# Shades of disengagement: high school dropouts speak out

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**Abstract**    The purpose of this study was to describe how dropouts navigate their educational journeys. Eighty dropouts participated to individual interviews which were recorded and transcribed. The data analysis yielded three broad categories in answering the research question. *Setting the stage* in the family and the school, the dropouts described their *teetering* between in and out of school contexts and proceeded to explain how they *ended their educational journey*. For 20 dropouts, family turmoil represented a pervasive force negatively influencing their schooling. For 24 dropouts, problems in school set the stage for dropping out. *Teetering* represented juggling strategies to *prolong* and to *sabotage the journey*, while

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the end of the journey occurred as a result of a *pivotal moment* (48%) or a gradual *fade out* (52%) from the school context.

**Keywords**   School dropout · High school · Qualitative methodology

## 1 Introduction

The Ministry of Education in Quebec estimated that during the school year of 2003–2004, 28.1% of students failed to obtain their high school diploma and did not reenroll the following year (MELS 2005). Many of these dropouts may not have acquired the competencies needed to integrate into the workforce, may have difficulty finding work (Statistique Canada 2003) or remaining gainfully employed, may suffer from social maladjustment (Fortin et al. 2004) or psychological dysfunction (Kaplan et al. 1996) and may depend on the welfare system more so than will graduates. In such cases, the consequences of dropping out of high school prior to graduation represent a heavy burden both for the individuals who drop out of school and for the society that supports them.

Researchers have studied the personal, family and school-related risk factors to determine which factors may contribute to increasing the probability that a student will drop out of school prior to graduation. On the personal level, findings suggest that behaviour problems and gender are risk factors. More specifically, results indicate that externalized behaviour problems, such as aggression or delinquency, contribute to increasing the risk of dropping out (Fortin et al. 2004; Kasen et al. 1998; Newcomb et al. 2002) as do internalized behaviour problems, such as depression or anxiety (Marcotte et al. 2001). Research findings pertaining to the influence of gender on the risk of dropping out do not converge. Earlier studies conducted on school dropouts indicated that being a boy increased the dropout probability (Rumberger 1995); however, more recent studies statistically controlling such factors as academic performance (Battin-Pearson et al. 2000) and aggressive behaviour (Alexander et al. 1997) showed that the probability that girls will drop out is greater than that of boys.

On the family level, the dropout risk factors most often reported in the literature are low socioeconomic status (Alexander et al. 1997; Battin-Pearson et al. 2000) and elements related to family functioning. Following results of large studies conducted in the United States, researchers have documented low socioeconomic status as affecting the risk level of students throughout their educational trajectories (Ekstrom et al. 1986; Goldschmidt and Wang 1999). Battin-Pearson et al. (2000) determined that this factor contributed directly and significantly to increasing the dropout risk level. In terms of family functioning, boys and girls who perceive little cohesion, conflicts and a lack of organization within the family show a higher dropout risk than other students (Fortin et al. 2004). Potvin et al. (1999) found that students who perceived little affective support and a lack of commitment from their parents were at higher risk of dropping out than were other students, as were those who reported little communication between home and school. Students who came from broken homes were at higher risk of dropping out (Rumberger 1995).

Finally, school-related risk factors associated with dropping out of school include academic performance, grade retention and the student–teacher relationship. Poor academic performance is one of the factors most often associated with dropping out of school (Kasen et al. 1998) and has been found to be the most significant predictor of school dropout (Battin-Pearson et al. 2000). Poor academic performance may be a result of poor academic competence (Newcomb et al. 2002; Saunders et al. 2004) and may lead to failure to complete a grade, causing the student to be retained. According to Rumberger (1995), grade retention

is the single most powerful predictor of school dropout. Results from a study conducted by Ripple and Luthar (2000) show that being older than other students in a cohort as a result of being held back was a determining factor in the dropout process. Jimerson et al. (2002) determined that being held back in primary school was a significant dropout risk factor and being held back more than once increased the dropout probability. Finally, Lessard et al. (2004) found the negative perception of student–teacher relationship was the second most important factor contributing to increasing the risk of dropping out in a sample of 3,359 middle school students. Rumberger (1995) reported that students who perceived their teachers positively were 16% less likely to drop out than were those whose perceptions were negative.

Results from studies conducted on school dropout show that there are a number of factors which contribute to increasing the dropout risk. Researchers have often resorted to using regression analysis to try and disentangle the complex relationships between risk factors and their confounding effects. However, researchers tend to agree that the "task of predicting who drops out is more difficult than simply taking into account known risk factors" (Gleason and Dynarski 2002, p. 37). Alexander et al. (2001) suggest that the risk factor checklist approach is a useful starting point in attempting to determine which student may drop out of school; however, risk factors may come as a package and their configuration may vary between students. Moreover, Entwisle et al. (2004) propose that dropping out of school be viewed more as a process than as an event. A few studies on school dropout have relied on longitudinal research designs spanning primary and secondary schooling (Alexander et al. 2001; Garnier et al. 1997; Jimerson et al. 2000) and their results tend to show the intricate associations between different risk factors, supporting the perspective of school dropout as a multidimensional life-course process.

