Preparing Students At-Risk for Successful Transitions into Institutions of Higher Education

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For students from lower socioeconomic areas or who might be the first in their family to contemplate attending postsecondary, transition support programs can provide students with the opportunity to become more familiar with institutions of higher education. The purpose of this Master of Teaching Research Project is to examine how a small sample of secondary and postsecondary teachers working collaboratively within a credit-bearing transition support program preparing secondary school students deemed at-risk in Toronto’s priority neighborhoods for the transition from high school to university. Data was collected through a series of semi-structured interviews with three educators involved in a specific credit-bearing transition support program in Ontario. These interviews were first audio-recorded, and then subsequently transcribed, coded, and analyzed by the researcher. The results of this qualitative study determined that the financial cost of attending postsecondary, family expectations, and systemic and cultural oppression can be barriers for students’ access to institutions of higher education. It also found secondary teachers need to further develop the reading and writing comprehension of their students, as well as their critical inquiry skills. Furthermore, the research found that transition support programs promote a sense of belonging for students involved in the programs within institutions of higher education. Finally, the study was found that students need to foster self-confidence in their academic abilities as well as self-assuredness that students at-risk are capable of attending postsecondary.

Key words: students at-risk, transition support programs, access, high school, postsecondary.
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Chapter One: INTRODUCTION

1.0: Introduction to the Research Study

As the education community continues to adapt curricula and educational policies to reflect the current trends and issues within 21st century society, educators need to ensure that they are providing their students with the conceptual and practical skills that will enable them to pursue their future careers (Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, and Nordstrom, 2009). Yet, a study conducted for the Ontario Colleges Collaborative Research Project revealed that one-quarter of the students who were enrolled in the Grade 9 base 2002-2003 did not complete an Ontario Secondary School Diploma, or in other words failed to graduate high school (King, Warren, King, Brook, & Kocher, 2009). In addition, of the thirty-four percent of students who attended postsecondary educational institutions that year approximately ten percent of male and nine percent of female students in university dropped out before their fourth or final year (Ibid., 2009). One underrepresented, yet significant, group found in postsecondary institutions is students deemed to be at-risk. These figures are important to keep in mind, when considering the fact that over the past three decades there has been a sharp decline in the number of jobs available to Canadian youth who did not attend institutions of higher education (Côté & Bynner, 2008; Sweet, Anisef, Brown, Walters, & Phythian, 2010). For students from low socioeconomic communities, the challenge to gain admittance into university programs can be even more difficult.

There are a multitude of factors that create barriers for low-income students trying to access higher education. Included within this is a lack of finances, student perception of finances, and environmental and parental influences (College Student Alliance, Ontario Student Trustees' Association, & Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2011). While there are educational and
financial policies in place to help assist low-income students in accessing higher education institutions, these students are still not attending postsecondary in the same numbers as their middle- and high-income peers (Deller & Oldford, 2011). Such findings underscore the need for students to be better prepared for academic and personal success when they experience this transition (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). This is a crucial, yet too often overlooked, element of teaching, yet is particularly relevant for those educators who are teaching intermediate and senior level students.

For those involved in the field of education this issue of preparedness for future pursuits can be problematic. As Conley and Wise (2011) write, the more educators and those involved in educational policy-making, curricular studies, and research try to pinpoint the areas of comprehension that students need to develop (i.e. computer literacy or critical inquiry skills), developments occur within education that makes such determinations difficult to locate. Consequently, teachers struggle to prepare the students for the rigors of present-day society, and the skills that students need to develop in order to meet future challenges (Conley & Wise, 2011). This can be a daunting task for teachers, as they are charged with developing a variety of competencies within their students, while at the same time having to be attentive to the skillsets that those in the education community (i.e. policy-makers, researchers, etc.) believe need to be developed in order for society to properly function at a later date. Such a task can seem very daunting to a teacher in general, never mind the fact that as educators they need to be aware of the multitude of factors that contribute to a student’s cognitive development and other competencies.

Research has found that factors such as socio-economic background, or the location of the schools (i.e. inner-city or rural schools) also play important roles in determining a student’s
future success. Scholarship has shown the crucial role that schools play in “promoting or preparing students to gain access to postsecondary education” and has found that schools can make a significant difference in facilitating students’ access to postsecondary education (Frempong, Ma, & Mensah, 2012, p. 26). Therefore, it is particularly important to attend to how teachers prepare academic transitions for students from lower socio-economic communities in particular.

While much has been written about specific curricular issues in relation to preparing students for university (in math, history, or sciences for example) and the concepts needed for future student success, little research has attended to how teachers working in student mentoring or transition programs are preparing their students in transitory stages for future academic success.

1.1: Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to learn how a sample of Ontario educators prepare students deemed at-risk by the school system and living in Toronto’s “priority neighbourhoods” for academic transitions into institutions of higher education. In this study, I am specifically referring to geographically and socio-economically students at-risk who are from urban priority neighbourhoods. I will be adopting the term “students at-risk” within my research study, as recognition that the designation of at-risk does not apply to any particular student, but to the context or setting in which the risk occurs, including, but not limited to, the socioeconomic factors (Smink, 2004, p. 6). This designation directly connects to the locations of the communities in which these students attend high school.
A priority neighbourhood is an urban area that has low socioeconomic standing, and lacks the community supports or social services to support the members of the community (Hulchanski, 2007; Leslie & Hunt, 2013). This lack of infrastructure and social supports within the community in which “students at risk” live can create unwanted challenges for those who are trying to access institutions of higher learning (Trudel & Puentes-Neuman, 2000). Families from low socioeconomic status (SES) communities, or priority neighbourhoods, tend to not have the financial resources or time needed to provide children with the same level of academic support than families from more affluent areas (American Psychological Association, 2015). Moreover, it is not only the students’ families that can have an impact on their academic success, but the school systems themselves, as they are often under-resourced in priority neighbourhoods (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008).

