Post-Program Experience of Secondary Alternative School Students Who Have Returned to a Regular School: The Student's Perspective

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ABSTRACT

In this study the experience of former alternative school students during the process of reintegration into a regular high school was examined in order to make recommendations for improvement of services to alternative school students before, during and after reintegration. By means of a telephone interview twenty-seven male and thirteen female former alternative school students were questioned about their (a) reasons for leaving regular school, (b) reasons for returning to regular school, (c) difficulties they had encountered in the regular school, (d) support provided by teachers and counsellors in regular and alternative school, and (e) recommendations for improvement of service. It was found that while a large number of students are referred to alternative programs, few students, in particular few females, return to regular school to complete graduation requirements. Those students who returned felt they had been prepared to return and were successful in completing their programs, but would have benefited from more support from teachers and counsellors in the regular school programs. Students expressed a wish to be treated as individuals by school staff.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Dropping out of school before achieving a high school graduation has serious consequences for students in terms of employment and general well-being. The drop-out phenomenon has affected one out of every four youths nationally, and has had an economic as well as social impact in terms of housing, health care and employment, and the need for further subsidized education (Finn, 1989; Ward, 1991). In the United States, costs to society have been estimated at approximately $145 billion (US) per year (Bartnick & Parkay, 1991). Data from Statistics Canada revealed that one of every three Canadian students has dropped out of school (Ward, 1991).

It has been suggested that students drop out of school for a complex array of reasons which may include any combination of academic, social and emotional problems (Finn, 1989). Students may have left school because courses were too difficult for them, or because they made poor curricular choices for themselves. They may have left because they had not been attending and had fallen behind in completing assignments, or because they found little relevance in what they were doing in school. They may have left school because they believed school to be a "waste of time" and they found life outside of school to be more exciting. They may have left, also, because they were experiencing personal difficulties which precluded their attendance

or their success at school. A student's decision to drop out of school may have been the final event in a long and complex process (Finn, 1989; Rumberger, 1987).

The establishment of rehabilitation programs, or "alternative programs" (the term most widely used by professionals and students), has been one of the measures educators have taken to retain potential drop-outs. In British Columbia, the mandate of alternative programs has been to serve specifically, drop-outs who have been categorized as having "severe socio-emotional problems" (British Columbia, Ministry of Education, 1985). Alternative programs form part of the spectrum of special education services within school districts which includes other programs providing services to students with physical, sensory, and/or cognitive deficits.

The author acknowledges that there are two issues involved in the application of labels and/or the categorization of students by the presence of a handicapping condition: the first is a philosophical one, which argues that labelling is detrimental to the individual, while the second takes a more pragmatic approach and argues that labelling is a practical necessity for obtaining appropriate services within the educational system. In opposition are the concerns that labelling may permanently stigmatize individuals who are recognized as "different", puts the burden of failure on the student and may, in fact, emphasize weaknesses rather than strengths. In support, it may be said that labelling clearly draws attention to a group of students in need of

support and services, facilitates communication among professionals, and helps the public understand the specific needs of a population (Marozas & May, 1988, pp.163-164). Having acknowledged this ongoing debate, it will not be addressed further because alternative programs in the province of British Columbia have adopted a categorical approach to the provision of services. It should be noted that educators attempt to use labels as judiciously as possible, however, there remains the possibility that, for some students, the label may not accurately describe the nature of the student's problem. For the purpose of the present document, the term "students with socio-emotional problems" is used to refer to students who have been recognized as needing specialized programming (i.e., alternative education) to best meet their unique learning problems.

The goal of alternative programs has been to "provide students with academic and social development skills, leading toward re-entry into the regular school system, further training or employment" (British Columbia, Ministry of Education, 1985, p. 7.48). According to the guidelines contained in the Manual of Policy, Procedures and Guidelines students whose needs may be met through rehabilitation programs may be identified as those students who are not seen to be coping with the traditional school and classroom environment, and who are seen to be exhibiting socio-emotional difficulties, as well as experiencing academic failure.

More recently, the term "students with behaviour disorders" has been

used by the Ministry of Education in the guide, Rehabilitation Resource Services and Programs, as a global term to refer to students who have social/emotional with associated academic difficulties or "young people who, for social and/or emotional reasons, are having great difficulty in school or who have dropped out of the school system" (British Columbia, Ministry of Education, 1990a, p.9). Students with behaviour problems which can be dealt with in regular classrooms have not been part of the group served by alternative programs. Neither have those students been included whose behaviours may be considered severe (e.g., autism). Students who have been characterized as having behaviour disorders display behaviours significantly different from age-appropriate expectations and which interfere with the student's own learning and/or that of others (British Columbia, Ministry of Education, 1990, p.17).

Adolescents with behaviour disorders may exhibit (consistently or inconsistently) any number of an array of characteristics which relate to the emotional, social and academic aspects of their lives. A behaviour disorder classified under the heading of emotional difficulties may be manifest in such indicators as a student's lack of motivation, fragile self-esteem, resistance to change, depression, stress-related disorders (e.g., hypochondria, headaches), lack of self control, or inability to be responsible or accountable for behaviour (British Columbia, Ministry of Education, 1990a, p.18). The term social difficulties is used to categorize student behaviours such as a student's

inability to establish and/or maintain satisfactory relationships with peers or adults, over-reliance on peer subcultures, intolerance of differences, alienation from society, chronic attendance problems, substance abuse, disruptive classroom behaviour, abusive behaviour, or impulsiveness (British Columbia, Ministry of Education, Special Education Branch, 1990a, p.19). The term academic difficulties is used to describe generally such indicators as a student's lack of content knowledge, poor study skills, passive learning style, poor organizational ability, task avoidance, or unrealistic academic goals (British Columbia, Ministry of Education, 1990a, p.19).

Alternative programs differ from regular school programs in that they provide educational, social and vocational intervention that is highly individualized and non-traditional. Alternative programs differ from each other in that they may offer primarily academic, vocational (e.g., work experience or work related skills training) or counselling programs in a variety of settings in or out of the regular school (e.g., partially mainstreamed or detached settings) (Csapo & Gittens, 1979).

The focus of the present study was the alternative program offered by staff at S. J. Willis Edcuational Centre. The centre is located in an urban setting in Victoria, British Columbia. The program is under the jurisdiction of School District #61 (Victoria). It is housed in a building separate from any of the high schools it serves. Students who exhibit behaviours associated with social and emotional problems are referred from four junior high

schools (Grades 8-10), three junior-secondary schools (Grades 8-12) and four senior high schools (Grades 11-12) within the school district. Students may be referred to the alternative school program by school or district counsellors, parents, teachers, social workers or by themselves at any time throughout the year. A recent examination, by the researcher, of referral forms for the years 1989/90 and 1990/91 revealed that over 90% of students were referred for two or more areas of concern to teachers, counsellors or other referring persons. These concerns were categorized on the referral forms as "family problems", "attendance problems", "academic problems" and "emotional/social problems".

The S. J. Willis Educational Centre alternative program is oriented towards an academic rather than vocational curriculum, although the program's counsellors assist the students in job search and work placements. The students, who range in age from 15 to 19, are permitted to attend the program between the hours of 8:30 and 3:00 on a drop-in basis to accommodate working schedules and individual patterns. Typically, 75% of the students are 15 or 16 years of age. The program allows for individual tutorials in various courses. Students work at their own pace and only on the courses they required, at that time, to complete Grade 9 or Grade 10 basic requirements. The majority of students (70%) in the program at any given time are completing Grade 10 courses. A small number of students (20%) may be completing Grade 9 courses and a smaller number (10%) may be

completing a Grade 11 and 12 equivalency program or Grade 11 credit courses. A limited number of Grade 11 credit courses are offered to facilitate return to the regular high school, however, students are required to return to regular high schools in order to graduate.

Most alternative school programs are "rehabilitative" in nature and do not allow students to graduate from Grade 12 without partial or full reintegration into the regular school program, however, the transition from the alternative school back into the regular program has not yet been fully examined. Studies on the effectiveness of programs which serve the needs of drop-outs or those at risk of dropping out of school have focused on student success within the program (cf. Catteral & Stern, 1986; Csapo & Stevens, 1982; Gold & Mann, 1984; Mann & Gold, 1981; Matriello, Pallas, McDill, McPortland, & Royster, 1988; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989), but not on student success after leaving the program.

Many of the students who enter alternative programs do not, in fact, return to a regular school to complete graduation requirements (Csapo & Gittens, 1979); those who do continue to be at risk of failing to graduate (Karp, 1988). However, little is known about the experience of students who returned to regular school after having been in an alternative program. Without such knowledge it is difficult to determine the effectiveness of alternative programs or to make suggestions for change.

Researchers who have completed follow-up studies of special

education students have, in the past, concentrated primarily on employment outcomes. These studies have reported discouraging findings (Edgar, 1988; Hasazi, Gordon & Roe, 1985; Mithaug, Horiuchi & Fanning, 1985). Few former students of special education programs have become employed in jobs that provide adequate incomes or job satisfaction (Thurlow, Larson & Bruininks, 1989). Such findings have suggested a need for more support for continued education, since employment rates and satisfaction with employment increase with education. Statistics Canada reported that, in 1991, 44% of jobs required a post-secondary education (Ward, 1991).

According to survey results, students who had received services for "social and emotional" problems continued to be dissatisfied with the employment and social aspects of their lives and, in general, had poorer post-school outcomes in areas of employment, education, personal independence, and social integration than their learning disabled peers (Thurlow et al., 1989). Special education students who exhibited social and emotional problems required support and encouragement to continue their education. Programs which encouraged students with social and emotional problems to remain in school have been shown to have a positive affect on the post-program employment status of students (Catterall & Stern, 1986).

Information on post-program outcomes of students who have received special education services is needed to make programming and planning decisions and to improve transition services between such programs and

other school programs. Careful monitoring of all special education programs is required to ensure that they provide the most effective kind and quality of service for students (Bruininks, Wolman, & Thurlow, 1990). An important part of such monitoring lies in documenting post-program outcomes. Examining the post-program experience of alternative school students has the following broad goals:

1. To assist the staff of alternative school programs to respond more effectively to the needs of the students they serve.
2. To assist the staff of regular school programs to respond more effectively to the needs of the alternative school students re-entering regular programs.
3. To provide information leading to more effective transition services and support.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experience of former alternative school students who returned to a regular high school program for the purpose of continuing their education. The transition of alternative school students to a totally integrated setting in a regular high school program has not been fully examined. The purpose of such an examination was to add to the body of literature which describes the needs of alternative school students and to make suggestions for improvement of services to this

population of special needs students. The experience of students who have received services may provide insight into the effectiveness of intervention programs designed to retain students in school. Information about the experience of the students who have received special education services may help make programming and planning decisions and may improve the transition process from a special program to a regular program. Such information may be used to improve both the quality and the kind of service provided to students at risk of drop-out within the alternative school/programs and upon re-integration to the regular school.

Staff and administration need to know whether the alternative school program and/or the regular school program are meeting the educational and emotional needs of their students. In order to examine the students' experience of the transition from an alternative school back into a regular school, the experience of students from one particular alternative program, located in the S. J. Willis Educational Centre, was examined.

Research Questions

The experience of alternative students during the process of re-integration back to regular school was examined by asking the following questions:

1. How many students left the S. J. Willis Educational Centre (1) to return to regular secondary school, (2) to find employment, or (3) to attend community college?