Alexander et al. (2001) studied a population of 790 students over a 14 year period. Their results show that academic, parental and personal resources affected dropout prospects throughout their lives, thus leading this research team to view dropping out as the culmination of a long-term process of disengagement from school. Garnier et al. (1997) followed a cohort of 205 families over the course of 18 years. Their results show that early risk factors in childhood (difficulties in school or family stress) are related to multiple problems in adolescence (such as continued lower academic performance, lack of motivation or drug use) thus increasing the probability of school disengagement and eventual dropout.

According to the results obtained by Jimerson et al. (2000), who conducted a 19 year prospective longitudinal study of 143 at-risk children, the process of dropping out may begin even before the child begins school since the results of analyses demonstrated the association of the early home environment and the quality of early care giving in predicting high school status at age 19. These variables emerged as powerful predictors of school dropout. However, these authors also note the probabilistic nature of risk factors or predictors, stating that predictors should be viewed as markers in the dropout process. Thus, truancy, behaviour problems and failing grades in high school may indicate an advanced stage in the dropout process that, in many cases, began much earlier in the individual's life.

Studies focussing on school dropout, relying mostly on quantitative research methods, have allowed researchers to outline the factors which contribute to increasing the probability of dropping out. However, such studies have certain limits. As was stated by Jimerson et al. (2000), results are probabilistic and may not be representative of the lived experiences of all dropouts. Janosz et al. (1997) revealed that an important limit of such studies pertain to the fact that not all risk factors affect individuals in the same way.

On a different level, the probabilities that certain factors will lead a student to drop out provide statistics which yield a fragmented, decontextualized picture. Studying student disengagement leading to school dropout, Dei (2003) observed that "there is a human side to

stories that statistics do not tell us" (p. 245). Jimerson et al. (2002) suggested that using qualitative methods to study the dropout process from the dropout's perspective may yield a more thorough understanding of this phenomenon. Cairns and Cairns (1994) pointed out that dropping out is a two-way street, suggesting that adolescents may or may not be the ones actually making the ultimate decision to stay in school or to drop out. Few studies have focussed on the dropout's perspective, allowing these youths a voice in describing their experiences (Beekhoven and Dekkers 2005).

## 2 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to describe how the lived experiences of dropouts have helped to shape their educational journeys. More specifically, two research questions were posed. How do students navigate their educational journeys? What precipitates dropping out?

## 3 Methodology

3.1 Participants

In the context of the larger longitudinal study (Fortin et al. 2006), 808 participants were contacted twice per year since 1996 to answer several questionnaires. During the fall of 2001, the research assistants who contacted the participants asked them whether they had obtained their diploma and whether they were still in school. When participants answered in the negative to both questions, they were identified as dropouts. They were informed that the study included an opportunity for them to "tell their story". Dropouts were asked if they were interested in participating in interviews. Out of the 92 individuals who were identified as dropouts, 80 (36 females; 44 males) accepted to participate in this study.

These participants had left school at one point since 1996 and had not obtained their high school diplomas. The difficulty in reaching the dropout population has been documented by researchers (Janosz et al. 1997; Kortering et al. 2002). Anticipating the challenges associated with contacting individuals who have left the school system, the research team asked the students, in their fifth and potentially final year of secondary school, to fill out a form with nominative information and to sign a consent form for the continuation of the study. The consent form had been approved by the Sherbrooke University Ethics Committee and included a clause allowing researchers to use provincial and national databases to locate participants, should the need arise. Researchers called repeatedly the phone numbers provided until the participant was reached and agreed or refused to participate or until someone confirmed the participant could no longer be reached using the dialled phone number. Written notices were also sent to the last known address, providing information about the study and how to reach the researchers.

The 80 dropouts who agreed to participate were all French-Canadian Caucasians living in the province of Quebec. Three high schools had been targeted in 1996 for the initial longitudinal study, in three different regions of Quebec. In the dropout population, 17 (seven females and ten males) came from site 1, 26 (nine females, 17 males) from site 2 and 37 (20 females, 17 males) from site 3. They were between 17 and 21 years of age when asked to participate in interviews.

## 3.2 Procedure

The researchers called all dropouts and informed them about the purpose of the study. The participants were told that they would receive $20 for their participation in the interview, which they did. They were also reminded about confidentiality; moreover, they were informed that during the interview, if they were uncomfortable with some questions, they could refuse to answer. The researcher and the participant determined a time and place for the interview. As the same researcher conducted all interviews in the three sites, the settings for the interview varied from site to site (hotel conference room, local university or school, restaurants and in participants' homes). The interviews usually took place within 24 h of establishing contact with the participant.

Depending on the participant and context in which the interview took place, interviews were videotaped and audio-taped. The individual face-to-face, semi-structured interviews lasted on average 45 minutes. The interviews were then transcribed word for word by research assistants and reviewed by the researcher who conducted the interviews. No paralingual notation systems were used during the data collection or transcription process. Research assistants were asked to ignore some French-Canadian colloquial expressions such as *tsé là* (*you know, like*…) because the expressions tended to obstruct the data analysis rather than contribute to a better understanding of the process.

