barriers include time, daycare and family responsibilities. Especially if these young adults have families to support or take care of, the cost of daycare might be a barrier that prevents them from returning to school. It is often very difficult for students in this type of situation to find the time to attend school, work and take care of their family (Kazis *et al.* 2007).

Course timetabling problems, lack of information informing young adults about learning opportunities available to them, as well as the use of inappropriate teaching/learning strategies are some examples of institutional barriers. Timetables as well as teaching/learning strategies must incorporate the principles of adult learning. It is important to include time for talk, hands-on activities, and an opportunity for these students to be able to relate their coursework to real-life experiences. Learning should be both formal and informal (Norman & Hyland 2003).

Dispositional barriers include having a negative perception and/or attitude towards learning. Some young adults are hesitant to re-enrol into a high school setting because they may have had previous encounters where they formed the perception that they can not trust the system or they lack confidence because of their prior experiences. This is a barrier that prevents them from using the services offered. Therefore, it is important for educators to recognise this barrier,

understand the individual student, and work at establishing interventions where the student can feel comfortable, return to school and achieve a high school diploma. Services and supports must be established, accessible and appropriate to fit the young adult learner (Marcotte 2008, Norman & Hyland 2003).

Adult learners: strategies, programs and services

Often young adult dropouts are hesitant to re-enrol in school programs because they mistrust the system (Compton, Cox & Laanan 2006). Therefore, it is imperative to establish interventions that will help serve these emerging young adults and prevent them from leaving the school setting a second time. Marcotte (2008: 10-11) suggests that services and supports must be accessible to these students because

> Given the critical period that emerging adulthood constitutes, especially for at-risk youths, the importance of school achievement and perseverance in subsequent adult adjustment and the potential turning point that the adult education sector may represent for these youths, it is imperative to establish interventions that will serve those emerging adults enrolled in these school settings, as it may be the last chance to take action during that developmental period and prevent subsequent maladjustment. To improve service delivery to this segment of the population, programs must be created with respect to the developmental status and features of emerging adulthood.

The potential intervention must also be coordinated and developmentally appropriate to enable these young people to pursue their goals. Curriculum must involve and permit the development of personal choice and social responsibility that is both authentic and meaningful. Further, we believe that this adult-oriented learning environment must build on the principles of accessibility for, and inclusion of, all young adults, and be flexible in meeting their individual needs. For example, we could schedule night or weekend

classes, or provide daycare at the school. We can also offer the course in various formats such as in a regular classroom setting or correspondence. At our adult education centre, we offer Literacy and Basic Skills training (LBS) which can help prepare students for the credit courses. In our opinion there is a need to locate programs that sustain the interests and abilities of these young adult students such as high skills major and dual credit courses. If students have been away from a formal school setting for many years or those who do not have many credits on their transcript, we recommend they spend some time in this program upgrading their literacy and numeracy skills. It is also important to incorporate their adult experiences in work and life (Kazis *et al.* 2007).

It is essential that programs for young adults who return to high school are meaningful and relevant, and the delivery of the curriculum is focused around the use of current adult teaching methods. For example, when teaching adults, emphasis should be placed on 'self-directed rather than teacher-directed methods: learning should be based on sharing experiences within the group' (Bradley & Goldman 1996a: 72). Teachers of young adult students should have students draw on their own life experiences when making connections and discussing curriculum. Adult learners have the ability to use prior experiences and link them to new ideas and situations, making learning easier. The delivery of the curriculum must also provide new and engaging learning opportunities (Compton *et al.* 2006).

Students need to see the relevance of what they are studying. They also bring to the classroom a wide range of experiences that can be used to enrich the learning in the room. Learning should also take many forms such as co-operative education and be offered across different interdisciplinary settings. This will help reach the various learning styles of these young adults and, for some, this type of learning will help them feel successful and keep them motivated

(Compton *et al.* 2006, Kazis *et al.* 2007, Norman & Hyland 2003). We believe the curriculum must provide engaging learning opportunities and be customised to the needs and interests of individual adult students.

Adult learners also want to minimise the amount of time they spend in class (Kazis *et al.* 2007). Therefore, it is important to offer flexible schedules such as day, evening and weekend classes. Schools should also offer various forms of instruction, which includes on-line instruction, in-class instruction, and correspondence courses. Given that there are a variety of reasons why these young adult learners return to obtain a high school diploma, schools should also offer multiple entry and exit points (Bradley *et al.* 1996a, Kazis *et al.* 2007). Parnham (2001) found that adult learning programs should also allow participants to progress at their own pace and to achieve their own personal objectives.

The exact potential of the adult education centre (school) has yet to be realised, as many of the assigned teachers have not yet been trained in the theories and teaching practices within adult education. Without this vital training, the staff is unable, through no fault of their own, to meet the needs of the young adult learners. To help out in this area, we have put up various statements about adult learners in our staff room. We have explained to the staff that these statements refer to the people sitting in their classroom and these statements reflect how they learn and their immediate needs. As a staff we look at one principle a month during staff meetings and hopefully dialogue as discussion unfolds amongst the staff.