2. Of those students who returned to a regular program, how many returned to (1) regular graduation program (i.e., Dogwood), (2) pre-employment program, (3) career preparation program, or (4) co-op program?
3. How many students who returned to the regular school programs felt adequately prepared?
4. How many students who returned to the regular program felt they were succeeding in their chosen courses, and how many hoped to complete their programs?
5. What types of problems were encountered by those students who returned to a regular school?
6. Was the assistance provided by the S. J. Willis program teachers and counsellors to facilitate return beneficial to those who returned to a regular program?
7. Was the assistance provided by the regular school teachers and counsellors beneficial to those who returned to the regular program?
8. What specific suggestions do returning students offer that might assist (1) staff at S. J. Willis and (2) staff in regular programs in preparing students for reintegration in the future?

General Procedures

In the present study the researcher examined one alternative program, housed in the S. J. Willis Educational Centre, located in Victoria, British

Columbia. The area of focus was the nature of the transition of students from an alternative school program back to a regular school program, from the students' point of view. By means of a telephone interview students were asked to provide information on: (a) the reasons they left regular school, (b) the reasons they returned to regular school, (c) any problems they encountered in the process, (d) their feelings related to the nature of the services provided by the alternative school staff and the regular school staff before, during, and after the transition process, and (e) suggestions for the improvement of services. Numbers of students who entered the S. J. Willis Educational Centre and subsequently left to attend regular school programs over the 1988/89 and 1989/90 school years were analyzed and examined for trends and patterns.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

The present study was limited to the examination of experience of secondary alternative school students who returned to a regular school in order to complete their education. The current study did not attempt to examine the experiences of students who left the alternative program to go to work or to another setting (e.g., community college, another alternative program) to continue their schooling.

The study was further limited by examining secondary alternative school students who had attended the alternative program at S. J. Willis Educational Centre, located in Victoria, B. C., prior to re-entry in various

public schools located within School District #61 (Victoria, B. C.). The program at S. J. Willis serves an urban population, has an academic focus rather than a vocational focus and is not attached to a regular school. The results of the present study should not be generalized to other academically oriented alternative programs located in the province of British Columbia, rural or urban, nor to vocationally oriented programs or to programs directly attached to, or housed in, a regular high school. Similarly, the results should not be generalized to regular schools in other school districts.

Students who attend alternative schools do so as a result of social, and/or emotional, and academic difficulties which preclude their attendance in regular school programs. Many of the students have a history of chronic attendance problems and an alienation from society. Many are transient in terms of their living situation. Some of the students are either living on their own or in group homes; many are not only attempting to attend school but are holding down part or full-time jobs. Consequently, attempts to locate students proved to be difficult; school records did not always include current addresses or phone numbers. The present study was limited by the ability ot the researcher to contact students by telephone and to make arrangements for the students to participate in an interview (i.e., during school hours or after work). Therefore, the sample of students who participated in the current study may or may not be representative of all S. J. Willis students.

The focus of the current study was the students' perceptions of their

experiences at the S. J. Willis program and their experiences upon re-entry into the regular school system. By means of a telephone interview the researcher attempted to solicit information specifically related to the problems that they encountered upon re-entry and their feelings related to the nature of services provided by alternative and regular school staff to help in the transition process. However, students' recollections and perceptions of events may be different from those of the teachers and counsellors who worked with them (Wehlage et al., 1989). Since the scope of the present study was to examine the students' perceptions, no attempt was made to solicit information from teachers and/or counsellors involved with the students.

Reintegration into regular programs requires students to leave a supportive environment of a smaller group of students, teachers and counsellors, with a flexible timetable enabling students to work at their own pace, and re-enter an environment in which class sizes are larger, scheduling is more rigid, and where there may be less teacher and counsellor support available. The limited scope of the current study will provide preliminary information that may be the basis for assisting staff of alternative schools and regular schools to respond to the needs of the students who are categorized as having social and emotional problems. Similarly, the limited scope of the current study will provide preliminary information that may be the basis for further investigation into the complex issues related to the transition of this unique population from one setting to another.

Definition of Terms

The following terms have been defined for the purpose of the current study:

Alternative program or Rehabilitation program is described as "an education program designed to meet the special needs of students with behavioural disorders . . . . Such students may be served in regular classrooms (with assistance), in partially mainstreamed settings, or in detached settings" (British Columbia, Ministry of Education, 1990, p. 9).

At risk refers to students in educational settings who are assumed to be prone to school failure. "At risk" may be defined in terms of events or conditions in the student's life outside the classroom or, alternatively, the pupil's behaviour in the classroom (Kauffmann et al., 1991).

Behaviourally disordered students exhibit behaviours which deviate in an extreme manner from the norm, recur chronically, violate social or cultural expectations, and affect the student's self esteem, interpersonal relationships, and probably school achievement (Winzer, Rogow & David, 1987, p.378).

Drop-out refers to a student who leaves high school before graduation whether or not he/she plans to return at a later date.

Transition refers to the gradual process of re-integration into a regular program after a student has been enrolled in a special program.

Summary

Little information exists on the post-program outcomes of those students labelled as having social and emotional problems who are at risk of dropping out of school, and who have been served in alternative school programs. The needs of alternative students are varied and it is incumbent on those people working with alternative school students to examine whether alternative programs continue to meet student needs. Relatively few students who have leave alternative programs return to a regular program and those who do remain at risk of failing to graduate. The experience of students who have returned to regular school after having been enrolled in an alternative program may provide a valuable source of information for improvement of services to this population.

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

Although alternative schools have only been in existence since the early 1970s, there has been substantial interest in the needs of students, who, for a number of reasons, are unable to cope adequately in the regular program. The literature review presented in this chapter will focus on: (a) an overview of the development of alternative programs, (b) the characteristics of "drop-outs" and "at risk" students, (c) the programs developed to serve the needs of "at risk" students, and (d) post-program survey studies on special education students.

The Development of Alternative Programs

Educators have long recognized the need to provide a range of services to encourage all students to remain in school regardless of ability or inclination. In the early 1900s vocational education and various extra-curricular activities were included in school programs to encourage potential drop-outs to remain in school (Wehlage et al., 1989). Over the years schools expanded their range of curriculum so that more students whose interests lay in gaining practical rather than academic skills could be served. Academic subjects were offered by means of modified curricula so that less academically capable students would be able to graduate from a modified high school program. Some students, however, such as those with behavioural and

emotional problems, were unable to be successful in regular school programs despite intervention and required special programs to meet their specific needs. When the need to provide services to students exhibiting mild and moderate behavioural and emotional problems associated with academic difficulties was recognized, it was in the form of alternative education with the aim being to reintegrate those students as fully as possible into the regular setting (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1988).

In the early 1970s the Ministry of Education for the province of British Columbia responded to the needs of those students whose behaviour and non-compliance with rules and structure precluded their academic success in regular high schools by establishing rehabilitation programs, or alternative schools as they are more commonly known. They were jointly funded by the Ministry of Education and what is now the Ministry of Social Services and Housing, since both teachers and youth and family counsellors form the staff of such programs. The Department of the Attorney General also assisted the Ministry of Education in providing partial funding for a small number of programs to serve youth on probation (British Columbia, Ministry of Education, 1990a). In the 1990s, the Ministries of Education and Social Services and Housing, along with the Department of the Attorney General, continue to provide the primary funding for the students in alternative programs.

Students who have been referred (and continue to be referred) to alternative programs exhibited behaviours such as absenteeism, delinquency or disruptive behaviour in the classroom. Such students have typically had a history of failure in their academic work, and/or had experienced difficulty coping with the complexity of the social system, instructional methods and curriculum of traditional schools (c.f., British Columbia, Ministry of Education, 1990; Gold & Mann, 1984). Indicators of behaviour disorders which have been identified by the Ministry of Education of the Province of British Columbia include: (a) emotional disorders, such as lack of motivation, fragile self-esteem, depression, poor decision-making and problem solving skills; (b) social disorders, such as an inability to establish and/or maintain satisfactory relationships with peers, substance abuse, impulsiveness, alienation from society, and chronic attendance problems; and (c) academic problems, such as poor organizational skills, lack of content knowledge, and unrealistic academic goals (British Columbia, Ministry of Education, 1990a). It is important to note that these indicators represent a partial list, and that a student may express several of them at any given time.

Alternative programs have provided an opportunity for students with social and emotional problems to develop the necessary academic and social skills needed to return to regular programs in the public school system, other training programs, or to go to work. The programs have been designed to be short term in nature with the goal that students reintegrate into a regular

school program, seek further training or make the transition to work (i.e., programs are "rehabilitative" in nature).

As a response to the need for services for a population of students who had already dropped out of school or were at risk of dropping out for a variety of reasons, a range of alternative school programs has been established. Programs for students with emotional and behavioural disorders have neccessarily been varied because of the wide differences in intelligence, behavioural characteristics and achievement of the students involved (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1988). A wide spectrum of programs has been developed to service the needs of students with social and emotional problems in the junior high schools or senior high schools, pregnant teens, students who are court-ordered to attend school, and students who require flexible structure in order to work. The programs typically offer individualized and non-traditional instruction, counselling, and an opportunity to work within flexible hours and at the student's own pace. The majority of programs offer academic upgrading; some offer vocational training involving work experience in a variety of settings, and most offer training or counselling in interpersonal and social skills .

"Drop-outs" and "at risk" Students

Students served by alternative programs are those students who have experienced great difficulty in school, or those students who have dropped out of the school system (British Columbia, Ministry of Education, 1990).

They have been classified generally as students with social and emotional problems. Alternative programs have provided support for those students seen to have social and/or emotional difficulties who have been unable to cope with the demands of a regular high school setting due to an inability to attend to instruction, an inability to complete assignments, lack of attendance, and inappropriate behaviour in an instructional or social setting (Csapo & Stevens, 1982).

Student characteristics associated with dropping out have been identified through a number of studies on drop-outs (cf. Finn, 1989; Luby, 1989; Rumberger, 1987; Self, 1985; Wehlage et al., 1989). Drop-outs have been found to be more likely to come from families with low socio-economic status, though this may have become a stereotype and may not always have been the case (Earle & Roach, 1989). They were also more likely to be living apart from one parent or both parents, to have compiled poor records of attendance and achievement at school, and to have had a lower self concept, lower aspirations and fewer long term goals than their peers (Earle & Roach, 1989; Karp, 1988; Rumberger, 1987; Self, 1985; Wehalge et al. 1989).

The student role has been central and critical to adolescents. All young people need to acquire a sense of personal competence or of success (Mann & Gold, 1981; Wehlage et al., 1989). Most dropouts have not achieved this sense of confidence and success in their academic life and have abandoned the student role. School withdrawal has been a concern both in the special

education and the regular school population because of the detrimental effects of leaving school before graduating in terms of employment and general quality of life. The follow-up study of students served in programs for emotional or behaviour problems by Thurlow et al. (1989) revealed that 30% of students who exhibited severe emotional disturbances and 26% of students who exhibited mild emotional disturbances graduated from high school in comparison to 96% of their non-disabled peers. The uniqueness of the population of students described as having "social/emotional disabilities" compared to other groups of students served by special education (e.g. learning disabilities) was highlighted in Thurlow's study. Students who had received special education services for disorders that have been labelled as "social and emotional" in nature were more likely to report unhappiness with current living situations and job earnings and were more likely to be unemployed a greater percentage of the time than their peers with other disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities).