## 3.3 Data collection

In the context of this study, data were collected through interviews conducted by the same researcher. The interview protocol was initially built by the researchers who, based on their knowledge of the dropout process, listed questions pertaining to the evolution of the educational trajectory over a life-time. Open-ended questions encouraged the description by the participants of their primary and secondary schools, of their relationships with other students and school personnel. Probes were included to help the interviewer draw out the lived experiences of participants. The participants were also asked to describe the events which led to the moment when they dropped out and to reflect on and describe their present situation.

The protocol was piloted with two dropouts (one male, one female). The interviews were videotaped with the participants' consent and were reviewed by all researchers who then proposed changes to the interview protocol. The main modification was in the sequencing of the questions. It was decided that it would be more convivial if questions pertaining to the present situation of the dropout were asked first, as a way to establish the rapport with the participant. The participant was then asked to retrospectively talk about all events and experiences leading back to the moment when they left school.

## 3.4 Validity/trustworthiness issues

Trustworthiness was ensured through different modalities. One such modality was the development of the interview protocol and the interview sequence. Seidman (1991) suggests a three interview format in order to first establish rapport with the participants, second to delve into the important concepts under study and finally to allow the participant to reflect on answers and for the researcher to do a member check. In the context of the present study, the decision was made to do one interview focussing on the main concepts under study. As the participants had been participating in the longitudinal study since 1996, they were familiar with the researcher team and a rapport had already been established. The researchers also allowed for more interaction with participants after the interview; however, as this population

is extremely mobile, the researchers could not depend on formal member checking. A second modality in assuring trustworthiness was the use of a research team. Finally, it should be noted that all the qualitative analyses in this study took place after a five-year, quantitative, longitudinal study. The scope of this paper does not permit us to delve into the work specifically, but the quantitative work did help to raise awareness about issues and develop questions that might not have been articulated without this previous work.

3.5 Data analysis

Data analysis is never a linear process, however, in order to answer the research questions, and make our process as transparent as possible we present it here as a series of different steps. First, the interview transcript was condensed by extracting the words of the researcher and replacing them with words in italics to preserve the meaning of the participant's discourse. For example, the interaction between researcher (R) and participant (P) could be modified from R: Where did you go to school in kindergarten? P: I went to school at Coeur-Immaculé to "*when I was in kindergarten*, I went to school at Coeur-Immaculé".

Second, the condensed transcript was further analyzed using the methodology described by Labov and Waletsky (1967) to produce shorter synopses composed of a sequential and non-repetitive narrative. The analysis proposed by Labov and Waletsky aims to position the elements of the discourse by presenting an abstract (a summary of determining events in the life of a participant), an orientation (a description of events which contributed to shaping the educational journey of a participant), the complicating action (events which directly contributed to dropping out), a resolution (elements which help make sense of dropping out), an evaluation (elements presented by the participant describing the participant's evaluation of the resulting situation) and a coda (elements pertaining to the participant's outlook on the future, considering past events). This step in the analysis helped to make sense of each story by putting it into a sequence, and to reduce the interviews from approximately eight pages to three pages retaining the essence of each story, yet making it as concise as possible. We made a conscious decision to present these condensed narratives in the third person to indicate our presence in this process (Rhodes 2000), but all participant words were italicized to enhance the persuasiveness of each account.

Third, the researchers met to discuss the different narratives, focussing on the elements that were similar in all cases. The goal of this particular step in the analysis was to reach a higher conceptual level in the understanding of the dropout process. Four elements initially emerged, namely *living invisibly, navigating the edge, never being in the game* and *swamped in family turmoil.* The data were reviewed to find other elements which might be present across the entire continuum of experiences, at which point *failing*, *falling*, and *looking elsewhere* represented added elements. At this point in the process, propositional statements or rules of inclusion (Maykut and Morehouse 1994) were created to collapse and expand these elements as needed and to help push the analysis to a more conceptual interpretation (Charmaz 2005).

# 4 Findings

To answer the research questions and to gain a better understanding of the dropout process, the researchers reviewed the elements which emerged from the data analysis and positioned them in a temporal order (Fig. 1), including the number of youths who described occurrences of each element in their lives. Participants' description of how they navigated their
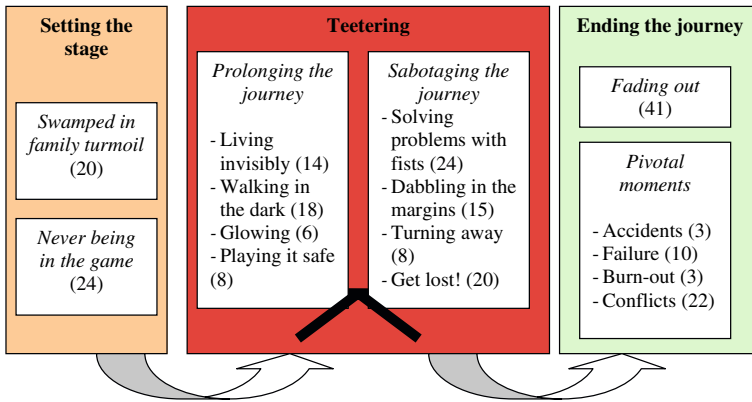
Fig. 1 The dropout process, its phases and the number of youths who described occurrences of each element

educational experiences included first *setting the stage*, then *teetering* and finally *ending the journey*. The last step in the process answers the research question pertaining to what precipitated dropping out.