1.2: Research Questions

The primary question guiding my research is:

- How is a small sample of secondary and postsecondary teachers working collaboratively with transition support programs preparing secondary school students deemed at-risk in Toronto’s priority neighborhoods for the transition from high school to university?

Subsidiary questions include:

- What are the learning goals of the transition support programs that these teachers work with and how do these educators create opportunities for students to reach them?
- What factors and resources support and hinder their work?
- What outcomes do these educators observe from their students?
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It is through the process of asking these questions to the interviewers that I hope to be able to highlight some examples of successful transition programs and instructional supports for at-risk high school youth.

1.3: Background of the Researcher

This underdeveloped area of research is of great interest to me in terms of my teaching philosophy. I believe that it is my duty as an educator to ensure that each student is more than adequately prepared for success in their future personal and academic goals. My interest in this topic stems from my personal experiences that I had being educated, and growing up, in a rural community.

In elementary school I was given additional assistance in mathematics and literacy due to slower development in those areas when compared to my classmates. During high-school, I felt that my teachers inadequately prepared me for the rigors of university in general, and more specifically, the transition from high-school to a first-year undergraduate university student. Due to this, when I entered university (with a high grade average and an entrance scholarship) I was academically unprepared and as a result my grade average plummeted. It was only after a lot of hard work that I was able to place myself on the Dean’s Honour List for the subsequent years of my undergraduate program and went on to complete a graduate Masters of Arts degree. It was during this time that I made a promise that when I became an educator, I would ensure that those individuals that I worked with would be prepared, both academically and personally, to embark on their higher education journeys or workplaces.

It was in my role as a student ambassador and mentor at a research-intensive university in the United Kingdom that I truly came to appreciate just how important higher education is within
society, and the challenges that some students face when trying to decide what educational/career path is right for them once they graduate from high-school. I believe that by encouraging students from an early age to pursue higher education and looking into the means to do so is crucial for their development as citizens within the community. Being a part of such initiatives made me realize the struggles that some students have to face to even think of attending research intensive universities. I came to learn that it is the role of the educator to help assist their students in achieving their academic and professional dreams. As a teacher-candidate in the Master of Teaching Program (Junior/Intermediate division) at The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in Toronto, Ontario I have come to realize the impact that educators can have on student success.

Embedded within this viewpoint is the belief that each student needs to have the opportunities to learn and develop their own sense of self within a safe and inclusive teaching environment. It is in this setting that learners, of all backgrounds, will be able to gain the tools necessary for success as they enter adulthood (problem-solving, critical thinking, and communication skills to name but a few). This is considered to be a school-within-a-school model, or in other words, a “learning community” or “a cluster” (McIntosh & White, 2006). By gaining insight into how experienced educators who are involved in student mentoring or peer support programs prepare their students from various socio-economic backgrounds for future success in their given interests, I look to adopt some of the successful techniques that the interviewed teachers demonstrated as I embark on my own teaching career within a knowledge community.
1.4: Overview

To respond to the research questions I will be conducting a qualitative research study using purposeful sampling to interview three teachers about how they implemented programs that prepared their students from disadvantaged backgrounds for future career and educational success. Chapter 1 includes the introduction and purpose of the study, the research questions, as well as how I came to be involved in this topic and study. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature in regards to at-risk students, barriers to access to higher education, the educational transition process from high-school to university, academic success, and cognitive and non-cognitive skill development. The second chapter will also review the literature on community and social supports for students involved in the educational transition process, as well as explore transition support programs which include peer-mentoring and credit-based transitions support programs. Chapter 3 provides the methodology and procedure used in this study including information about the sample participants and data collection instruments, as well as identifies the participants in the study. Chapter 4 describes the data as it addresses the research questions and examines the findings that were brought forth from the data collected. Chapter 5 includes limitations of the study, conclusions, recommendations for practice, and further reading and study. References and a list of appendixes follow at the end.
Chapter Two: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0: Introduction

In this chapter I review the literature in the areas of at-risk students, barriers to access to higher education, educational transitions, academic success, community and social supports, and transition support programs. More specifically I review themes related to how educators working in credit-based transition programs are preparing their secondary students for success in higher education. I start by reviewing the literature in the area of at-risk students. I look at the contentious issue of adopting the terminology of at-risk within the context of student success. Next, I review research on barriers to access to higher education including financial factors, family circumstances, and geographical issues. From there I continue to review the literature on educational transitions and I consider the factors that influence the school-to-university process. I then examine the literature on academic success and the cognitive and non-cognitive skills needed for postsecondary preparedness. After that, I examine the literature relating to community and social supports for students experiencing educational transitions, in particular, credit-based transition programs. Finally, I review the literature relating to transition support programs, in particular, peer-mentoring and credit-based transition support programs.

2.1: At-Risk Students

In the United States, the term at-risk student has been hesitantly used by those in the educational community. Nevertheless, in the legislation known as the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) the term can be seen in the Part D title: Prevention and Intervention Programs for Children and Youth Who Are Neglected, Delinquent, or At-Risk (Smink, 2004a). This gives credence to the use of the term, not only by those in the field of education, but also within media
and popular culture. It is not only in an American context that the term at-risk student has been used, as other countries, including Canada, have incorporated the label into their lexicon.