Students who have dropped out of school have been surveyed as to their attitudes towards schools and school personnel (Luby, 1989), and school records have been examined for any information on student characteristics and data on student age, course and Grade completion that may provide insight as to why some students remain in school until graduation, whereas others terminate their secondary education prior to graduation. Of those who chose to terminate their education before graduating very few returned to

complete their education at a later date, and of those who did return few (1 in 4) were successful in graduating (Karp, 1988). More males returned to school than females, though the reasons have yet to be assessed (Earle & Roach, 1989; Peng, 1985).

Background characteristics of drop-out students may be divided into environmental factors (e.g., socio-economic status, number of siblings) and those which are school related (e.g., academic failure, dislike of school). Educators have addressed mainly those factors which are school related. Researchers have determined that number of siblings and low level of mother's schooling were important background characteristics, particularly for females (Earle & Roach, 1989; Peng, 1985; Rumberger, 1983). While these two factors may have been important for both sexes, females who had a large number of siblings and females whose mothers had low levels of schooling were more likely than males with similar backgrounds to be drop-outs.

Following a review of the literature available on potential secondary school drop-outs, Self (1985, p.13) compiled a comprehensive list of factors leading to drop-out. The factors included (a) poor academic and reading ability, (b) a dislike of school, (c) poorly educated parents, (d) high Grade retention, (e) discipline problems, (f) low socio-economic status, (g) high absenteeism, (h) low self-esteem, (i) lack of long term goals and aspirations, (j) lack of identification with and participation in schools." Finn (1989) stressed the interdependency of factors leading to dropout. He specified lack of self-

esteem, lack of identification with and participation in school, and alienation from school as being particularly critical. In his opinion, lack of self-esteem was related to a lack of participation in school, which, in turn led to alienation from school.

The most commonly cited reason for leaving school has been that the student has "lost interest" in school (Self, 1985). Leaving school, however, is often preceded by a complex set of events and may in many cases be averted (Finn, 1989). Loss of interest in school may be the result of school failure and/or low self esteem which may be aggravated by a lack of parental support or a low value placed on education in the home. Reasons commonly cited by students when questioned about dropping out may be divided into school related and environmental reasons, though reasons most often cited are school-related (Self, 1985). School related reasons include lack of interest and dislike of school, academic failure, poor reading ability, discipline problems, high absenteeism and non-attendance, and poor student-teacher relationships. Evironmentally related reasons include employment, marriage, and pregnancy.

Students at risk of dropping out of school have had a variety of reasons, many of them complex, for withdrawing from school. Wehlage et al. (1989) in their report on schools as "communities of support" provided several fascinating case studies of students who dropped out of the regular school. Students who experienced academic failure or who had poor reading

ability often found themselves at a disadvantage in regular high schools. They were unable to complete assignments, or required extra help and encouragement to remain in school. Students who had a background which included poorly educated parents who may or may not have placed value on education, or students who were required to work to help provide income found it difficult to complete high school.

Students have been questioned as to why they did not ask for help before they quit (Self, 1985). More than half of the students questioned (53%) in the studies reviewed said they did not feel they needed or wanted help and that they wanted to make their own decisions. Many did not trust anyone at school and several said they did not want anyone to know their problems.

The interaction between the school and the student has played a crucial role in an individual's decision to drop out (Wehlage et al., 1989). Students who displayed the behaviours which caused them to be referred to an alternative program (e.g., academic failure, discipline problems, non-attendance) exhibited a wide range of characteristics. Such students required creative, individualized and flexible educational options (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1988). Catterall and Stern (1986) suggested that researchers turn their attention from characteristics of the students, to practices of schools, in order to understand student retention patterns.

Drop-out Intervention Programs

Educators have responded to the problem of keeping drop-outs in school by providing a variety of services (e.g., alternative schools, vocational programs). Several studies have examined the effectiveness of programs created to intervene in the dropping out process, however, most research on intervention programs has been limited to descriptive case studies (cf. Gold & Mann, 1984; Wehalge et al., 1989).

Measures taken by school staffs to encourage student retention in school have focused on providing positive experiences for students. According to Finn (1989), opportunities for positive experiences which address the multiplicity of factors leading to drop-out include the following:

1. Organization of separate schools for "at risk" students,
2. Disciplinary measures more appropriate to the needs of adolescents,
3. Revised curriculum more apporpriate to the needs of at-risk students,
4. Positive teacher attitudes, and
5. More student involvement in the learning process.

Finn has corroborated earlier work by others interested in programs for at risk students (cf. Csapo & Stevens, 1982; Gold & Mann 1984; Hawkins & Lam, 1987; Newmann, 1981; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Students in an alternative program have experienced a withdrawal or an alienation from school whether it be as a result of absenteeism, disruptive behaviour or delinquency (Hawkins & Lam, 1987). Newmann (1981) proposed that the

alienation of students from the schools could be addressed by allowing for a smaller school and class size, which in turn would allow for more participation and identification with the school, minimal rules and flexibility in schedules and choice of teachers as well as a more integrated curriculum. Counselling and teaching basic academic skills were also considered important components of an effective intervention program (Self, 1985).

Staff in schools have developed a variety of programs with the explicit purpose of retaining students until they graduate. However, it has been demonstrated that participation in an alternative program has not been sufficient in and of itself to reduce drop-out (Catterall & Stern, 1986). Early research pointed to the fact that students were more successful in terms of behavioural change in programs which focused on academic rather than vocational or social skills intervention (Csapo & Stevens, 1982). More recently, researchers have found that participation in an alternative program was most successful in terms of the student maintaining a higher paying and more satisfying job when students were retained in school until graduation and when students were retained in programs other than those with a vocational focus (Catterall & Stern, 1986).

There continues to be a need for programs which help young people combine work and school, which help pregnant teens stay in school, and/or which provide a more accommodating environment for students who are dissatisfied with the school environment (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack & Rock,

1986). Many of these needs have been addressed by the creation of programs such as: (a) alternative programs in which students are taught individually or in small groups using non-traditional methods; (b) school modification programs in which regular curricula are modified for students who function at lower academic levels; (c) vocational education programs which provide supervised work experience or training in work-related skills as well as modified academics; and (d) counselling programs which focus on students' personal or interpersonal difficulties. Such programs may be independent of a school, or situated within schools. Students may spend all or any portion of their time in such programs. Many programs require students to be partially integrated into the regular program (Wehlage et al., 1989) The creation of programs has responded to the needs of specific populations. However, it has been suggested that academic upgrading should be the major focus of alternative education with the goal of reintegrating the student into the regular stream (Csapo & Stevens, 1982).

Students labelled as having social and emotional problems who were at risk of dropping out have often been served in separate programs such as alternative schools where lower pupil/teacher ratios, attention to counselling issues and modified materials were some of the methods used to improve school attendance and increase academic skill levels. The effects of alternative school programs on student behaviour (Gold & Mann, 1984) and the effect of alternative school practices on such factors as high school

alienation and drop-out (Rumberger, 1987) have been demonstrated to be positive. In studies on the effects of an alternative school program on behaviour, researchers found that there was a significant reduction of in-school disruptive behaviour, an increase in student's optimism about the chances to succeed at school, and an increase in their commitment to the academic role of the student (Gold & Mann 1984; Self, 1985). Such positive effects were reported in spite of the stigma which may accompany participation in an alternative program.

It has been demonstrated that the most successful programs were those which keep students in school until they graduate by way of providing a vocational program or an academic program which encourages students to remain within the mainstream of regular education (Catterall & Stern, 1986). Successful programs were different from regular school programs in terms of providing a more flexible structure and staff who responded to the needs of individual students, as opposed to regular schools with their typically more rigid timetabling and large classes which precluded individualized instruction. Students interviewed in Luby's (1989) study on drop-outs asked for caring and accepting teachers and counsellors, flexibility in curriculum and scheduling, peer support groups, relevancy in learning materials, and fewer restrictive rules and regulations.

A few alternative programs provide a full academic graduation program. However, for the most part, students spend varying amounts of

time in alternative programs and are then required to return to regular programs to graduate. For those alternative school students who are sufficiently motivated to return to regular school to complete their education there may not be enough support available to survive the transition from a special program to a regular program (in which they were previously unsuccessful). Despite support, some students described as having social and emotional problems may not be successfully integrated and may continue to require special programs (Csapo & Stevens, 1982).

Post-Program Follow-up Studies

Most follow-up studies which have investigated the post-program outcomes of students with varying disabilities who have received services from public schools have focused primarily on students who were learning disabled or mentally retarded (cf. Hasazi et al., 1985; Horn, O'Donnell, & Vitulano, 1983; Mithaug et al., 1985; Thurlow et al., 1989). Follow-up studies of special education students have, in the past, focused primarily on employment outcomes of students in special education programs (e.g., mentally and physically handicapping conditions) with the rationale that employment data were the most easily measured aspect of the students' post-program life (Hazasi et al., 1985; Mithaug et al., 1985). Studies revealed that approximately 60% of students in special education programs found employment after leaving public school (Hazasi et al., 1985). However, few former students of special education programs become successfully employed

in jobs that provide adequate incomes or job satisfaction (Peng, 1985; Thurlow et al., 1989). Such findings suggest a need for more support for continued education, since employment rates and satisfaction with employment increase with education.

Researchers who have undertaken follow-up studies on students with social and emotional problems have examined data on occupational status, economic status or financial independence, social integration, and the transition process from school to work (cf. Benz & Halpern, 1987; Catterall & Stern, 1986; Mithaug et al., 1985; Thurlow et al., 1989). The results of such investigations have been a cause for concern to educators since, regardless of disability, special education students in most cases fared worse than their peers in regular programs in the areas of occupational status, financial independence, and social integration. Specifically, where students in programs for emotional and behavioural problems were studied, it was found that students scored lower on measures of economic and social independence than their peers without handicaps and even below their peers with other handicaps (Thurlow et al., 1989).

One of the difficulties with surveys of special education populations has been a lack of specificity in the identification of the population involved and an inability to generalize results (Edgar, 1985). While Edgar argued that behaviourally disordered and mildly handicapped (i.e., learning disabled and mildly mentally handicapped) groups were similar in terms of post-school

experiences, Thurlow and her colleagues (1988) argued that the groups were unique and, consequently, they needed to be studied individually. Their findings that special education students with social and emotional problems fared worse than other special education students in post-program measures of success, such as employment and job satisfaction suggested that such students may have required more or different types of support in order to graduate from school.

Surveys which have compared post program results of special education students to regular education students have revealed an alarming disparity in the low numbers of students in special education who have completed graduation requirements, as compared to students in regular programs (c.f., Catterall & Stern, 1986; Horn et al., 1983; Padilla & Jay, 1988). Dropping out of school has had serious consequences for all students. The proportion of the labor force holding high school diplomas has become a majority, therefore, high school drop-outs have been at a distinct disadvantage (Peng, 1985). Drop-outs have had fewer opportunites in the job market and their educational deficits have reduced severely their economic and social opportunities throughout their lives (Catterall & Stern, 1986; Glaser & Kley, 1982; Rumberger, 1987). Within two years of dropping out many of the drop-outs in a survey of high school students conducted by Peng (1985) felt that they had made a poor decision. They were working at lower paying jobs and had experienced less job satisfaction than their peers who had

graduated. Female drop-outs earned less than half the income of male drop -outs.

A post high school survey of students in Ontario (Karp, 1988) revealed that of the students who had dropped out of school before graduation, approximately half planned to return to school. Of those who had returned, however, only one in four managed to graduate successfully. Those who returned found the experience a more positive one than their original experience had been. Students reported that they returned to complete high school in order to improve job prospects. The students who returned cited the relevancy of school and of the curriculum as major concerns in their decision to drop-out.