4.1 Setting the stage

The first element in the dropout process essentially includes elements which, from childhood, seemed to shape the educational journeys of participants both in the family and the school contexts. *Setting the stage* brings together two elements which were initially entitled *swamped in family turmoil* and *never being in the game*.

Family turmoil is representative of approximately 25% of participants. Examples of participant accounts included descriptions of divorce, parental abuse, parental neglect, parental criminal activities, placement of the participant into foster care by the child and family services and death of a parent.

Although 55% of the participants experienced their parents' divorce, this experience did not seem to affect all participants in the same way nor was it problematic for all. Ten participants (seven girls and three boys) described the divorce as the end of the abuse that had been ongoing in the family or the neglect which they had experienced. The participants also described the move or moves which took place as a consequence of the divorce. Moving often entailed changing schools and making new friends. It sometimes also brought on other forms of turmoil, including financial hardship for the mother, parents' new significant others with whom the participant did not get along, and placement of the participant into foster care by child and family services. The stories of Melissa and Jeremy, which represent two of the most compelling cases, demonstrate the pervasiveness of the family turmoil which contributed to shaping their educational journeys from childhood through adolescence.

*4.1.1 Melissa*

When Melissa was just 7 years old, the child and family services came to take her and her younger sister away. At the time, the family lived above a bar, which was convenient for her parents who abused drugs and alcohol daily. Melissa moved from one foster family to another and changed schools and friends along the way. She did not integrate well into the schools. The separation from her mother was very difficult, and she was unable to concentrate on her

school work. Her thoughts were focussed continually on being reunited with her mother. In secondary school, the court sent Melissa to a boarding school. This period was the darkest for her. She was depressed, had insomnia and was unable to concentrate. She attempted suicide twice. She changed schools and became part of another foster family. Here her siblings introduced her to bars. She was just 15. For the first time in her life, she discovered friends and could not pass up the opportunity to be with them. She began living nocturnally, drinking and abusing drugs. It became a way of life. Inevitably, she started missing school. Her truancy increased and she failed her final exams. Ultimately, she dropped out of school.

### 4.1.2 Jeremy

Family turmoil started early in Jeremy's life when just three years old. His mother left his father to escape the violence that she endured because of his alcoholism. Jeremy went to day care because his mother had to work long hours. As a result, Jeremy was left to fend largely for himself. Then a new significant other entered his mother's life. Jeremy never got along with his new step-father. In fifth grade, Jeremy started leaving the house at 7:00 am and returning very late. He fought in the school yard and spent extended periods of time in the principal's office. By sixth grade he was smoking and associating with boys who were often in trouble. He was expelled from the first secondary school he attended because he flagrantly disobeyed rules and ultimately broke the law. When he was 14 years old, he got into a heated argument with his step-father that turned into a physical altercation. The police were called, and as a result, Jeremy was sent to a detention centre. From that moment on, Jeremy remained in and out of state care. He never concentrated on his school work and never graduated.

Not all participants faced such family adversity. For other participants, the stage for dropping out was set in the school context rather than in the family. These 24 participants are those who received special education services early on in their educational journeys, some as early as first grade. Twenty participants received services because of poor school performance and four because of behaviour problems. These problems set the stage for dropping out in a number of different ways. Participants who talked about their inability to get good grades, also talked about not seeing the value in school. They described being picked on or rejected. Finally, they recalled having to change schools frequently to get the services they required.

Family events and problems in the school setting in primary school account for the lived experiences of approximately 35% of participants, with eight students experiencing both types of problems very early on in life. However, for the majority of students, the dropout process began in secondary school. Our data document how dropouts wavered between strategies to keep themselves in school, and actions leading them further away from graduation.

### 4.2 Teetering

The metaphor of *teetering* was chosen to represent how the dropouts were often off balance during their educational journeys. Their narratives describe both strategies for *prolonging the journey* and others for *sabotaging the journey*. There seemed to be forces keeping them in school and others pushing or pulling them away from the school context. These forces contributed to the tug of war taking place between in and out-of-school contexts. Moreover, there were elements of family turmoil and psychological stress which also contributed to this dynamic tension. The data revealed this was more prevalent for boys and girls who had already been *swamped in family turmoil* while in primary school. For these students who had

lacked stability within the family context, *teetering* was yet another form of instability they had to face.

*Living invisibly* was subsumed into the broader category labelled as *prolonging the journey*, which we defined as a way for a student to navigate the school context and continue on the educational journey. Other elements of *prolonging the journey* consisted of *walking in the dark*, *glowing* and *playing it safe*.

The 14 participants who lived invisibly were those who actively withdrew from the social aspects of schooling, who chose avoidance strategies (such as truancy, drug abuse or spacing out) or who offered passive forms of resistance. They were ghosts in the school. Mostly represented by girls, *living invisibly* also included statements about being shy, not wanting to attract attention and "not counting". One participant stated that no one ever noticed whether or not she was in school. Avoidance strategies such as truancy and drug abuse were included as part of *prolonging the journey* because they provided a form of escape that ultimately gave them the strength to return to school, at least for a while. These participants selectively missed classes, mostly to avoid certain situations (conflicts with teachers or peers). They described using drugs to make their daily lives more bearable. Many of these girls were the same participants who experienced family turmoil.