It is also important that teachers of young adult learners establish a learning environment where students feel secure, feel free to ask questions, and can work at demonstrating the curricular expectations. If students avoid seeking help, it may result in misunderstandings, lack of important skills and reduced motivation (Skaalvik *et al.* 2005). Remedial courses and/or informal tutorial assistance should be

available to returning students (Bradley *et al.* 1996a). Remedial classes can help students enhance their numeracy and literacy skills, if needed, before entering into a credit accumulation program. Tutorial assistance should also be available and easily accessible so that returning students can get the help they need and have their questions answered in a timely fashion.

Many of the young females that leave high school do so because of family responsibilities and their focus changes to their child. To help female students re-enter a high school curricular program, it would be important to establish childcare facilities either in or close to the school (Bradley *et al.* 1996b, Raymond 2008).

Young adults re-enter a high school setting with mixed feelings which may include fear, insecurity and doubt. Some of these feelings are heightened because of their past experiences in a similar setting. It is therefore important to help these students feel comfortable, and provide the supports needed as they re-adjust to this new lifestyle. Because it is still a school setting, these adults still have to obey 'rules'; however, every attempt should be made to make this environment comfortable and it should recognise the uniqueness of an adult education centre (Bradley *et al.* 1996a). Guidance counsellors should also be available to help these young adults with course selection, be available to answer questions, and provide information about higher education and jobs. These guidance counsellors will also be able to assess gaps in students' prior knowledge and recommend the need for bridging or remedial courses before they delve into a regular course curriculum (Bradley *et al.* 1996a).

It is interesting to note that Bradley *et al.* (1996b) found that almost 90 percent of students who returned to high school to obtain a diploma would advise younger students not to leave school or to think very carefully before doing so. Perhaps this finding demonstrates and signals the need for guidance of these young adults.

Conclusion

Limited research that focuses on young adult learners aged 18-24 who return to school to obtain a high school diploma was uncovered and there is a need to conduct further research in this area. The literature reviewed to date suggests that young adult learners have diverse needs, responsibilities and ways of learning. We believe, as a community we need to explore this area and find out how to motivate and engage these students. Once this is done, we can help them achieve mutual goals. We know that adult learners bring a wealth of life and work experience with them when they re-enter education and, as educators, we need to incorporate this knowledge into the curriculum. Our adult education centre has a neighbourhood reputation among local education leaders of being a 'hassle' to visit and extra work for the school board administration. This is not the sentiment of all educators, however, it needs to be acknowledged and made public in order to change this reality.

We also believe that high school credits should be granted to adult learners who bring with them life experiences. These credits can be obtained through a testing or a portfolio system. Another goal of ours this coming year is to implement Mature Prior Learning and Assessment Recognition (MPLAR) at our adult education centre as a similar system can be found elsewhere in the province of Ontario. Through this program, adults will have the opportunity to gain credits for life experiences and skills they obtained while not in school. Our point of view suggests a shift to an 'adult friendly' school model is too slow, but with time we are hoping to help transform the centre into a school that promotes lifelong learning and helps young adult learners achieve their goals. Our work has produced a number of key factors to achieve these goals.

We believe secondary level re-entry of young Canadian adult learners can be enhanced when:

1. We increase the student contact time with individual teachers—Relationships.

2. We increase parental involvement—Community.

3. We establish supportive retention policies, school practices and instructional strategies to sustain this group of adults aged 18 to 24—Administration.

4. We assist these same young adults to realise fulfilling and rewarding lives beyond school—Life Skills/Community.

5. We better understand what motivates young adult students—Knowledge.

6. We build flexible timetables and offer options such as correspondence courses or credit recovery to help students catch up on credits missed—Administration.

7. We put in place guidance counsellors and other supports within adult education centres—Services.

8. We put in place meaningful programs, and deliver these via curriculum focused around current adult teaching methods—Curriculum.

9. We provide engaging learning opportunities and customise to meet the needs (entry-exit flexibility) and interests of individual adult students—Opportunity.

10. We acknowledge that participants need to progress at their own pace and achieve their own personal objectives—Individualise.

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About the authors

Dr. Thomas G. Ryan *(EdD), Associate Professor, is an adult educator teaching at Nipissing University, Faculty of Education in North Bay, Ontario, Canada. He is the author of The reflexive classroom manager and the editor of Canadian Educational Leadership.*

Ms. Cassandra MacGregor *(MEd) has been an adult education administrator for several years and is currently Vice-Principal at the Sudbury Adult Learning Centre situated in Ontario, Canada. The Centre is located within the Sudbury Catholic District Board of Education where Ms. MacGregor has also taught for many years in various capacities.*

Contact details

Thomas G. Ryan, Nipissing University, Faculty of Education, 100 College Drive, North Bay, Ontario, P1B 8L7
Tel. 1 705 474 3461 X4403   Fax 1 705 474 1947
Email: thomasr@nipissingu.ca