Summary

Surveys of the post high school and post special program experience of students have revealed a discrepancy between the number of special program students, particularly those labelled as having social and emotional problems, and the number of their peers in regular programs who complete high school and subsequently achieve job satisfaction and adequate income. Few students who have dropped out have been successful in completing their education at a later date. The negative effects of not completing a high school education in terms of employment, job satisfaction and quality of life have been demonstrated (Horn et al., 1983; Karp, 1988; Peng, 1985; Rumberger, 1987; Thurlow et al., 1989). While programs which have been developed to retain

potential drop-out students until graduation have been successful, more information is required on the effectiveness of special education programs, such as those offered by alternative schools, for secondary students described as having social and emotional difficulties.

CHAPTER III

Method

The information presented in Chapter III includes the procedures which were used to investigate students' perceptions of their experience before, during and after the transition from an alternative school to a regular school. The chapter is divided into the following sections: (a) Selection of Subjects (b) Development of the Interview Protocol, (c) Procedure for Data Collection, and (d) Summary

The researcher used a telephone interview to survey a population of 40 alternative school students who had returned to the regular school programs. Copies of the telephone protocol soliciting participation by the student, the letter requesting parent or guardian permission, and the questionnaire administered to the subjects, can be located in Appendices A, B, and C.

Selection of Subjects

The students in this study were former students of the S. J. Willis Educational Centre (S.J.W.E.C.), between the ages of fifteen and twenty, who had returned to the regular public school system to complete their education. They were representative of the group of students who have met a stated goal of alternative programs, that is, to be reintegrated into the regular school system. The students had been enrolled at S.J.W.E.C. during the 1988-89 or the 1989-90 school year. All subjects had been referred to S.J.W.E.C. after they

had exhibited behaviours associated with social or emotional problems (e.g., depression, low self esteem, chronic attendance problems, lack of motivation) and had returned to regular school after spending six months to one year in the S.J.W.E.C. program.

The names of all students who had returned to regular schools after leaving the S.J.W.E.C. program were obtained from S.J.W.E.C. exit forms, as well as from registration rosters at the various receiving schools (i.e., regular education high schools) for the 1990/91 school year. The original pool of subjects included 49 male and 26 female students (total = 75). Forty students were sucessfully interviewed. The remaining 35 students were unavailable for an interview (e.g., due to job commitments) or were not located by the researcher (i.e., had moved, had no telephone).

Development of Interview Protocol

Initial contact with the student to confirm participation was made by telephone. A copy of the protocol is contained in Appendix A. For students under the age of 19 the researcher obtained written permission from the parent or guardian prior to the interview. A copy of the permission form can be found in Appendix B.

The questionnaire that solicited information of post-program experiences of alternative school students who had returned to a regular school was developed after examining the literature available on secondary alternative school students (cf., Luby, 1989; Self, 1985) and on designing

surveys (cf., Borg & Gall, 1990; Bruininks et al., 1990; Sudman & Bradburn, 1982).

The telephone survey consisted of 18 questions of which six required forced choice answers; the remaining 12 questions were open-ended. The questions elicited information about (a) the reasons students had left the regular school, (b) the reasons they returned to the regular school, (c) the difficulties they had faced upon return to a regular school, (d) the level of success they had achieved, (e) students' perceptions of service they had received in alternative and regular schools, as well as, (f) suggestions for improvement of service.

Procedure for Data Collection

The study involved four phases. Phase 1 consisted of examining, analyzing, and compiling statistics from the exit data available from the S. J. Willis program during the years 1988-89 and 1989-90 by means of withdrawal forms and year-end reports. During phase 1 the records of S.J.W.E.C. and those of all schools which received students who left S.J.W.E.C. were examined to collect the names of the students to be interviewed. Total numbers of students enrolled, numbers of students leaving to return to the regular program, and the number of students who left to work or look for work were compared over two school years (i.e., 1988/89 and 1989/90). Numbers of students leaving the program to go to the following were tallied:

1) Another alternative school program
2) Pre-Employment program

3) Career preparation program
4) Vocational training program
5) Community college (e.g., Camosun)
6) Regular graduation program (Dogwood)
7) Workforce

Phase 2 of the study consisted of pre-testing the questionnaire. Four students who were enrolled at S. J. Willis during the 1990-91 fall semester and returned to the regular schools during the spring semester of the 1990-91 school year were included in the pre-test. The four students who participated in the pre-test were asked individually to provide feedback on the questions (i.e., relevancy and clarity of questions). No major changes were made in the interview protocol subsequent to the pre-testing as the questions appeared to be clear and relevant to the students' experience. The data obtained from the pre-test were not included in the final analysis.

Phase 3 consisted of telephoning former alternative school students who were at that time attending regular school programs and administering the questionnaire over the telephone. Parent/guardian permission was obtained if the student was under 19 years of age. An attempt was made to reach all students who had been enrolled in S. J. Willis Educational Centre during the 1988-89 and 1989-90 school years and who were enrolled in a regular school during the 1990-91 school year.

At the time of the first telephone contact it was determined whether or not the student would allow him or herself to be included in the study. The interviewer spoke to the student and the parent/guardian individually over the telephone (making a second phone call if necessary to speak to both

parties), explaining the nature of the study and informing the parent/guardian of the need for the prompt return of a signed permission form which would be sent to him/her. Upon receipt of verbal permission, a letter (Appendix B) with a stamped, self addressed envelope was sent to the parent or guardian explaining the nature of the study and asking for the letter to be returned promptly with signed permission. Upon receipt of signed permission the interviewer telephoned the student to proceed with the interview. The telephone interview required approximately twenty minutes to complete.

Phase 4 consisted of analyzing, compiling and categorizing the data. Exit data were examined and compared for trends or patterns (e.g., numbers of students leaving to go to regular school as opposed to those who leave to work). The data obtained by means of the interview were examined for similarities in responses given to the open-ended questions (e.g., suggestions for improvement of services). Frequency counts were tallied for forced choice questions. The data were examined for patterns of response.

Summary

A telephone interview was used in this study to survey a population of alternative school students who had returned to regular school programs. The students were questioned as to (a) their reasons for leaving regular school, (b) their experience in both the alternative and the regular school, (c) their suggestions for improvement of services in both the alternative and the

regular school, and (d) their suggestions for other alternative school students. The data from the interviews and from the alternative school exit data were examined for trends or patterns.

CHAPTER IV

Results and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experience of former alternative schools students who had returned to a regular high school in order to complete their education. The investigation attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. How many students left the S. J. Willis Educational Centre (1) to return to regular secondary school, (2) to find employment, or (3) to attend community college?
2. Of those students who returned to a regular program, how many returned to (1) regular graduation program (i.e., Dogwood), (2) pre-employment program, (3) career preparation program, or (4) co-op program?
3. How many students who returned to the regular school programs felt adequately prepared?
4. How many students who returned to the regular program felt they were succeeding in their chosen courses, and how many hoped to complete their programs?
5. What types of problems were encountered by those students who returned to a regular school?

6. Was the assistance provided by the S. J. Willis program teachers and counsellors to facilitate return beneficial to those who returned to a regular program?
7. Was the assistance provided by the regular school teachers and counsellors beneficial to those who returned to the regular program?
8. What specific suggestions do returning students offer that might assist (1) staff at S. J. Willis and (2) staff in regular programs in preparing students for reintegration in the future?

The data for this study were obtained, by means of a telephone interview, from students who had previously left a regular high school for reasons labelled as behavioural or emotional problems and had been referred to an alternative school. These students had all attended the S. J. Willis Educational Centre for a variable period of time and had subsequently been reintegrated into a regular high school setting. The study was conducted during the months of April, May and June, 1991.

The information presented in Chapter IV includes the the results obtained from the investigation of the perceptions of former alternative high school students of the experiences they had encountered in the transition from an alternative school back to a regular high school. The chapter is divided into the following sections: a) Examination of Student Exit Data, b) Responses to the Interview Questions and (c) Student Profiles.

Examination of Student Exit Data

Student exit data were obtained from the year-end reports of S. J. Willis Edcuational Centre for the school years 1988/89 and 1989/90. Information regarding student exit data, based on declared exit intentions at the end of June 1989 or 1990 is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Student Exit Data (as determined by stated intentions at June 30)

	School year		
Students exited to:	1988/89	1989/90	Total
1) Workforce	62	55	117
2) Regular public school program (i.e., Dogwood Certificate)	8	9	17
3) Pre-Employment Program	4	10	14
4) Another alternative school program	5	7	12
5) Career preparation program	0	0	0
6) Vocational training program	0	0	0
7) Community college (e.g., Camosun)	0	0	0
8) Exit data unavailable	69	86	155
Total	148	167	315

The number of students (n = 17) leaving S. J. Willis Educational Centre to go to a regular school represented the number of students who had indicated in June 1989 or 1990 that they intended to return to a regular high school the following September. Many more students, in fact, returned to the regular school than was indicated by the data available from the S. J. Willis year-end reports (see Description of Sample). Students often made the decision to register in regular school programs over the summer or at the beginning of the school year which differed from their stated intentions in June.

Description of the Sample

The population of students intended to be interviewed for this study consisted of 49 male and 26 female secondary school students (total = 75) who had been former S. J. Willis students and who were registered in regular school at the time of the study. This group of 75 students had been previously referred to the S.J.W.E.C. because they had been experiencing difficulties in school such as inappropriate behaviour, academic failure, or non-attendance, which may have stemmed from social or emotional problems.

The population consisted of those students who stated in June 1989 or 1990 that they intended to return to the regular program (n = 17) and others (n = 58) who decided independently to return over the summer months or in September, prior to school opening.

The researcher was able to contact 40 students who had been former S. J. Willis students and had subsequently registered in a regular school program. The sample represented 53% of the original population of students. The researcher was unable to interview students who had moved, were unavailable to be interviewed during the time period of the study due to work schedules or other reasons, or who had no telephone service. The inability to contact students is a common problem in research on students who attend alternative schools as this population is characterized as being transient and consequently difficult to contact (Luby, 1989; Wehlage et al., 1989). Information regarding the age of respondents, by sex, is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Age and Sex of Respondents (N = 40)

Age	Male	Female	Total
15	1	0	1
16	2	3	5
17	8	4	12
18	8	3	11
19	6	2	8
20	2	1	3
TOTAL	27	13	40
Mean age	17.8	17.8	17.8
Median age	18	17	18

Over 80% of the subjects were either 17 or 18 years of age. This finding was not unexpected as the majority of students attending S.J.W.E.C. are 15 or 16 years of age and most students spend at least one year in the alternative program prior to re-entry into the regular public school program.

Gender of respondents. The sample included 27 male students (67.5%) and 13 females (32.5%). The proportion of males to females in the sample is similar to the proportion of males to females in the total population. Based on available enrollment data, the population of the S. J. Willis Educational

Centre was distributed equally between males and females over the course of the 1988/89 and 1989/90 school years. Although the population was not constant (i.e., students entered and left the program at any time throughout the school year), the average number of females was 74 (52%) over the course of the year while the average number of males was 69 (48%). A study of several varied alternative school populations revealed that in most alternative school programs males and females were equally represented unless the program was specifically a vocational program, in which case it would be predominently male, or a program for pregnant teens, in which case it was a totally female population (Wehlage et al., 1989). There were a larger number of male than female students returning to the regular school in the current study (Male = 49 and Female = 26). The number of students contacted in the current study, though not intended, was consistent with the higher number of males than females returning to the regular program (Male = 27; Female = 13). A review of the literature on drop-outs has revealed that males are more likely to return to school to complete their education (Earle & Roach, 1989).