*Walking in the dark* may have been, for some, the persistence in secondary school of the learning difficulties which appeared in primary school. Others were experiencing difficulties for the first time. Participants talked about not seeing the value of school, not being able to equate efforts with accomplishments. They spoke about going through the motion, without recognizing how the journey would benefit them. The French expression "ça donne quoi?" (what's the use?) was a recurrent one throughout the dropouts' discourse. They were unable to link their educational journeys with their futures.

Many participants admitted their disliking of school, and for some this happened as early as kindergarten. There were some positive times, however. These were when participants were acknowledged, cared for and appreciated by teachers. In those rare moments (6 youths described such events), they felt like they were *glowing*. This recognition and/or acceptance made these teachers their favourites. Many participants stated that if all teachers had been like this one favourite teacher, they would not have dropped out. The positive characteristics attributed to these teachers were attentiveness, open-mindedness, patience, availability and the ability to be rewarding. Feeling valued by these teachers helped to prolong the educational journey for these participants.

Finally, eight participants described making efforts to prolong their educational journeys by adopting strategies to play it safe, or to fit in with their peers. They described making these efforts in their classes, by doing their homework, and making friends each time they moved and attended a new school. Some of these participants willingly described their behaviour problems, but they also explained how they made a conscious effort to avoid getting in trouble, to remain calm, to comply with the rules and meet expectations.

However, some participants found themselves in problematic settings where violence was a way of life. A few shared how they had a choice between either fighting or being a victim. When they chose to defend themselves, this often initiated a spiralling of events that included conflicts, suspensions and ultimately school dropout. The poisonous elements in these contexts contributed to the *teetering* experienced by these participants. Their actions, albeit sometimes inadvertently, contributed to sabotaging their educational journeys.

Besides *solving problems with fists*, *dabbling in the margins* and *turning away* were other strategies which contributed to *sabotaging the journey*. These were specific actions taken by the participants which set them off on a journey leading to school dropout. However, there were also external elements that contributed to sabotaging their educational journeys, such as

school policies, teacher attitudes and reactions and peer influences. These elements, that we labelled *get lost!* address the flip side of the coin, namely that suspension policies, perceived teacher ostracism and peer rejection provided these students with messages that they did not belong in the school community.

Twenty-four participants (22 boys and 2 girls) described solving their problems with their fists. They knew that using such a strategy would "get them in trouble". Nevertheless, they chose to use their fists because the stakes associated with not fighting were higher than those associated with fighting. Participants fought to defend themselves and/or to avoid having people walk all over them. In some cases, participants were being picked on, humiliated or forcefully cast aside by their peers, for example by being placated into lockers, and so they chose to act. Many described having to be tougher than others to be respected or left alone. Often they made their mark and tried to walk away. Regardless of the reason for which they chose to fight, the consequences were often more rejection and sometimes suspension.

*Dabbling in the margins* was another way participants' behaviours set them on a trajectory leading away from school graduation. Behaviours included in this category were all reprehensible by law. Participants admitted to abusing alcohol and drugs, stealing, committing acts of vandalism, breaking and entering, loitering and using a firearm. Most of the accounts included in this category, except for grand automobile theft, included peers. For some participants, particularly those who had been rejected or ignored, making friends was critical. These new friends introduced drug and alcohol abuse into their lives, dared them to take part in questionable activities, or encouraged them to break the law. This was the case for Melissa who chose to follow her new friends, even though she knew she was participating in delinquent acts. As with Melissa, and perhaps not surprisingly, *dabbling in the margins* sometimes coincided with a transition, a move into a new neighbourhood, or a change of school.

Finally, the act of *turning away* contributed to the sabotaging of the educational journeys of these participants. They turned their backs on their education. They gave up. They stopped fighting and started looking elsewhere for gratification. Turning away was the last conscious decision reached by the participants before actually leaving school, before ending their journey.

Although dropouts did adopt strategies to sabotage their journeys, there were outside forces that contributed equally to rerouting their journeys and moving them further away from graduation. The category we designated as *get lost!* includes statements from others that contributed to increasing the unease and disengagement of participants. Dropouts described feeling ignored and cast aside by peers and school personnel. They did not have a social safety net in the school setting. There were a significant number of accounts of peer rejection. Many participants had only a few acquaintances in the school, and could not count on their "friends" to protect them from bullying. Many reported not talking to anyone about their problems. When they had academic problems, they did not seek help. Some of the dropouts attending special education classes reported that they were encouraged to leave school when they reached the age of 16. They did not feel supported by teachers. Peer or teacher rejection was representative of the lived experience of 25% of our participants, and was a significant trend in the data which contributed to cutting short the educational journeys of participants.

The stories of Evita and Max, which are typical cases, show their *teetering* process. For Evita, *prolonging the journey* was done by *living invisibly* and by experiencing *glowing* moments, while she sabotaged her journey by *turning away* after feeling the pressures of her environment telling her to *get lost!* For Max, *teetering* was a matter of establishing a balance

between *playing it safe* on the positive side and *solving problems with fists* and *dabbling in the margins* on the negative side.