2.1.1: What is in a Name? To be an At-Risk Student

Over the last few decades, colloquial terms such as drop-outs, truants, and problem-students, have been given to students in Canada who have failed to achieve the same educational markers as their classmates. Previously the term “disadvantaged” was given to designate such students, and was defined as “one who is isolated from mainstream culture and… who grows up in a family and a community which are economically deprived, or socially stigmatized, or both, …” (Lin, 1967, p. 751). More recently, the label of at-risk has been given by those in academic circles to designate such types of students (Levin, 2004). An at-risk student has been defined as one “whose past or present characteristics or conditions” are associated with a greater likelihood of not graduating from high-school (Ibid., 2004, p. 2). Poverty, parental influence, a child’s natural development, and the community in which a child lives are all factors that can be used to determine whether a student falls under the designation of being at-risk (Ibid., 2004). The use of the term of at-risk as a categorization has been met with ardent disdain by some researchers within the field of education, as it emphasizes the personal factors that lead to the labelling and stigmatization of individuals (Edwards, Mumford, & Serra-Roldan, 2007). While I agree that there are numerous factors that can help or hinder a student’s progress and educational outcomes, I do not believe that educators should label learners at-risk strictly due to their personal upbringings or where they live.

Instead of using the categorization of at-risk some researchers have adopted the term “students at-risk” to designate students who struggle in school. They chose to use this categorization as a way of contesting the at-risk label that is often given to students implying that
their personal challenges are rooted in their own inadequacies and/or their community or family circumstances (Portelli, Shields, & Vibert, 2007). Others have adopted the term *students in at-risk situations*, as they understand that the status of risk can vary due to the context, setting, or event in which it takes place (Smink, 2004a, p. 6). I will be incorporating the term “students at risk” in my study with the understanding that the label does not apply to the individual students, but to the situation in which the risk occurs (Ibid., 2004a, p. 6). It is important to recognize the contentions surrounding the use of the term at-risk in scholarly discourses as it will situate my research within contexts of greater discussions around issues of student success and access to higher education that are occurring within the field of education.

### 2.2: Barriers to Access to Higher Education

For high school students from low socioeconomic communities, access to postsecondary institutions can be challenging for a variety of reasons. Factors such as financial support, family circumstances, and geographical locale can all contribute to a student’s decision to continue on to university.

#### 2.2.1: Financial Factors

A three-year study conducted by the University of South Carolina’s Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis on access to higher education and financial aid for low income students found that of the 8000 student respondents, 59% indicated that they would heavily rely on the financial aid information they received when deciding whether to attend postsecondary (De La Rosa & Tierney, 2006 p. 2). An example of the financial aid information that low-income students consider is a report by the United States’ National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2002) regarding the affordability of higher education in America. It noted that over the previous couple of decades the federal and state governments have expanded their support.
student financial aid, however these increments have not kept pace with the expanded expenses of going to postsecondary institutions, especially “those increased costs represented by tuition” (Ibid., 2002, p. 6). In Ontario, 42% of students have “financial need not met by student assistant programs” (College Student Alliance, Ontario Student Trustees’ Association, & Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2011, p. 18). As a result, students are borrowing loans, in larger amounts, to cover the costs that their grants do not cover (Burdman, 2005). This fear of debt and loan repayment can be a deterrent for students at-risk thinking of attending university (Callender & Jackson, 2005). This means that for those students from SES communities who are receiving financial assistance, it may not be enough to cover living expenses and as a consequence could lead to those students dropping out of postsecondary programs, or not attending them all together.

This issue of financial aid is further compounded when, as research has shown, students from low socioeconomic communities cannot rely on their parents for financial support, as students find it difficult to collect their parents’ tax information as the parents are hesitant to share that information with their children (De La Rosa & Tierney, 2006). Additionally, due to social or language barriers low-income parents do not have easy access to college planning resources and are not aware of the various forms of financial aid or scholarships that were available (Ibid., 2006). These financial factors, when coupled with parental and geographical influences, can be seen as major barriers for students at-risk wanting to attend institutions of higher education.

2.2.2: Family Circumstances

Low-income undergraduate students tend to be from racial or ethnic minority families (Corrigan, 2003, p. 26). These students are also more inclined to be first-generation students,
meaning that neither of their parents attended postsecondary institutions (College Student Alliance et al., 2011). It has been noted by some researchers (Ibid., 2011; Sweet et al., 2010), although more research needs to be done about race factor and barriers to accessing higher-education, that certain immigrant groups have higher postsecondary education participation rates than Ontario-born students, while other groups have much lower participation rates, including those from Caribbean, East African, and Latin American origin. For example, only 12% of Caribbean-born students within the Toronto District School Board had “gained admission to university following their final year of secondary school” (College Student Alliance et al., 2011, p. 16). More research needs to be conducted to determine to what extent that racial factors and family background play in creating barriers to accessing postsecondary school for those categorized as students at-risk.

Another influence that can contribute to a student’s decision to attend university is that of parental expectations on their child’s academic performance. Studies have shown that for those low socioeconomic students who have parents that place great value on postsecondary education and have high expectations of their student’s academic success, it can lead the students to behave in ways that “promote high achievement in school” (Sweet et al., 2010, p. 15; Kao, 2004; Szalacha, Marks, Lamarre, & Coll, 2005). Conversely, students are twice as likely to not attend institutions of higher education if they believe that their parents are indifferent to their educational pursuits, as those students who say that their parents would be “very disappointed if they left” school (College Student Alliance et al., 2011, p. 21; Finnie, Childs, & Wismer, 2010). Thus parental involvement and support for their child’s learning are needed to positively impact a student’s academic performance and their desire to attend university.
2.2.3: *Geographic Factors*

The distance from a student’s home to university can be a significant deterrent for students from low socioeconomic communities who want to attend university. Frenette (2004) noted that one in five secondary schools students tend to live 80km away from a university, and are “only 58 percent likely to attend university as students living within easy commuting distance- less than 40km,” (p. 428). Furthermore, students from upper income families who live beyond the 80km from a university are “5.6 as likely to attend university as students in lower income families…” (Frenette, 2003, p. 20). It is this “negative effect of distance” that contributes to the notion that the financial costs of living away from home can result in students from low socioeconomic communities not being able to attend postsecondary school (Frenette, 2004, p. 428). This is an area that needs to be further explored within academic literature. However, it should be noted that through the review of the literature, on the topic of barriers to higher education, it does not appear to strictly be a single factor that results in a student at-risk not attending higher education, but a combination.