Responses to the Interview Questions

Responses to the interview questions were examined individually. They have been presented individually, or in relation to responses to another question where patterns or relationships were evident, and not necessarily in the order in which they were asked in the interview.

Question #1: Why did you leave regular school to go to S. J. Willis?

This was a forced choice question in which students were asked to rank reasons for leaving the regular school in terms of most important to least important. The reasons offered were those which appeared repeatedly in the literature on high school drop-outs, however, students were encouraged to offer additional reasons that applied to their particular situation. The reasons given for leaving regular school, by rank order, are presented in Table 3. It should be noted that some students gave only one reason (i.e., the primary reason) whereas others offered additional reasons. Consequently, the number of reasons given totals to more than 40.

Table 3

Reasons Given for Leaving Regular School

Reason	Order of Importance			Total
	#1	#2	#3	
Lost interest in school.	19	3	1	23
Problems with the teachers.	6	8	2	16
Got behind in assignments	1	6	8	15
Courses were too difficult	7	1	0	8
School schedules not flexible	0	2	5	7
Working full or part-time	0	0	1	1
Personal problems	2	0	1	3
Other	5	0	0	5
Total number of responses	40	20	18	78

In the category of 'other' students responded; "I needed a change," "I could not get extra help," "I was asked to leave," "I was on the street," and "Everything about the school was a problem."

In order to determine whether or not the gender of students resulted in differences for leaving school, the data were examined separately. Information regarding reasons for leaving school reported by male and female students is presented in Table 4. It should be noted that most students (both male and female) reported more than one reason for leaving.

Table 4

Reasons Reported for Leaving Regular School By Gender

Reason for leaving school	Male (n=27)	Female (n=13)
Lost interest in school	15	8
Problems with the teachers.	10	6
Got behind in assignments	9	6
Courses were too difficult	4	4
School schedules not flexible	4	3
Working full or part-time	1	0
Personal problems	0	3
Other	3	2

In the present study, overall, "loss of interest" in school was the most commonly reported reason for leaving, however, more females (62%) indicated that this is a reason than males (52%). In fact, for all reasons given, the percentage of women reporting a specific reason was higher than corresponding percentage of males, except for males who reported they left to go to work full or part-time. This finding differed from previous research which indicated that females were more likely to report personal reasons and such school related reasons as low academic achievement and low self-esteem (Earle & Roach,1989; Rumberger, 1983).

Loss of interest in school has been the most commonly reported reason for students leaving school in studies on dropouts (Self, 1985). Loss of interest may have been the result of other factors such as school failure or difficulties at home. Although the interdependency of factors leading to drop-out was not examined in this study, as noted many students gave more than one reason for leaving school.

Question #2: Why did you return to a regular school?

This was an open-ended question in which students were encouraged to be candid about their reasons for returning to a regular school. The reasons reported were examined individually and subsequently grouped by common themes. The reasons offered by theme are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

Reasons Reported for Returning to Regular School

Reasons for returning	Number
Wanted to graduate (i.e., Dogwood Certificate)	20
Wanted the Pre-Employment Program	8
Wanted the regular program/regular work	6
Wanted to be with friends/missed social life	4
Needed courses not offered at S. J. Willis	2

There were a large number of students (50%) who returned because they wanted to graduate. Of this group there were a small number of students (4) who specifically expressed a goal of going to university. The other 16 students indicated that, at that time, they were interested in completing Grade 12 and expressed no plans to go to university.

Students who entered the Pre-Employment Program (P.E.P.) did so with the intent of finishing a modified Grade twelve program rather than a Dogwood graduation program. The P.E.P. program allowed those students with poor academic ability to achieve a school leaving certificate rather than a Dogwood Certificate. It should be noted that students would have been referred to P.E.P. and would have undergone academic and psychological assessment to determine their eligiblity for this program.

Ten students (25%) indicated that they chose to return to regular school because they wanted regular programs and wanted to be with their friends. Only two students (5%) returned because courses were unavailable at S. J. Willis. One of these students indicated that, in his opinion, needing to go elsewhere to complete course credits was the only reason students left S. J. Willis.

Question #3: When you went back to the regular program what program did you register in?

Information on the programs chosen by students upon return to the regular school is presented in Table 6.

Table 6

Student Program Registration in Regular School

Program	Number
Graduation Program	27
Pre-Employment Program	8
Career Preparation	5

The students who returned to the regular program overwhelmingly chose the regular graduation program once they returned to regular school. The eight students who chose a Pre-Employment Program (which leads to a modified graduation certificate) would have been referred by their teachers in the alternative program. Of the five students who chose Career Preparation courses (which also lead to graduation), three students chose auto-body, one chose a recreation progam and one chose a cook's training program.

Question #4: What courses have you enrolled in since you have been back? Which ones have you finished?

This was an open-ended question. Students indicated which courses they had enrolled in and which courses they had completed since they had returned to regular school. Their responses are presented in Table 7. It should be noted that the responses of students enrolled in the P.E.P. program (n = 8) were not included in the analysis as the P. E. P. program includes a prescribed set of courses which the students complete at their own pace. It should also be noted that several students fit into more than one category, therefore the totals may be more than 32.

Table 7

Courses Completed in Regular Programs and Courses Remaining to Complete Graduation Requirements

Courses in Regular School	Number of Students (n = 32)
Courses completed/will be completed by June/91	
1 - 4 courses (Grade 10)	12
1 - 4 courses (Grade 11 & 12)	13
5 - 8 courses (Grade 11 & 12)	11
9 - 12 courses (Grade 11 & 12)	4
Courses still required in order to graduate	
1 - 4 courses (Grade 10)	2
1 - 4 courses (Grade 11 & 12)	2
5 - 8 courses (Grade 11 & 12)	5
9 - 12 courses (Grade 11 & 12)	18

Students who returned to the regular program left S. J. Willis with varying numbers of courses at the Grade 9, 10, 11 or 12 level completed. However, all of the students reported that they had completed 1 or more courses. A small proportion (35%) had completed 5 or more courses. This statistic should be interpreted with caution since some students had been in the regular school for less than one school year, whereas others had been there for more than one year. On the whole, the group of students who have returned to the regular school appeared to be strongly motivated. They had

completed from two to thirteen courses each, depending upon the length of time they had been back in the regular school. Most students (18) had the majority of their program still to complete but felt that they would complete their program of studies, as planned. Six students indicated that they hoped to graduate in 1991 and two students anticipated graduating in 1992.

Question #5: Were you prepared to return to regular school?

Question #6: Will you complete your program?

These two questions required a "yes/no" response, however, students were asked to provide reasons for a "no" response. The two questions were asked separately, but for the purpose of examining the data they were combined to determine if there were any relationships between (a) students who felt they had been prepared to return to regular school and who were successful in completing their programs, (b) students who felt they were prepared and were not successful, (c) students who felt they had not been prepared to return and were successful and (d) students who had not felt they were prepared and were not successful in completing their programs. A tabulation of student responses is presented in Table 8.

Table 8

Students' Responses: Preparation for Regular School and Possible Completion of Program

Responses	Yes	No
Prepared to return to regular school	35	5
Will complete program	32	8

Eighty-eight percent of repondents (35) felt that they had been prepared to return to the regular school. Eighty percent of the respondents (32) stated that they would complete their programs. A total of 29 students felt they had been prepared to return to the regular school and would complete their programs. Of the 32 students enrolled in a regular graduation program, 22 stated that they felt they had been prepared to return to a regular school and would complete their program. All but one of the students enrolled in the Pre-Employment Program stated that they felt they had been prepared and would complete their program. The one student who stated that he would not complete the program felt he had not been prepared and would not complete the Pre-Employment Program, however, he planned to continue in another program.

Of the five students who felt they had been prepared to return but would not complete their programs, two stated that the problems were personal and not related to the school. Both of these students were female. Two female students who had been prepared to return, but were unsuccessful, stated "I went back to the wrong school." Finally, a male student who said he had been prepared to return but would not complete his program was working and finding attendance a problem.

Four of the five students who felt they were not prepared also felt they would not complete. The student who felt he had not been prepared, but would complete his program was enrolled in a regular graduation program.

He suggested that the alternative program should have been "more regulated." The other four who said "No" to both questions were asked why they felt they were not prepared and why they would not complete their program. A student in the Pre-Employment Program, who seemed to be confused about his placement in the program said that he had not been prepared and that the program had not "worked for him." One student suggested he had not been prepared to be "on his own" so much in the regular school, but that he would probably not finish because he had been sick. Another student stated she was not prepared for the structure and class requirements but that she would not finish because of personal reasons rather than school-related reasons. The fourth student suggested that he might never be prepared to return to complete school because of his "problems with authority."

Question #7: What difficulties did you encounter in regular school after attending an alternative school?

This was a forced-choice question. Difficulties commonly encountered by students in the regular school, offered as possible responses, were selected from a review of the literature on high school drop-outs (cf. Finn, 1989; Gold & Mann, 1984; Rumberger, 1987; Self, 1985; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986).

Students were asked to respond to each situation stating whether it had or had not been a problem. Some students identified more than one problem; others indicated that they had not encountered any problems. Information on the problems encountered by alternative students upon return to regular school in presented in Table 9.

Table 9

Difficulties Encountered Upon Re-entry into the Regular School

Difficulty	Number of responses
Schedules were not flexible	14
Could not get help from teachers	9
Courses too difficult	8
Course load too heavy	5
Felt like an outsider	0
Other	7
No problems encountered	12

For the twenty-eight respondents who stated that they had encountered problems, it appeared that school schedules were of major concern. Schedules may have represented a loss of freedom and flexibilty for some students since at risk or alternative school students prefered to work at their own pace, and schedules at the secondary level do not allow for individual working styles or pace (Wehlage, et al., 1989). Class schedules would in turn have affected availability of teachers to the students. Lack of availablity of teachers also appeared to present a problem, especially if the courses were difficult.

Student responses in the category of 'other' difficulties encountered upon return to the regular program included: "Too many friends," "I was older," "Could not work at my own pace," "Monotonous and unchallenging," "Transportation was a problem," "I had mono," and "Motivation was not there."

Several students, six (75%) in the Pre-Employment Program and six (15%) in the graduation program, responded that they had not encountered difficulties and that the transition had not presented a problem. Several of those who did not appear to have difficulties expressed surprise and/or pleasure about the relative ease of resuming their regular education.

Most students in the Pre-Employment Program felt they had adequate support from their teachers and counsellors, however, the majority of students in the graduation program reported experiencing difficulties.

Question #8: How were you helped by teachers and counsellors at S. J. Willis to return to the regular school?

This was asked as a forced-choice question. The categories of help offered were selected from the kinds of support necessary for student success which appeared repeatedly in the literature on alternative schools (cf. Csapo & Stevens, 1982; Gold & Mann, 1984; Luby, 1989; Mann & Gold, 1981; Wehlage et al., 1989). The students were asked how the staff (i.e., teachers and counsellors) had supported them prior to their reintegration into the regular program. Many students indicated that more than one form of help had been offered. Information on the type of help received by students from staff in the S. J. Willis Educational Centre is presented in Table 10.

Table 10

Support Provided by Alternative School Staff

Type of Support	Number of responses
Provided necessary courses	33
Provided information on courses	29
Let student know that counsellors were available to the student at any time	27
Introduced the student to teacher or counsellor in the regular program	19
Other	8

The students' responses in the category of "other" were representative of the types of support which would be provided in an alternative program. For example, students appreciated being able to work at their own pace, having some help in making choices and having their efforts recognized and rewarded.