### 4.2.1 Evita

Evita and her mother lived alone together after her mother left her father following a marital dispute. Evita attended a small, rural school for the first 4 years of her education. When she and her mother subsequently moved to a large city, she felt uprooted and isolated. She cherished the caring environment she had experienced in her rural school. While she was never a very sociable student, and preferred working on her own, she was active and liked participating in sports. However, the transition from the small town to the big city proved to be extremely difficult, both for her and her mother. Her mother stopped going out, worked at home and isolated herself from the outside world. They both felt lost. It took some time for Evita to find her place in her new school. When she went into secondary school, she liked her teachers and succeeded in her studies, but still she had trouble integrating with her peers. She disliked initiating interaction, and often faced teasing and bullying. As a result, she withdrew. During lunch time and recess she would linger near doors that were on a timed lock and slip in at an opportune moment to escape from everyone. In spite of her difficulties socially, Evita persevered in her school work and relished the moments when teachers recognized her efforts and congratulated her. She maintained positive relationships with her teachers and received good grades until she reached her fourth year in secondary school when she was placed in an enriched program that was too demanding for her. The result was she failed. The praise stopped. She began disliking school, and ultimately stopped going to school altogether.

### 4.2.2 Max

Max did well in primary school. He enjoyed sitting in the back of the classroom with his buddies, and his small school where everyone was a friend. At age 10 his parents moved, and he was sent to boarding school. The two years he spent there was an excellent experience because his teachers were caring, and he always had plenty to do. When he changed schools the following year and entered secondary school, things went downhill. The environment was uncaring, and Max felt insignificant. He had never experienced problems integrating socially, but now for the first time in his life, he felt cast aside. While he never went looking for trouble, when it found him, he defended himself. On these occasions he ended up in the principal's office. This did not deter him from fighting. Teasing because his clothes revealed his poverty often precipitated his aggressive responses. He felt if he let others walk all over him, he would be victimized. In primary school, Max felt challenged. In secondary school, he was bored. He changed schools again, and made friends with teenagers who were always in trouble. Outside of school, he joined his buddies and began smoking marijuana. When one of them had money, he bought what marijuana they needed; otherwise, they found ways to acquire it. Max partied until the wee hours making the required 8:00 am arrival at school almost an impossibility. He lost his motivation to go to school, and finally it was just too much effort to be there. Max dropped out.

### 4.3 Ending the journey

During the interviews with the dropouts, they were asked to identify the the actual moment when they left school and then to work backwards from that point in order to answer the question, "What precipitated dropping out of school?" Many dropouts (48%) could recall a

*pivotal moment*, while others (52%), such as Max described it as a gradual process of *fade out*. Although there were different types of pivotal moments, common themes emerged from the data. Such themes include incidents of accidents, conflicts with teachers, failure (in school) and burn-out. *Fade out*, on the other hand tended to be described as a gradual, homogeneous process.

In *pivotal moments*, accidents refer to specific events that were instrumental in changing a participant's educational journey. One male participant was hit by a car during his second year in secondary school and was unable to walk for several months. He described feeling worthless and dispondent, and lost interest in school and life. A female participant got pregnant when she was 15 years old but lost the baby. She explained how she needed a year to get over the event and was subsequently unable to reintegrate the school context.

Conflicts which occurred with teachers more often involved the boys. Many dropouts (22) described an escalation of events that led up to one specific argument or conflict that precipitated their decision to drop out of school. They often described feeling misunderstood and persecuted by a specific teacher and felt this teacher "had it in" for them. To them it appeared that the teacher went out of his or her way to pick a fight with them. These conflicts were described with forceful emotions. The dropouts explained how eventually it became a choice between continuing to fight or leaving. Eventually, all chose to leave.

Failing grades constituted a pivotal moment for other participants, in one of two ways. The first includes students who basically completed their secondary school work, but failed their final examinations and did not return to school the following year. The second may be the result of persistent learning difficulties that surfaced in primary school and were never assisted and/or overcome. Although, as was described in Evita's story, failure at any moment could represent a trigger for dropping out, it appears that for some students, the experience of repeated failure and then being confronted with one more failure, caused them to leave.

Finally, burn-out represents the last type of pivotal moment that caused three participants to end their educational journey. In these situations, the participants were working outside of school. They described how they could no longer balance the demands of going to school and working for pay after school. They had to make a choice, and they chose to work.

*Fade out* is the second way in which participants ended their educational journeys. Participants described a lack of motivation to go to school. They gradually disengaged. They described being unable to get out of bed in the morning. Truancy increased. Calls were not forthcoming from the schools to encourage them to return. They slipped out of their student roles. Eventually, they stopped going to school altogether. *Fade out* may be the end result of having lived invisibly through most of the time spent in secondary school.