2.3: *Educational Transitions*

In academia, there has been a shift away from educational discourses concerning students from low-economic backgrounds and access to higher education and a move towards a more nuanced approach. Thus the “culture of poverty” argument, in which students from low socioeconomic communities were believed to have difficult family lives, has shifted towards scholarly discussions about institutions of higher education being “sites of capital” that some students do not have equal access to (Louie, 2007, p. 2227). Central to this are the processes of belonging, identification, and marginalization within secondary schools which have become crucial issues in the preparation of students from secondary to postsecondary institutions (Ibid.,
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2007). This means that in order for students to make a successful transition to places of higher education, students need to feel a sense of belonging and engagement with the secondary school.

These are the students that tend to do better academically and as a result will choose the path to higher education, as opposed to those students who feel marginalized within the school system (Louie, 2007). For this reason, it is important for teachers to foster an engaged community of learners in their classrooms. It has been suggested that an integrated approach through collaboration with academics, policy-makers, and practitioners would enable educational researchers to comprehend the multitude of factors that influence a student’s decision to enter into higher education (Ibid., 2007). Just as it is important in the act of teaching to integrate a cross-curricular approach, when conducting educational research one should try and incorporate an interdisciplinary perspective. By understanding the variety of factors that influence a student’s decision to enroll in a university program, an educator can develop strategies to help create a smoother educational transition.

2.3.1: Influencing Factors

In order to fully understand some of the reasons that assist students in the successful transition from high school to postsecondary, one needs to recognize the factors that might prevent students from making a smooth transition. The Canadian Council on Learning (Ungerleider, 2007) noted some of the challenges, which included: addressing the needs of students living in poverty, students living with mental health issues, the issue of older students wanting to return to school, students living with substance abuse issues, and addressing the needs of students new to Canada and English language learners (Ibid., 2007).

Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to be more vulnerable to not being able to access postsecondary education due to financial constraints (Frempong, Ma, & Mensah,
2011). In contrast, youth who have access to higher education will have better opportunities for employment and advancement in a modern society, and because of their higher academic attainment they are not at higher-risk of experiencing precarious occupational employment situations (Blossfeld, Klijzing, Mills, & Kurz, 2005). In order for students to be successful in school-to-university transitions, academic and personal supports need to be in place.

Given these factors, the *Evaluation of the Ontario Ministry of Education’s Student Success/Learning to 18 Strategy Stage 1 Report* underscored the need for high-school teachers to “re-culture” their teaching practices by moving away from “teaching practices” towards “teaching students” (Ungerleider, 2007, p. 37). One major challenge that the report noted was how hard it was for teachers to recognize that there are many different avenues available for students who do not want to attend institutions of higher learning and to adequately prepare those students for apprenticeships, college, or the workforce (Ibid., 2007). Teachers had the responsibility to acknowledge that not all students want to pursue postsecondary studies. They also had to provide support for those students who did want to attend university.

There are many key factors that play a crucial part in creating a smooth and successful transition from high school into postsecondary. It is important to note that educational transitions are impacted by outside factors, and the educational environment that the student is participating in (Donaldson, Shapiro, & Davis, n.d.). In addition to academic performance and the quality of high school instruction, teachers, guidance counsellors, family, friends, academic advisors, and orientation/transition programs are all influences that can affect the quality of their experiences, whether that be positively or negatively, when transitioning from high school into higher education (Smith & Zhang, 2008). With these influencers in mind, a transition can be conceptualized as not a fixed occurrence, but as a process that incorporates both an individual’s
developmental progress, as well as the educational benchmarks that are created by the school system (Donaldson et al., n.d.). This relates back to the idea of the teacher educating the individual student and being attentive to the particular needs of the student which might impede their move from high school into university. One route to creating a smooth educational transition from high school to university is through the implementation of a transition support program.

**2.4: Academic Success**

The success of a student in postsecondary education can often be traced back to how prepared, or ready, they were for the rigours of higher education during their final year in high school. Some researchers using a social capital model, involving social class as the foundation for their theoretical model regarding academic success, have argued that if students do not achieve “immediate success” in school than they will not have the necessary success level for future educational achievement in higher education (Hardwick & Frideres, 2004, p. 19). Furthermore, students who have the desire to attend postsecondary institutions or higher educational aspirations tend to have higher levels of academic success in high school than those who do not wish to attend institutions of higher learning (Hardwick & Frideres, 2004; St. John & Droogsma Musoba, 2011). Moreover, low-achieving students tend to receive more negative interpersonal interactions from their teachers, when compared to high-achieving peers who typically receive more support and “higher expectations for performance” from their teachers and thus, students at-risk are more likely to notice this pattern and perceive it to be an affront to their identities and thus react negatively towards teacher support (Baker, 1999, p. 59). Teachers have a responsibility to motivate their students and ensure that their students are seeing the
results of their academic efforts. No student should feel as though they are not receiving the support they need to succeed in transitioning from secondary school to university.

2.4.1: Preparing for Higher Education

Postsecondary readiness can be defined as “the level of preparedness a student needs in order to enroll and succeed- without remediation- in a credit-bearing course” at a university that offers the baccalaureate program (Conley, 2008). One reason for this lack of preparedness is due to the disconnect, and lack of communication, between postsecondary institutions and students and educators in high schools about what core skills and strategies are needed to be developed in order to succeed in higher education (Ibid., 2008). Conley (2008) outlines four key facets that provide students with a better conception of readiness in university:

1. **Cognitive Strategies:** Part of student success in higher education is the ability to learn content from a variety of disciplines. Some crucial cognitive strategies that students need to develop include: problem formulation and problem solving, research, reasoning, argumentation, proof, interpretation, precision and accuracy.