Question #9: What did you do to help yourself at S. J. Willis?

This was asked as an open-ended question. Students were asked to think about what their role had been at S. J. Willis and how they had prepared to return to regular school. Reponses to this question clustered around major themes such as completing coursework required to continue in the regular school, and learning about themselves.

Of the thirty-six students who responded with comments, twenty-one felt they had used their time well by completing the courses they needed to return to regular school. Several students (8) had taken the opportunity to think about whether they wanted to be in school. Comments such as "I changed my attitude towards learning," "I smartened up," "I gained confidence" and "It made me think I had to go back" are representative of the comments made by students who had taken time to review their situation. One student had used the time to get counselling on personal issues and found it well spent.

Question #10: How did teachers help you or provide support for you once you re-entered the regular school?

This was a forced-choice question with responses offered which would represent the types of support alternative students might require in regular schools. The suggested responses were selected by the researcher from the types of support necessary for student success in the regular schools as reported by counsellors and teachers in the regular school.

Responses offered by the students in the graduation program were examined separately from the responses given by students in the Pre-Employment Program. Students in the Pre-Employment Program have had the benefit of a program in which the staff was aware of the students' difficulties with academics and school structure, whereas former alternative school students in a regular graduation program have been re-integrated into a program in which it may be difficult to recognize and support students with special needs. Since some students have provided more than one response while other students had no response, the totals will not equal 40. Information on the types of support received by alternative school students upon re-entry to the regular school is presented in Table 11.

Table 11

Support Provided by Teachers in Regular School

Support Provided by Teachers	Program		Total
	Graduation	P.E.P.	
Kept in touch	13	5	18
Asked if extra help was needed	8	2	10
Assisted students in choosing courses	6	2	8
Arranged for peer tutoring	2	0	2
Provided learning assistance	0	0	0
Other	0	0	0

Responses to this question indicated an apparent lack of teacher support for the regular graduation program students involved in this study, however, it should be noted that a few students (3) stated that they expressly did not want any help, did not need help, and did not want special treatment simply because they had come from an alternative school. Five students responded that only certain teachers were available for help, and three students suggested that they were passing courses but would have liked more help. These three students indicated that they had asked for help. Three other students noted teacher support specifically and were pleased that their teachers recognized that they needed more time to complete an assignment

or that teachers took a student's schedule into consideration.

Students in the P.E.P. program made such statements as "The teacher was more like an alternative school teacher," "I'm friends with my teacher," "They're great," and "They really care." Five of the eight P.E.P. students (63%) responded that the teachers "kept in touch" with them which contrasts to 13 of the 32 regular graduation program students (41%) who gave the same response. This finding was not surprising since Pre-Employment Programs are characterized by low pupil/teacher ratio.

Question #11: How did the counsellors help you or provide support for you once you re-entered the regular school?

This was a forced-choice question in which the students were offered a number of recognized counselling roles and asked if they had received support in any of the categories suggested. The counselling roles were selected by the researcher after discussions with counsellors and teachers who worked with alternative school students in regular school settings. Some students reported more than one category of help. All students were encouraged to report any help they had received which did not fit any of the categories offered.

Responses from graduation program and Pre-Employment Program students were examined separately since Pre-Employment Programs provided service to a small number of students whose need for a vocational type of program with modified academics has been recognized, as opposed to the regular graduation program which served large numbers of students in traditional classroom settings. Information on the support former alternative school students reported that they had received from counsellors in the regular high school is presented in Table 12.

Table 12

Support Provided by Counsellors in Regular School

Support provided by Counsellors	Program		Total
	Graduation	P.E.P.	
Assisted student in choosing courses	17	3	20
Kept in touch	10	4	14
Asked if help was needed	8	3	11
Arranged for peer counsellors	1	0	1
Other	2	1	3

Twelve students had not received support from counsellors while twenty-eight of the students had received help in one or more categories. Four of the students reported that they did not want help. It would appear that although students who have attended alternative schools are known to have been at risk of dropping out, they received limited support from the counsellors other than help in choosing courses.

Two respondents suggested that counsellors were too busy and had too many people to deal with. One student did not want to be treated differently because he had been an alternative school student. Two students had not used the school counsellors but, rather, had sought a Native Student

counsellor for help.

In the category of "other" one student student reported that the counsellors had intervened so that the student could have some time off. Another student expressed appreciation that a counsellor had helped with her personal problems. One of the older students in the graduation program had worked with a counsellor in a peer counselling role and felt that, as well as having been able to help other alternative school students, she had gained from the experience personally .

Question #12: Do you think you are having more success in the regular school this time around?

The students were asked to explain their perceived success or lack of it in their own terms. Students who responded "yes" or "no" to this question were asked to provide reasons for either response. Information on student perception of their success after reintegration into the regular school is presented, by gender, in Table 13.

Table 13

Students' Perceived Success in the Regular Program

	Gender		
Level of success	Male	Female	Total
More	22	8	30
Less	5	5	10
Total number of students	27	13	40

The high rate of perceived student success upon return to regular high school (75%) expressed in this study was consistent with findings from other studies on drop-outs (Karp, 1988). Reasons for success clustered around three main themes: students were more motivated, more mature, or had developed better self esteem. The students' reported reasons for lack of success were varied. They included personal reasons and racial problems, and were characterized by comments such as, "Could not get into it," "Got sick and couldn't finish," and "Went back to the wrong school."

Five students who had previously said that they were prepared to go back to regular school (Question #5) reported they had <u>not</u> met with more success. Three of them reported that their lack of success had to do with personal problems, while two reported that they may have been more successful had they gone to another school.

Question #13: Is there anything else that the teachers or counsellors at the S. J. Willis Educational Centre could have done that they did not do?

Question #14: Is there anything else that the teachers and counsellors in the regular program could have done that they did not do?

Question #15: Do you have any suggestions for other students planning to return to the regular school after being in an alternative school.

The students were asked these three questions in an open-ended format. They were assured that the interviewer was interested insofar as the reponses would assist staff in both the regular and in the alternative school. They were assured that their information was given in confidence. Student responses were examined for major themes and have been presented in three sections: (a) Suggestions for the staff at S. J. Willis Educational Centre, (b) Suggestions for the staff of regular schools, and (c) Suggestions for future alternative school students who return to regular school.

Suggestions for the S. J. Willis staff. Of the forty students interviewed, twenty-two students responded with suggestions. Several students (8) suggested that the staff should be more strict and that the staff should require longer hours and more accountability from the students. Some students (4) requested more guidance from the teachers. Access to teachers was an area of concern for two students. According to these students often teachers had a line-up of people waiting to see them and these students felt frustrated by having to wait for assistance.

Several students (5) suggested that it was up to the student to make the best of the program and that the program needed no change. These same students suggested that if there had been a problem, it lay with the student and not the program. Feeling that the responsibility for individual success lay with the student was consistent with previous research (Luby, 1989).

Suggestions for regular school teachers and counsellors. Twenty of the forty students interviewed offered suggestions for improvement of services in response to this question. The main theme of the responses was that of "wanting teachers to get to know the students better" and "acknowledging them as individuals". These students reported that they found some teachers to be unapproachable and some classes to be too large for teachers to provide individual attention. Comments such as, "There is no flexibility to see teachers," "There are too many students in the classes," "No-one asked me why I dropped Math" were expressed. Students wanted more support from teachers in terms of help in class and recognition of difficulties with assignments. The need for more access to counsellors was suggested in comments such as, "Counsellors need more time to be with kids," "I've seen kids get lost," and "I needed counsellor's help." However, several students (5) felt that the level of support was sufficient and that they had been comfortable.

Suggestions for students returning to the regular school. Students' responses to this question clustered around three main themes: the "importance of returning and giving regular school a chance", "persistance in spite of difficulties", and, above all, "attending classes".

The majority of students (36) who returned felt it had been the "right thing to do" and, while many encountered difficulties (28), they felt graduating from a regular school was "worth the effort." Sixteen students reponded that the transition would be difficult but that it was worth it to "stick it through." Some older students (7) were more philosophical suggesting that "In the end it's up to you" and "Give it a fair chance. You can do it." Three students stressed the importance of being with friends, while two students cautioned other alternative school students about the stigma of being an alternative school student and the need to return to the regular stream to "get on with your life" and "fit in again."

Student Profiles

In order to assist the reader in gaining a further understanding of the complexity of needs of alternative school students who have returned to regular school programs, four individual cases are presented in this section: (a) a female who was successful in the regular school, (b) a male who was successful, (c) a female who was unsuccessful, and (d) a male who was unsuccessful. To this point the results of the telephone survey have been reported in isolation, whereas in this section responses to the various questions are examined in four representative cases.

All four students profiled had experienced a loss of interest in school which was associated with other difficulties such as problems with teachers or difficulties at home. The two male students reported they had left school because of difficulties with teachers and courses, whereas both females reported personal problems as a reason for leaving school.

The students who had been successful expressed their desire to graduate with friends, while the students who had been unsuccessful expressed a feeling that they did not "fit" or belong to their peer group in the regular schools they had chosen. Although all four students reported that they had been supported by teachers and counsellors at S. J. Willis, the unsuccessful students reported a lack of support in the regular school.

Student #1 (Successful female). Student #1 was a 17-year old living in a group home. She had left the regular school because of personal problems (i.e., problems at home) and stated that she "couldn't handle regular school." She had attended the S. J. Willis Educational Centre for six months prior to returning to a regular school because all her friends were there and she wanted to graduate with them. She also had the goal of attending university. She had been in the regular school for the full school year and had completed six courses in that time, one of which was a Japanese language course. She planned to graduate in June of 1992. So far, she had experienced no difficulties and explained that she had been very eager to return to the regular school. She reported that she had been supported at S.J.W.E.C. and that she might have worked harder while she was there but did manage to complete some work. She spent a good deal of time with counsellors sorting out her personal problems. Her suggestion for improving the program was for staff to keep better track of students. She felt it had been too easy to "skip out." She did not feel that she had received support in the regular program other than in course choice, but did not offer suggestions for the regular school staff, saying, "It was fine." She was happy to be back in the regular program and felt far more successful this time. To other alternative school students she suggested that they would have to work a lot harder but it was worth it. It was very important for this student to be with her friends.

Student #2 (Successful male). Student #2 was a 17-year old male who was living at home with both parents. He had left regular school because he had experienced problems with teachers and had lost interest in school. He had been in S.J.W.E.C. for seven months before he returned to regular school and had been back for a year and a half. He returned to regular school because he wanted to graduate and chose to re-enter the school where his friends were. He registered in the graduation program and had successfully completed eight courses required to graduate in June, 1991. The only difficulty he had encountered was with schedules. He preferred to work at his own pace and found it difficult to accommodate the schedules of others. This student felt he had been prepared to return to regular school and had been supported at S.J.W.E.C.. In his words "They made me realize I could do it. I worked and I actually enjoyed it." He felt he had changed his attitude towards learning and realized it was up to him: "I blamed my failure on everybody else." This student had been supported by counsellors in the regular school and stated that some teachers had made themselves available for extra help. He reported that he would have liked less emphasis on sports at the school he attended since he explained that students who were not athletic were discriminated against. He strongly encouraged other students to go back to regular school saying that graduating was important.