In summary, dropouts navigated their educational journeys in different ways. For some, family turmoil and problems in school set the stage for a difficult educational journey. They had more challenges to overcome than other students, often as early as first grade. Included in family turmoil were issues of financial hardship and increased mobility. Mobility also came in the form of change of schools associated with special education services, which also brought changes in friendships. Participants who experienced either or both of these conditions in primary school entered secondary school already challenged by the instability in their lives. For these participants, teetering which occurred in secondary school was more intense than for other dropouts for whom problems began in secondary school. Some lived as ghosts or walked in the dark. Some found teachers who cared. They tried to play by the rules and comply with the demands. But there were forces which pulled them away from the path leading to graduation. They fought to survive. They found new peers who encouraged delinquency. They were pushed aside, rejected, suspended and expelled from school. They either gradually disengaged from school, or walked out one day and never returned.

## 5 Discussion

The lived experiences of these dropouts provide a more vivid portrayal of the interplay of all risk factors in a particular context. The literature presents a number of personal, family and school factors which increase the probability that a student will drop out of school. However, when situating all these factors in the life of one person, the complexity of the process becomes more apparent. Findings from our study tend to confirm some trends in the literature, while others offer new ways of looking at the dropout process.

The experiences described by dropouts contribute to situating risk factors in a more contextualised perspective. Although not all dropouts were exposed to all risk factors presented in the literature, there is sufficient evidence to support previous findings. In terms of personal risk factors, behaviour problems and delinquency represent two important risk factors (Battin-Pearson et al. 2000; Fortin et al. 2004). Our results situate these factors in terms of *solving problems with fists* and *dabbling with the margin*. Dropouts described their use of aggression in their daily lives. However, our results also showed that 20 of the 24 dropouts who used aggression did so as a way to establish their place in the school setting, and as a reaction to the provocation of others. They also described their delinquent acts as a way to maintain the precarious friendships that they had succeeded in acquiring, often after years of peer rejection. Our results confirm those of quantitative studies demonstrating the very complex interplay of many factors constituting the dropout problem.

In terms of school-related risk factors, low school performance, learning disabilities and overall problems with the school were found to be conditions setting the stage for dropout. Low school performance and grade retention represent some of the strongest predictors of school dropout (Battin-Pearson et al. 2000; Jimerson et al. 2000; Rumberger 1995). Although a percentage of the dropouts interviewed in this study reported low school performance and being retained, they also described the associated consequences. For many, grade retention was but another occasion for losing friends. Low school performance was also cited as a reason for rejection and persecution by peers. As some of the problems in school continued in secondary school, participants continued to *walk in the dark* and eventually ended their educational journey after experiencing one final failure.

The association between the student–teacher relationship and dropping out has also been demonstrated in the literature (Lessard et al. 2004; Rumberger 1995). Our results show that student–teacher relationships were integral to *teetering* for some participants. On the positive side, supportive and caring relationships where students felt acknowledged and valued contributed to prolonging the time students stayed in school. On the flip side, some participants felt pushed aside by, and alienated from their teachers. Moreover, the conflicts with teachers frequently escalated and ultimately resulted in a pivotal moment that precipitated leaving school.

Finally, elements reported as *family turmoil* tend to support the research on family-related risk factors. More than 55% of participants came from broken homes, a condition which Rumberger (1995) associated with an increased dropout probability. Moreover, the participants described how the divorce of their parents contributed to financial hardship. Low socioeconomic status has also been found to contribute to increasing the dropout probability (Alexander et al. 1997). Finally, the family contexts described by participants show how low affective support, low cohesion among members and a high rate of conflict fuelled their family turmoil. The relationship between these family factors and high school dropout has been well documented (Fortin et al. 2004; Potvin et al. 1999). Garnier et al. (1997) and Jimerson et al. (2000) found the nature of the early caregiving environment to be an important factor contributing to the dropout process. However, what emerged from our data that is not appar-

ent in previous research is the pervasiveness of family turmoil in the lives of many of the dropouts.

Family turmoil contributed to setting the stage for school dropout. The psychosocial mechanisms underlying this process are beyond the scope of this study; however, it should be noted that the family turmoil lived by the participants seemed to affect all spheres of their lives. Also, the data suggested that there is a relationship between the turmoil experienced in the family and internalised behaviour problems (such as depression and anxiety), a factor which has been documented in the dropout literature (Marcotte et al. 2001). Dropouts, such as Melissa, described being too preoccupied with family issues to focus on their student roles. A few participants talked about consulting a psychiatrist and being on anti-depressant medication. Participants who described family turmoil also explained how the use and abuse of drug and alcohol by their parents influenced their own lives. The family turmoil imposed a significant burden that weighed heavily on them throughout their entire educational journey.

Data from a portion of our participant group tends to support the notion that dropping out is a multidimensional, life-course process, supporting the results found by Garnier et al. (1997), Jimerson et al. (2000) and Alexander et al. (2001). We were surprised by the fact that many dropouts (65%) seemed to progress smoothly in primary school and only began *teetering* while in secondary school. Moreover, our data show that the educational journeys of participants follow a tenuous path. There were many stories of their oscillating between attempts to play it safe and conform to expectations, and rebellious moments of frustration that eventually contributed to sabotaging their schooling. Interestingly, attempts made by dropouts to fit in are not discussed in the literature.