2. **Content Knowledge:** This area consists of the key concepts, ideas, and vocabulary that are used in a variety of disciplines. For instance, reading comprehension, writing, and text analysis are important skills to learn in English; while in sciences it would be the use and communication of empirical data to create hypotheses.

3. **Academic Behaviour:** Behaviours such as self-awareness, self-control, self-management, and self-monitoring are crucial to develop for success in higher education.

4. **Contextual Skills and Knowledge:** Students must make informed decisions about the reasons why they want to attend university and the feasibility of doing so. Thus
students need to be cognisant of admissions criteria, how to obtain financial aid, and
general knowledge of the challenges of student life in university (Conley, 2008).

Other researchers (Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009), have drawn on Coley’s work
(2008) about college readiness when identifying the four main areas of skill development that are
considered to be crucial factors in whether a student flourishes in institutions of higher
education. Content knowledge and the use of cognitive strategies are generally considered by
educationalists as being the crucial components of secondary school instruction and, as a
consequence, are usually included in the explanation of what it means to be prepared for
postsecondary; it is the increased demands in these essential academic skills, especially in
reading and writing, that marks the distinction between secondary and university classes
(Roderick et al., 2009; Conley, 2008). Thus high school teachers have the responsibility to focus
on the basic, but comprehensive, academic skills that students need to master in order to have an
easier transition into higher education, in addition to the subject-specific content knowledge.
However, it is not only the academic skills that teachers need to develop in their students.

2.4.2: Non-academic Skills

There are other skills, besides becoming proficient in certain disciplines and reasoning
techniques, which have been credited with determining academic readiness for a postsecondary
university. Learning skills such as time-management, study skills, organization, and adapting to
different teaching styles can make the transition process smoother and academically successful
(Goff, 2011). These “non-cognitive skills” include a wide range of behaviours that reflect
“greater student self-awareness, self-monitoring, and self-control,” and are problem solving and
coping skills that enables students to effectively manage the different academic and social
situations that can appear within institutes of higher education (Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca,
Furthermore, sociological researchers have stressed that a student’s readiness for university is also dependant on the information resources that a student has access to, including university admission process and criteria (GPA, required coursework, etc.); this aspect has not traditionally been included when trying to define the concept of postsecondary readiness and thus might be a contributing factor in the disparity that occurs between students from different socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds (Roderick et al., 2009). In contrast to the literature written about academic skills that students need to develop for university, there has been relatively little written on the required non-academic or learning skills. This might be due to intricate definition of postsecondary readiness, or because each university has their own understanding of what skillsets are required for admission.

This is an important aspect to consider for my research, as I am interested in how educators in high schools are preparing their students for success in university in all skillsets. Implicit in this is what information resources are available to students, especially those at-risk, when determining whether to attend a postsecondary institution. I am confident that my own research will be able to contribute to this area of research by identifying the various core skills needed for admittance into a university program. In order to determine the particular skillsets required, it is important to have a clearer understanding of the social supports that are in place within a given community for those students who wish to enter into higher education

2.5: Community and Social Supports

Social supports for secondary students are just as necessary as academic standards to facilitate success transitioning into higher education. To ensure academic preparedness and success in university a variety of on-academic supports need to be implemented; this would include emotional, instrumental, informational, appraisal, and structural (Campbell, 2010). Of
particular importance is instrumental support, which is providing workshops, outreach programs, summer-bridge programs, or the like, that focus on the skills that are needed to attend university (Ibid., 2010). Another factor crucial for student success is that of distributive leadership, which can be defined as “institute structural leadership changes” that allow for members of the community and school to collaborate together in decision-making processes (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2004, p. 3). Collaboration between parents, teachers, administrators, and students are important to ensure that students at-risk are being supported in their educational transitions.

By fostering an environment in which student achievements and academic performance standards are celebrated, communities can become powerful influencers for those students who want to pursue higher education (Cunningham, 2004). This is done by strengthening the connections between schools and the community. In order to build “lasting community support for schools that facilitates student achievement,” schools need to invite members of the public to identify the academic standards and “measures of progress” that their students engage in so that the community knows how best to support their students; this can be accomplished through public meetings, polling, focus groups, or the like (Ibid., 2004, p. 33). This is especially important for those communities who are deemed to be at-risk.

2.5.1: What are Priority Neighbourhoods?
In 2005, the City of Toronto released the Strong Neighbourhood Report, which identified neighbourhoods in the city that were considered to be at-risk (Leslie & Hunt, 2013, p. 1176). Moreover, it has been suggested that these neighbourhoods within Toronto have a disproportionate amount of populations considered to be at-risk, including newly-arrived immigrants, single-parent families, visible minorities, and youths (Ibid., 2013). These designated
at-risk communities within Toronto have also been termed priority neighbourhoods (Ibid., 2013). A priority neighbourhood is an area that has been designated with “extensive poverty” and lacks the proper structural supports for community or social services to be made available to members of the community (Hulchanski, 2007; Leslie & Hunt, 2013, p. 1176). This has a direct connection to the multitude of factors that place students under the designation of “at-risk youth” (Levin, 2004). As previously mentioned in Chapter 1, lack of community or social services within the student’s neighbourhood can be obstacles for students wanting to gain admittance into higher education institutions (Trudel & Puentes-Neuman, 2000). Thus, strong collaboration between the school and the community can be a foundational strategy for students at-risk to achieve a smoother transition between high school and postsecondary (Drew, 2004).