Student #3 (Unsuccessful female). Student #3 was a 16-year old female who was living at home with her mother. She had left regular school because of several reasons, mainly personal problems, which led to problems with teachers and loss of interest in school. This student had been enrolled at S.J.W.E.C. for five months and had been back in regular school for five months. She had completed four Grade ten courses in the regular school and had intended to enter the graduation program, however, she had encountered difficulties with the heavy course load and found the work difficult. She found the schedules inflexible and the "atmosphere" not to her liking. At the time of the interview she was not in school, although she indicated that she may return to finish "later." Although she felt she had been prepared to return and had received a lot of support from staff at S.J.W.E.C. while completing her Grade nine courses, she stated that, perhaps she had returned to the wrong school. Apparently she had returned to her former school and felt the teachers were unwilling to change their former perception of who she was. She felt she had not been given a chance to "prove herself." Her advice to other students was to be prepared for the fact that the regular school was "not S. J." and it would be a lot harder than they thought it would be.

Student #4 (Unsuccessful male). Student #4 was a 19-year old male living on his own. He had attended S.J.W.E.C. for one year and had been in the regular program for six months, but had already left school before he was interviewed. He had originally left regular school because he had experienced problems with teachers and with the school work and felt he did not fit with his peer group. He returned to the regular school to graduate, had enrolled in several classes and had not completed any of them. He had encountered difficulties with the academics but maintained that the main problem was lack of motivation. He did not plan to complete his program stating that he would pursue a Graduation Equivalency Diploma, or GED, which had become an option for him when he reached 19 years of age. He felt he had not been prepared to return to a regular school, though he had been adequately supported at S.J.W.E.C.. He reported that he probably never would be ready to return to regular school. He reported that he had asked for help while in the regular program but staff were unable to provide the help he needed. Allegedly, staff did not take into account that he was on medication. He continued to be unsuccessful in the regular school encountering the same problems he had had earlier. He suggested the need for more counsellors in the regular schools. His suggestions to other alternative school students were to "get ready." His final comment was: "It would be great to graduate from S. J.. It's the only reason people leave." He was working in a hairdressing salon at the time he was interviewed.

Summary of Results and Discussion

Of the total number of students exiting the S. J. Willis Educational Centre, only a small proportion returned to the regular school. The low number of females among the group who returned to regular school in this study is consistent with other studies (cf., Earle & Roach, 1989; Karp, 1988) which show females to be less likely to return to school.

Students who returned did so mainly to graduate and seemed to encounter relatively few difficulties. Students encountered difficulties mainly in the area of scheduling, which, for the alternative school population may represent a loss of freedom and flexibility (Wehlage et al., 1989).

Students reported they had been supported by the S. J. Willis staff prior to re-entry, but reported that they had received less support by regular school teachers and counsellors after returning to the regular high school. Some were pragmatic about the alleged lack of support and recognized the constraints of regular school schedules. Some wanted to be left alone and to be treated as everyone else was. For the most part students who re-entered regular school perceived themselves to be successful and they strongly encouraged others to return as well.

A main area of concern for students after re-integration into the regular program was a perceived lack of individual recognition and treatment. Students recognized that teachers and counsellors were very busy, but some reported they wished to receive more attention.

CHAPTER V

Summary and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experience of alternative school students who had been re-integrated into regular high school programs to continue their education. Information on the students' perceptions of their transition was gathered by means of a telephone survey in order to add to our knowledge about alternative school students and to make suggestions for improvement of services to this population.

The main research questions raised were: (a) How many alternative school students returned to the regular schools? (b) Were the students prepared, in their estimation, to return? (c) What programs did they chose? (d) In terms of their own perceptions, how successful were they in completing their programs? (e) What problems did they encounter? (f) What suggestions did students have for improving the level of support? and (g) What suggestions did students offer for other alternative school students who planned to return to the regular school? Chapter V is divided into the following sections: (a) Summary of the Problem, (b) Summary of Findings (c) Scope and Limitations of the Study, (d) Recommendations, and (e) Recommendations for Future Research.

Summary of the Problem

Students in alternative programs must, for the most part, return to the regular school to complete their graduation requirements. Alternative school students have been and may continue to be at risk of school drop-out. Of the large numbers of those who enter alternative school programs relatively few return to a regular school to complete their high school education which leads one to believe that they may require more support and encouragement to return to regular school.

Dropping out of school has had demonstrably negative effects on all students in terms of employment and job satisfaction as well as their general well being. Females are at greater risk in terms of future prospects since they will earn far less than their male counterparts regardless of the schooling they complete (Peng, 1985). Although much is known about the characteristics of potential drop-outs and about the kinds of programs required to retain potential drop-outs, there has been little information about effectiveness of the actual practices of programs, such as alternative programs, which are designed to rehabilitate students. This study was an attempt to gather information from the students' perpectives on the experiences of students who had been part of the population of alternative schools and who had since returned to the regular program.

By means of a telephone survey consisting of a combination of open-ended and forced-choice questions data was collected about (a) the reasons

students gave for leaving regular school, (b) the difficulties students perceived upon return to a regular school, (c) student perceptions of the support provided by counsellors and teachers in both the alternative school and the regular school, (d) the level of success students reported since their return to regular school, and (e) any suggestions students offered to improve services in both alternative school and regular schools. The responses collected from the telephone survey were tallied and examined to determine trends and patterns. All of the students who were contacted were helpful, receptive to the idea of being included in a survey, and willing to answer the questions, which took approximately twenty minutes to complete.

Summary of Findings

School records proved to be an unreliable source in describing the numbers of students who returned to a regular school, however it can be determined that out of the total numbers of students (i.e., 303 in 1988/89 and 231 in 1989/90) who were placed in the S. J. Willis Educational Centre, a relatively small number could be found on the registers of regular schools after they had exited the alternative school.

Students who returned to regular schools appeared to be quite successful. A high percentage of students in the present study (67.5%) who returned to regular school chose the graduation program. Students reported that graduation was important, however, only four students indicated an intention to attend university. The remaining students did not express any

future plans after high school completion. Students who had been referred to the Pre-Employment Programs (20%) in various high schools appeared to be content and secure in the notion that they would graduate and have a job when they finished. They expressed enthusiasm about both the program and their teachers, and as a group perceived themselves to be successful. A smaller proportion of students (12.5%) returning to regular school chose career preparation programs as opposed to 67.5% who chose the graduation program. It is possible that fewer students choose such a path because career preparation programs imply a commitment from students to a long-term goal of employment in the area of study, since such programs consist of courses related specifically to an area of employment (e.g., recreation, child care).

Gender issues. In the present study a higher proportion of males (65.3%) returned to regular school compared to females (43.7%), even though the proportion of males to females in the alternative school population was recorded as being relatively equal for the years 1988-1990. The trend for females not to return and complete their high school education once they have dropped out or experienced difficulties has been reported in previous research (Earle & Roach, 1989). This finding is disturbing in view of the fact that a review of a large follow-up study completed in California revealed that 60% of drop-out males were working as opposed to 33% of drop-out females, and that the females earned less than half the salary the males earned (Peng,

1985). According to American data, females who were high school drop-outs headed 49% of families who lived below the poverty line (Earle & Roach, 1989).

Reasons for leaving the regular school. The reasons respondents gave for leaving regular school in the present study were consistent with those found in the previous studies on drop-outs. The primary reason cited in the present study was a loss of interest in school. Such a finding is consistant with earlier research (cf., Self, 1985). Loss of interest may have one of many antecedent events, with loss of interest as the eventual outcome. Such antecedent events reported in the literature and in the present study included students becoming involved in social activities, having difficulties at home, or finding no relevance in what is happening at school.

Reasons for returning to a regular school. A large proportion of alternative school students in the present study reported that they returned to the regular school in order to graduate and the majority of students who returned felt they would be successful. Six students were to graduate in June of 1991, and others were nearing completion of their programs. Students generally reported it was important to be with their friends and that it was important to graduate. In the present study, relevance of school may have been a factor in the decision to return to school. Students reported that they became aware of reasons to be in school after attending the program offered in an alternative setting. Relevancy of schooling has been a major theme in

the literature on alternative schooling (cf. Gold & Mann, 1984; Luby, 1989; Rumberger, 1987; Wehlage et al., 1989).

Difficulties encountered upon return to a regular school.

A majority of students in the present study reported some difficulty after they returned to a regular school. The major difficulty students faced upon return to the regular school was that schedules were reported to be inflexible. Perhaps flexibility in schedules would have helped some of the students who stated that they might not be successful in completing their programs. The problem of flexibility is consistent with a need expressed by several students that they liked to work at their own pace and found it difficult to work at someone else's pace. Alternative school students have consistently alleged that regular school personnel are inflexible in responding to their needs (Gold & Mann, 1984; Wehalge & Rutter, 1986; Wehlage et al., 1989)

The difficulties of those students who had not been successful may have been related to factors the school could not affect or change. The student who could not complete her studies because she had to work, or the student who was on medication may have had difficulty regardless of the form of intervention.

A number of students did not report difficulties when they returned to the regular high school. Several students in this study reported they had matured and that they knew what they needed to do when they returned. It

appears that the alternative school functioned as a place where these students could mature and examine their priorities before returning to the regular school.

Support provided at the S. J. Willis Educational Centre. Students generally reported that they had been supported by the S. J. Willis staff and that the teachers and counsellors had provided them with what they needed, in terms of information on courses, available counselling, and help in course completion to make their transition back to the regular program. A few students reported that the alternative program allowed students too much freedom, and several students suggested that the number of hours required for students to attend should be increased.

Support provided in regular schools. On the other hand, few students perceived that they had been adequately supported by teachers and counsellors in regular school. In spite of such alleged lack of support, the majority of students who had returned encouraged other alternative school students to go back to the regular school. Several students commented that students must "endure" what was required to graduate. They recognized that teachers and counsellors often had too many students to deal with to provide individual attention. Several respondents warned other alternative school students who planned to return to regular school "not to expect individual attention." Although a few students were adamant that they did not want or need extra help, and did not want to be recognized as an alternative school

student when they returned to regular school, a greater number of students reported that they would have liked more help from regular school teachers and counsellors. Such comments suggested that many students who have been known to have been at risk of drop-out may require additional attention both from the teachers and the counsellors who work with them in regular schools.

Success in the regular program. It was encouraging to note the large proportion of students, both male and female who reported that they had been more successful in the regular program the second time around. Students felt they had matured, were more motivated than they had been, or in a few cases, they recognized that they had developed better self-esteem. This finding was similar to that of Karp (1988) who reported that students who returned to regular school after having left reported a more positive experience than the first experience had been.

Students' lack of self-esteem has been a major concern which was frequently addressed in the literature on drop-outs (cf. Self, 1985, Wehlage et al., 1989). One of the goals of alternative programs has been to improve students' self-esteem (Csapo & Stevens, 1982). In the process of creating a better sense of themselves and of their self worth, students may also have become more involved in their own educational process, or have become more "educationally engaged" (Wehlage et al., 1989). Certainly the decision to return to regular school entailed some risk for these students, but, as

several of them stated in varying terms, "I know what I need to do now."

Students who had not been successful reported they might have met with more success in another program, (e.g., graduation program, career preparation) or that they had encountered further personal problems which had precluded successful completion of their program. It would appear that unsuccessful students require continued counselling by teachers to make appropriate program choices and by counsellors to assist in dealing with their ongoing problems. Some of the difficulties encounetered by students may be outside the realm of the school, however flexible scheduling may have helped at least one respondent to the survey, while others may have been encouraged to try a different program or to make use of peer counselling.

Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to examine the post-program experiences of secondary alternative students who returned to a regular school to complete their education. The overall findings indicated that generally, students encountered few difficulties, even though the students had a history of social and emotional programs that had previously resulted in their dropping out of the regular school system.