Finally, issues of peer rejection and the negative influence of deviant peers in the lives of participants were omnipresent throughout participant discourse. Our results tend to support those of Battin-Pearson et al. (2000) in terms of the influence of deviant peers which seemed to contribute to increased delinquency. Our results also indicate that the nature of the relationships established with peers throughout primary and secondary schooling had important long-term consequences. For Melissa, the fact that she did not have friends in primary school or the beginning of secondary school made her friendships with her deviant foster sisters that much more important to her. Peer relationships appeared to play a significant role in shaping the educational journey of dropouts.

We believe this study contributes to understanding and showing how the lived experiences of dropouts help shape their educational journeys. Our results offer a different perspective on school dropout that defines dropping out as a process not an event, and reveals the complexity involved in each situation. However, there are limits to this study. First, a certain percentage of dropouts refused to participate in the interviews. Had they participated, their stories might have shed some light on different experiences, and possibly provided more marginalized accounts. Second, the discourse of dropouts is accepted at face value. Although some facts (such as grades obtained) could be and were verified with the quantitative data obtained since 1996, other accounts (such as acts of delinquency) could not. Finally, the population is relatively homogeneous in that all dropouts are French Canadian Caucasians selected from the general population.

## 6 Conclusion

School dropout has been viewed as a complex phenomenon which has both social implications and personal consequences for a youth who does not graduate. The complexity associated with this issue has been demonstrated through the findings of innumerable studies focusing

on the personal, family and school-related risk factors and through a few longitudinal studies documenting the long-term nature of the dropout process. Our study contributes by describing and shedding light on this complexity by examining the lived experiences of 80 dropouts. Allowing the participants a voice to explain how they navigated their educational journey has allowed this research team to gain a better understanding of the different complex elements which contributed to shaping their educational journeys. There is indeed a human side to school disengagement and school dropout that statistics do not capture.

Research on risk factors leading to school dropout has contributed to outlining the different pieces which create the dropout puzzle. However, as was outlined by researchers, risk factors may represent but the starting point for understanding the complex dropout process. Our findings allow us to explain further how the different pieces fit together and just how some of the factors influence the dropout process. Our findings help draw a more contextualized picture of the dropout process.

The narratives obtained through the interviews with the 80 dropouts participating to our study have allowed us to outline three elements composing the dropout process, namely *setting the stage, teetering* and *ending the journey*. Some students start navigating their educational journeys in an unstable home environment while some have difficulty with school work. These students enter secondary school in a precarious position. Other students start having problems only when they enter secondary school. All dropouts interviewed talked about strategies used to *prolong their journey* and strategies used to *sabotage* it. They either ended their journey as a result of a pivotal moment or as a result of a gradual disengagement from the school context.

Although many of our findings tend to support previous research on school dropout, three elements provide a different outlook on this process. The first element is family turmoil. Researchers have determined that many family factors influence the dropout risk. However, hearing the stories of dropouts who lived with abusive or neglectful parents, parents who took part in criminal activities, parents who may have suffered from mental health issues or parents who divorced, allowed this research team to document the pervasiveness of family turmoil throughout the lives of the participants. Although family factors may represent one dimension of risk factors, these participants were burdened by these problems often from early childhood onward. As was the case for Melissa, these dropouts were unable to put those problems aside when assuming their student roles. It was a constant preoccupation. Furthermore, the narratives contextualized such factors as divorce in a picture where divorce led to mobility and financial hardship. Positioned in such a context, family turmoil appears to have had a major influence on the lives of many dropouts.

The second element allowing for the emergence of a different picture on school dropout pertains to strategies used by dropouts to prolong their journey. Participants recalled moments when they did like school, when they did try to fit in and play it safe and when their efforts were acknowledged. Had these experiences been more prevalent than those used to sabotage their journey, the balance could have been redirected and their fate altered. It is important to report moments when these participants were *glowing* and moments when they did *play it safe*, because these attempts on the part of at-risk students may be those which teachers and school personnel can bank on to keep these students from ending their educational journeys. Focusing on such attempts on the student's part may also allow the teachers to view at-risk students' strengths as opposed to their deficits. Some of the narratives described the importance that students attributed to their relationships with their teachers. The influence of teacher–student relationships on the dropout risk has been documented. However, the narratives obtained through this research shows that teacher discourse can sometimes pull the student back on the right path or push him or her off course.

Although dropouts made efforts to prolong their educational journeys, many were faced with adverse external conditions, which represent the third element to be outlined. Many dropouts talked about being rejected by their peers and sometimes by their teachers, a fact which has been documented by researchers. However, although researchers have positioned peer rejection as one element in the development of antisocial behaviour (Patterson et al. 1992), few have discussed the consequences of rejection in the dropout process. One of the consequences described by dropouts was their aggressive behaviour. They fought to defend their honour and to prevent being victimized. Another consequence was adhering to a deviant peer group to which they attributed a critical role in their daily lives. Through their deviant peer groups, they attempted to create the social safety net which they had lacked throughout their journeys. Delinquency, truancy and school dropout were often the consequences of this peer affiliation.

Considering the dire consequences associated with school dropout, future research efforts should aim to study the psychosocial mechanisms underlying the dropout process. Moreover, prevention efforts could be aimed at increasing teacher awareness on their role in this process as their words often make a difference in the lives of students.

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