2.6: Transition Support Programs

In terms of the rationale behind the creation of transition support programs, there are two common assumptions that researchers have outlined. The first is that secondary schools are failing to provide the proper preparation needed for success in institutions of higher education, and so reforms within these high schools are required (Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002, p.6). The second assumption is that public universities “seek to enroll the types of students who have traditionally been left out of the system” (Ibid., 2002, p. 6). This section will explore two different types of transition support programs: peer-mentoring and credit-based programs.

2.6.1: Peer Mentoring

A review of the literature on mentoring in a variety of disciplines, including education, psychology, and sociology, has revealed that there is no set definition for the term. The absence of a fixed definition among academics results in a lack of clarity about the outcomes, characteristics, and experiences regarding mentoring programs (Jacobi, 1991). Additionally,
within the literature there appears to be a form of vagueness, in an operational sense, about the mentoring process and as a result, has led some experts to call for clarification on the subject of mentoring (Dawson, 2014; Coles, 2011). In order to fully evaluate the benefits of a mentorship program for students at-risk who want to attend postsecondary institutions, it is pertinent to explore some of the definitions or characterizations associated with mentoring.

2.6.2: The Definition of Mentoring

Traditionally, the term mentoring has generally been described in the field of human services as a relationship between “an older, more experienced adult and an unrelated, young protégé,” whereby the adult imparts instruction and ongoing support to the younger protégé with the intention of developing their competencies (Baker & Maguire, 2005, p. 4). Currently, within academic circles there has been a shift from defining the term mentoring and more towards specifying it, as mentoring represents an assortment of interrelated connections across a wide spectrum of contexts (Dawson, 2014). The reason for this shift is because over the past two decades since Jacobi (1991) reviewed the literature on undergraduate mentoring, there have been over fifty different definitions (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Dawson, 2014). This has led to many inconsistent attempts that have failed to provide a “clear operational definition” (Crisp & Cruz, 2009, p. 528). It is through the specification of the ways in which mentoring is similar that researchers are able to gain a clearer understanding of the term.

There are common components in mentoring that researchers (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Dawson, 2014; Ehrich, Hansford, & Tennent, 2004) tend to be in agreement over. Jacobi (1991) first outlined these ways, and they still continue to be used by academics today (Crisp & Cruz, 2009, p. 528). First, the mentoring relationship tends to be focused on the achievement of the mentee through the support and guidance of the mentor (Jacobi, 1991). Second, the mentoring
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experience includes broad forms of support, including emotional and psychological, career and professional development, and role modeling (Ibid., 1991). Lastly, mentoring relationship are both personal and reciprocal, where the mentors “show greater experience, influence, and achievement within a particular organization or environment” (Ibid. 1991, p. 513). These commonalities are attempts by educational researchers to specify the nature of the formal mentoring process.

Thus, formal mentoring involves a structured and intentional method facilitated by an agency or program with the intent of building a relationship between a student and an adult, or a younger peer and an older peer (Coles, 2011). It emphasizes positive youth development, in order to reduce the possibility of students engaging in unsafe behaviour, and addresses the concerns of the community including responsible citizenship, college access, and avenues to the vocational training; thus formal mentoring can be situated in school, community, and workplace settings (Ibid., 2011). This study will be focusing on formal mentoring, as it can give students, particularly youth at-risk, the interpersonal skills, academic techniques, and personal support that are needed to be successful in life (Smink, 2004b). A structured mentorship program can assist students through challenging life experiences and educational transitions.

2.6.3: Supporting Student Success

Yet, some researchers in the United States (Brock, 2010) have noted that although access to postsecondary institutions has “substantially increased” in the last forty years, “success in college- as measured by persistence and degree attainment- has not improved at all” (Brock, 2010, p. 110). An area of concern for certain scholars is whether mentoring can help students achieve academic success (Jacobi, 1991; Centre for Higher Education Policy Analysis, 2005). While there have been debates amongst academics and educational policy-makers about
mentoring aimed at improving academic achievements, it has been suggested that structured mentoring can have an impact on factors that directly relate to attending higher education including motivation, aspirations to attend university, academic skills and preparation for postsecondary, and knowledge about the challenges that students can encounter at university (Centre for Higher Educational Policy Analysis, 2005). In addition, such programs give participating students a sense of belonging, which can help facilitate a successful transition from high-school into university. Within these “literal and symbolic spaces”, students find support among their peers and a better understanding of their own identities which fosters greater engagement and achievement (Louie, 2007, p. 2227). Furthermore, some researchers have maintained that peer-support programs can create a community of learners who assist one another in managing the stresses that are associated with the transition into higher education (Tinto, 2000). These are all issues that formal mentorship programs address, and as a consequence can be influential in determining a student’s level of academic achievement in high school and aspirations to enter into higher education.

There is a body of evidence that suggests that peer-mentoring programs can assist in the socio-cognitive development of a student, which in turn can lead to success in postsecondary studies (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008; DuBois & Karcher, 2005; Schwille, 2008). This is due to the fact that peer mentors often discuss with the student all aspects of a student’s life, including personal and academic goals, without judgement or criticism; they act as confidants and role-models for their students as they have been through similar processes, i.e. applying to university, admission acceptances/rejections, the academic transition and the like (Centre for Higher Education Policy Analysis, 2005). Mentors provide encouragement and support for their mentees once they have made their decisions about where to attend university (Ibid., 2005). It is
particularly important for those students considered to be at-risk to have access to structured mentoring programs, as a few scholars have argued, they are in greater jeopardy of not completing their studies, and may become an unproductive member of society; draining the economic resources of their community through welfare or correction services (Lee & Cunningham, 1997). It is important to now examine a select number of peer-mentoring programs in Ontario.