The students at S. J. Willis Educational Centre are, in all likelihood, representative of the larger population of alternative school students who attend alternative programs in other cities and other provinces, prior to returning to the regular system to graduate. It is hoped that the following

recommendations may be of assistance to staff in both alternative and regular schools to respond more effectively to the students that they serve and to improve the nature of services provided to the students during their transition from one setting to another.

While the present study was limited to examining the experiences of students who had attended a program with an academic focus, it is hoped that the recommendations may also be of assistance to staff at other types of alternative programs (e.g., vocationally oriented programs, programs for pregnant teens) in their dealings with students who are required to make a transition to a different setting (e.g., regular school, community college) as it is probable that the experiences encountered by students may be similar (e.g., transition from a program in which they received individualized instruction to one in which instruction is geared towards a larger group of students).

The data from the present study indicate that a very small proportion of students who attend an alternative program actually return to the regular school system in order to graduate. Given the fact that over 40% of jobs today require a post-secondary education (Ward, 1991), the need for a high school graduation may be paramount for students in order to obtain employment and/or further training. It is recommended that staff at alternative schools ensure that all students be counselled regarding the need for continuing their education. Printed and audio-visual materials that promote the importance of school attendance and the training needs of specific jobs should be made

widely available to all students in alternative programs.

The number of females returning to complete their high school education is alarmingly small. The staff at alternative programs should be particularly alert to this finding, and ensure that female students are adequately counselled. Given the fact that the employment opportunities for female dropouts are worse than those for male dropouts and that female dropouts earn less than half their male counterparts (Peng, 1985), female alternative students are particularly at risk.

Even though the number of students returning to the regular school program was extremely small, the number of students who actually attended the alternative program at S. J. Willis Educational Centre was quite substantial. By means of examining the teachers' rosters, month by month, for the years 1988/89 and 1989/90 the researcher was able to determine that over 500 students (303 and 231 respectively) attended the program. This number exceeds the number of students at many high schools throughout the province of British Columbia. While it was not the purpose of the present study to examine the reasons that all students attending S. J. Willis reported for leaving regular school, it may be assumed that the reasons given by the sample included in the present study (i.e., those who dropped out and later returned) are representative of the much larger group. Overwhelmingly, the students reported a "loss of interest in school." There have been recent initiatives by the Ministry of Education (1990b) such as the

Year 2000 documents in response to the Sullivan Royal Commission on Education, to address the issue of relevancy in secondary education. Given the findings of the present study, it is recommended that the staff at regular school encourage and support the initiatives and work to ensure that programming/curricula are responsive to the needs of current and future students. If schools (and teachers) become more responsive to the students it would be expected that fewer students would report "loss of interest" or "problems with teachers" as major reasons for dropping out of school.

The students who did encounter problems upon return to regular schools commonly cited lack of flexibility in scheduling as a major impediment to success. Not surprisingly, the same students cited inflexible schedules and getting behind in assignments as reasons for dropping out of school initially. It is recommended that staff at regular schools examine the issue of flexiblity to determine whether or not schools could respond more appropriately to the schedules of students who work or who have family and other commitments that preclude regular school attendance.

Currently students who attend the S. J. Willis alternative program are allowed to attend on a drop-in basis (to accommodate working schedules and individual patterns), however, they are required to return to regular schools with less flexible scheduling in order to graduate. Given the large number of students who do not return to the regular school, it is recommended that alternative school staff and administrators investigate the feasibility of

students remaining in the alternative program in order to graduate. It would appear, from the comments of students who attended the program, that the alternative schools met their academic needs (i.e., obtaining required courses in order to return to regular school) as well as their social and emotional needs (i.e., changing their attitudes towards school, developing self-confidence).

If the option of remaining in an alternative setting is found not to be feasible, then students who do not, in fact, return to regular schools need the encouragement to remain in school. These students have alreading dropped out of school once and, in all likelihood, given the nature of their social, emotional and academic problems, will continue to be at risk for dropping out. It would appear that such encouragement and additional support must be provided by teachers and counsellors. A very small percentage (7.5%) indicated that they did not want help, did not need help and did not want special treatment because they were former alternative school students, however, a larger proportion (60%) offered suggestions for regular school teachers and counsellors that ranged from "wanting the teachers to know them better" to "acknowledging them as individuals." Consequently, it is recommended that former alternative program students' progress (or lack of progress) be carefully monitored by high school staff. Increased liaison among teachers and counsellors in alternative and regular programs may prove beneficial to students by ensuring that staff in the regular schools are

made more aware of those students who might be at risk for future problems.

It is recommended that staff of alternative schools provide follow-up services and perhaps consider counselling sessions whereby students could be encouraged to return to S. J. Willis on a regular basis (for the first six months after the transition) to discuss problems concerns and difficulties encountered in the new setting. Staff at S. J. Willis should also examine the possibility of arranging sessions in which former students (who have been successfully integrated) return to S. J. Willis to talk to students currently in attendance in order to provide a forum by which students who are about to make the transition can discuss problems that may be encountered and to examine possible solutions before the difficulties actually occur.

Future research. The present study has revealed a lack of information as to why students do not choose to return to regular school. It has been acknowledged that many do not and that females were less likely to return than males (Earle & Roach, 1989), but the reasons for such a finding have not been examined. Further research is required to examine why students who drop out of school do not return to regular school and particularly why female drop-outs return in fewer numbers than males.

Alternative schools vary a great deal in approach. Some research has been undertaken as to the effectiveness of various approaches (cf., Wehlage et al., 1989), however in the interests of serving the needs of alternative school students, further research is required on the efficacy of the various programs

(e.g., academic programs, vocational programs, or programs which focus on life skills).

Finally, it may be necessary to review the role of the secondary school counsellor who, from the student's point of view, appears to spend an inordinate amount of time on assisting students in course selection. Some former alternative school students might have remained in school had counsellors been able to devote more time to counsel students on personal or school issues.

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APPENDIX A

Protocol for

Initial contact with student and parent/guardian

Hello, I'm Ali Wassing. I'm a teacher at the S. J. Willis Educational Centre. You may remember me. I'm also a master's student at the University of Victoria and I'm completing a study on students like yourself who have been in an alternative program and have returned to a regular school. Would you be willing to answer some questions on your experiences in moving from the alternative school back to a regular school?

(If student answers"yes"): How old are you?

(If over 19): Do you have time to answer the questions now? If not, when would be a good time to call?

(If under 19): I need to have permission from your parent or guardian for you to participate in the study. Is your parent/guardian available to speak to me? Do you have any questions about the study?

(Protocol with parent/guardian): Hello, I'm Ali Wassing, one of the teachers at the S. J. Willis Educational Centre. I am also a graduate student at the University of Victoria. Your son/daughter has agreed to participate in a study I'm doing in which he/she will be asked questions over the telephone about his/her experience in moving from the alternative school back into the regular school. The University requires signed permission from the parent or guardian of a student under 19. Would you permit _____ to participate in this study? (If "yes") Thank you. I will send you a stamped self-addressed letter which explains again the nature of the study and which asks for your signature on a permission form which should be sent back to me as soon as possible, because I need to receive it before I can interview___. (If "yes" or "no") Thank you very much for your time. If you are interested in knowing anything more about the study, please call me at school at __ or at home at __ _.

APPENDIX B

Letter of Permission

Address

Dear Parent or Guardian;

I am a teacher at the S. J. Willis Educational Centre. I am also completing a Masters Degree at the University of Victoria. As part of my Masters work I am studying the experience of students like your son/daughter who have returned to a regular school after having been a student in the S. J. Willis program.

I hope to gain information which may help the teachers of alternative programs such as S. J. Willis as well as the teachers in the regular program better understand what happens when students move from an alternative program back into a regular program. We all need to know how we can help in that process.

Students are not under any pressure to participate in this study. It is completely voluntary. The student's name will not appear in the study. If you have any questions feel free to call me at S. J. Willis. My number is ____.

Thank you very much.

Ali Wassing

_____ has my permission to participate in this survey. I understand that anonymity is assured and that the information given is confidential.

_____ Parent or guardian

APPENDIX C

Interview Protocol

I'm going to ask you a number of questions which have to do with your experience at S. J. Willis as well as at the regular school. The information you give me will be confidential and your name will not be used in the study. The information will be useful for teachers and counsellors at S. J. and in the regular school so that when they do their planning they will be aware of what it's like for students like you to return to regular school.

1. How old are you?

2. How long did you attend S. J. Willis Educational Centre?

3. Why did you leave regular school to attend S. J. Willis program? I'm going to give you some of the reasons other students give and I'd like you to tell me if it was important for you.

   (a) Courses were too difficult,
   (b) Lost interest in school - did not attend,
   (c) Had problems with teachers
   (d) Got behind in assignments
   (e) School schedules were not flexible
   (f) Working
   (g) Personal problems
   (h) Other

   Which of these reasons was the most important? Next in importance?

4. How long have you been back in a regular school?

5. Why did you return to a regular school?

6. What program did you register in?

   (a) Career Preparation
   (b) Co-op Program
   (c) Pre-Employment Program
   (d) Graduation Program
   (e) Other

7. What courses have you enrolled in since you have been back?

   Which ones have you finished?

8. Will you complete your program? If "No' why not?

9. What difficulties did you have in the regular school? I'm going to suggest some difficulties other students have and I'd like you to tell me if any applied to you.

   (a) Course load was too heavy
   (b) Courses were too difficult
   (c) Could not get extra help from teachers
   (d) Schedules were no flexible
   (e) Felt like an outsider
   (f) Other?

   Which of those were most difficult?

10. Did you feel you were prepared to return to the regular school?
    If "No" Could you explain?

11. How were you helped by teachers and counsellors at S. J. Willis to return to the regular school? (I'm going to suggest things they might have done and you could add anything I have missed).

    (a) Provided the necessary courses to return to regular school.
    (b) Provided information on programs at the regular schools.
    (c) Introduced you to a counsellor or teacher in the regular school.
    (d) Let you know that you could talk to a teacher or counsellor at S.J. at any time after you returned.
    (e) Other?

12. What did you do to help yourself at S. J. Willis so that you could return to regular school?

13. Is there anything else the teachers and counsellors at the S. J. Willis Educational Centre could have done that they did not do?
    Please remember that the information you give me is confidential and I'm only interested insofar as the information can help improve programs.

14. How did the teachers help you or provide support for you when you went back to the regular school? I'm going to suggest some things they might have done and you can tell me if it applied to you or if there were any other ways they supported you.

    (a) Provided learning assistance
    (b) Assisted you in choosing courses
    (c) Kept in touch with you to see how you were doing
    (d) Asked you if you needed extra help
    (e) Arranged for peer tutoring
    (f) Other?

15. How did the counsellors help you or provide support for you in the regular school? Again I will give you some suggestions.

    (a) Assisted you in choosing courses
    (b) Kept in touch with you to see how you were doing
    (c) Asked you if you needed extra help
    (d) Arranged for peer counselling
    (e) Other

16. Is there anything that teachers and counsellors in the regular school could have done that they did not do?

17. Do you think you are having more success in regular school this time? Why or why not?

18. Do you have any suggestions for other students like you who are in alternative school and plan to return to a regular school?

Thank you very much for you time. You have been a great help. If you would like to know about the finished study call me in the fall at school at __ or at home at _____.

VITA

Surname: Wassing

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Title of Thesis: Post-program experience of alternative school students who have returned to the regular school: The student's perspective.

Author

(Signature)

AALTJE WASSING