2.6.4: Brief Overview of a Peer-Mentoring Program in Ontario

One example of a formal peer-mentoring program for at-risk youth in Ontario is Pathways to Education. This is a “comprehensive youth program” that was developed to help improve the academic results among incoming secondary school students from low socioeconomic communities (Oreopoulos, Brown, & Lavecchia, 2014, abstract). The Pathways to Education program started in 2001 for Grade 9 students living in the Regent Park area of Toronto (Ibid., 2014). The program provides academic tutoring, group and peer mentoring, career counselling, and assistance for the transition from high school to postsecondary (Ibid., 2014). In terms of social supports, Grade 9 and Grade 10 students receive group mentoring, while Grade 11 and Grade 12 students receive career mentoring; structured group mentoring activities are usually held biweekly (Pathways to Education, 2010). The participants are paired with a trained mentor, usually a university student or professional, as well as a Student-Parent Support Worker, who monitors school attendance, academic achievement, and participation while also “helping the student build stable relationships with parents, teachers, and other students” (Ibid., 2010, p. 4). Before the implementation of the program, 56 percent of Regent Park youth dropped out of high school, compared to 29 percent for Toronto overall (Ibid., 2010). For students participating in the program, when compared to students from other areas before
and after the introduction of Pathways to Education, there was a dramatic rise, “in some cases by more than 50 percent, in terms of high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment rates” (Oreopoulos, Brown, & Lavecchia, 2014, abstract). This mentorship program for students at-risk in the Toronto area has helped close the achievement gap for participating students.

A review of some of the program’s statistics revealed the relative success that the Pathways to Education program had in the drop-out reduction and postsecondary enrollment rates. For instance, with assistance from the peer-mentoring program the drop-out rate at Regent’s Park between 2001 and 2010 went “from 56% to less than 11.7%” (Pathways to Education, 2010, p. 6). Furthermore, of the six hundred graduates from the 2008-2009 cohort, approximately 80% enrolled into university programs, compared to the 20% who had entered Grade 9 two years before the program was implemented; over 90% of these graduating students were the first in their families to enter higher education (Ibid., 2010). The Pathways to Education program demonstrates the success that peer-mentoring programs can have for students at-risk when there is strong collaboration between the local community, school, and the peer-support organization.

2.6.5: Credit-based Transition Programs

Another way in which students at-risk can be supported for the transition from high school to university is through the implementation of a credit-based transition program. This is a collaborative program between a secondary school, university and the community, in general, and usually has the goal of seeing an increase in the number of high school students making successful transitions into postsecondary institutions (Fowler & Luna, 2009). Moreover, research has shown that there are a number of reasons as to why a credit-based transition program can be beneficial for students from low socioeconomic communities wanting to attend university
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(DeRoma, Bell, Zaremba & Albee, 2005; Bailey & Karp, 2003). These include: preparing students for the academic rigours of university, providing students with greater understanding of the skillsets that need to be developed in order to succeed at university, high school teachers are better able to assist their students in preparing to attend postsecondary, and exposes traditionally “non-college-bound” students to university (Bailey & Karp, 2003, p. 15). Although there is a limited body of research on the success of credit-based transition programs for students at-risk, results seem to suggest the importance of implementing transition programs in order to “reduce attrition and increase skills critical to academic success (DeRoma et al., 2005, p. 20; Whitaker, 2011). An example of such a credit-based transition year program is the Steps to University Program.

2.6.6: The Steps to University Program

The Toronto District School Board in collaborations with The University of Toronto’s Transitional Year Programme offers the Steps to University Program to participating secondary school students. A survey of the program’s website outlines the goals and structure of the mentorship program. Since its inception in 1992, the Steps to University Program offer certain undergraduate university courses, including Drama, Philosophy, and Sociology, to high school students who attend secondary schools in communities that have tended to be underrepresented in institutions of higher education. These are students who have the potential to excel in higher education, but have been marginalized due to a variety of factors, including ethnicity, family history, or socio-economic status (Council of Canadian Educators, 2014).

The program’s four goals include: encouraging participating secondary students to complete their OSSD, or high school diploma, to complete their secondary education at a level that will allow them to participate in postsecondary institutions, to persuade students to attend
institutions of higher education, and to encourage the students to select university programs for those postsecondary studies (Council of Canadian Educators, 2014). While in the program, the students take their courses at their local high school but also have access to the University of Toronto’s libraries and student services. The successful completion of the courses offered through the program gives participants a credit which is applicable to a Bachelor’s degree at the University of Toronto, but can also be transferred to other postsecondary institutions if the student chooses to not attend postsecondary studies at the University of Toronto. To date, no research has been conducted on the Steps to University Program and the kinds of outcomes that the program produces to ease the transition to university for students at-risk.

2.7: Conclusion

There is recognition within the field of education that a student’s level of educational attainment can determine the direction of a student’s future career and life decisions. Due to this awareness, differential access to education and the “geographical variations in educational attainment”, have been important themes within scholarly circles (Holloway, Hubbard, Jöns, & Pimlott-Wilson, 2010). All adolescents, whether designated at-risk or not, need to be able to develop their own identities and acquire the skills that will make them become responsible and active citizen in their communities (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). Through education students can acquire an individual understanding of capability and success, but as some researchers have noted, a “redefinition of teaching” and other educational reforms need to occur before students at-risk can achieve their academic and personal goals (Ibid., 1989, p. 27). This could be realized through the implementation of a credit-based transition program between local high schools and universities.
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In this literature review I looked at research on at-risk students, barriers to access to higher education, educational transitions, academic success, community and social supports, and transition support programs. This review elucidates the extent that attention has been paid to about educational transitions from secondary to postsecondary in terms of academic attainment and the issues of at-risk categorization of students. It also raises questions about the social supports that are needed within the community to help foster successful transitions into higher education, and points to the need for further research into the areas of credit-based transition programs and non-academic, or subject-specific, skillsets that secondary students need to master in order to experience smoother transitions into higher education. This study will look at how high-school teachers working in collaborative credit-bearing transition support programs are supporting participating students for success in postsecondary institutions.
Chapter Three: METHODOLOGY

3.0: Introduction

This chapter examines the methodology that was used throughout my research. I begin this chapter by reviewing the general methodological approach that was used, as well as the procedures and instruments of data collection, before focusing more specifically on participant sampling and recruitment. I further describe the data analysis procedures and review the ethical considerations that are applicable to my study. Furthermore, I identify a range of methodological limitations, but I also highlight some of the strengths of the methodological approach. Lastly, I conclude the chapter with a brief summary of important methodological decisions and my rationale for these decisions given the purpose of the research and related questions.

3.1: Approach and Procedures

Qualitative research can be seen as a broad notion that encompasses the research focus, the methodological approach, as well as the strategies of analysis and procedures used when conducting qualitative studies (Heynik & Tymstra, 1993). It needs to be rooted in experience and in the process of meaning-making, or construction, through the creation of a specific research question and sampling procedures (Kuper, Lingard, & Levinson, 2008). A critical issue when conducting qualitative research involves the sampling process. The samples should be extensive enough to speak to the various aspects of a phenomenon, and limitations to the sample should be clearly identified (Ibid. 2008). Furthermore, the biases of the researchers are considered to be an inherent part of conducting qualitative research, which is to be acknowledged when doing qualitative work (Ambert, Adler, Adler, & Detzner, 1995). The results of qualitative research should further the understanding of the problem undertaken, or
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speak to an issue or “understudied population” (Ibid. 1995, p. 884). It is with this understanding of the nature of qualitative research that I conducted my study.

My qualitative research study explored how Ontario secondary school educators prepare urban students from low socioeconomic communities for the educational transition into institutions of higher education. This research was conducted in accordance to the standards outlined by the Masters of Teaching program at the University of Toronto. The study involved an in-depth literary review of the relevant literature, as well as four one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with secondary school teachers in the Toronto area. New and relevant literature was continually reviewed throughout the study process. Data was recorded using a digital voice recorder, and was subsequently transcribed and coded into relevant themes. This research project implemented characteristics of a case study, as well as a phenomenological approach (Yin, 2009; Noor, 2008; Creswell, 2013).

A case study can be seen as an “empirical inquiry” that thoroughly examines a contemporary phenomenon within the context of real-life, especially when the “boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2009, p. 18). It provides a clear representation of the issue that the research addresses. Included in this definition is the technical aspect in which a case study inquiry process is used, that being when there are several sources of evidence, and when a triangulation of data is needed and, as a result, benefits from the prior “development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis (Ibid., 2009). This blurring of theoretical and context is at the heart of my study, as I examined how secondary school teachers are supporting their students for success at university. This blends the academic research on educational transitions, academic success, and access to higher education with
practical applications to practical situations, which in this case was interviewing teachers who were affiliated with a collaborative credit-bearing transition support program.

As a methodological practice, case studies have been criticized for the lack of representation of the case that is being used as the basis for their observation of a social phenomenon, as well as for a lack of rigor in the collection, coding, and analysing of empirical data which is usually connected to issues of the researcher’s biases towards the subject matter that they are studying (Kennedy & Luzar, 1999). By closely adhering to the data collected, one can maintain their objectivity in relation to the research (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). It is through the practice of self-reflection and thorough coding and analysis of the transcribed interviews that I am able to minimize the impact that the limitations of the case study approach can have when conducting qualitative research.

My research approach does not only lend itself to the case study methodology, but that of phenomenological study. As with phenomenology my qualitative study focuses on a single idea, or phenomenon, that being the idea of transition supports (Creswell, 2013). It seeks to understand how a group of secondary school teachers in Toronto support their students for success in university. The individuals involved in a phenomenological study have similar lived experiences (Ibid., 2013). Each of the participants in my study was involved with the same collaborative credit-bearing transition support program. Another characteristic of phenomenology, is that the research removes themselves out of the research study by discussing their personal experiences and how they relate to the study (Ibid., 2013). I related my own experiences to the research phenomenon I studied so that I could focus on the experiences that the participants had of this study.
3.2: Instruments of Data Collection

The primary method in which data was collected was through a series of in-person, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the preferred method of interviewing due to how the style was able to put the participants at ease so to provide a more relaxed atmosphere, which was conducive to gaining greater insight into a particular topic (Leech, 2002). The interviews were between forty and sixty minutes in length, with the possibility of additional questions through email or phone communication. All of the interviews used the same twenty-seven questions, and additional follow-up questions were asked if needed (see Appendix B). A sample of the interview questions includes the following:

- Can you describe the community in which your school is situated?
- What factors do you believe hinder some students from gaining access to institutions of higher education?
- In your view, how can the education system better respond to the barriers that students face that hinder their access to post-secondary education?

See Appendix B for the complete set of interview questions.

The goal of the interviews was to gain a better understanding of the ways in which secondary school educators involved in transition support programs are supporting their students who have been deemed by the school system as at-risk for successful transitions into higher education.
3.3: Participants
Within this section of the chapter, I review the sampling criteria that I established for participant recruitment, as well as review a variety of different routes for teacher recruitment. Included within this section is a subsection, introducing the participants of this research study.

3.3.1: Sampling Criteria
As the purpose of this study is to learn how a sample of Ontario secondary school educators prepare students who have the ability to excel but have been marginalized due to a variety of factors (socio-economic status, race, family history, etc.), or academic transitions into institutions of higher education, the participants of this research study were selected based on the following three criteria:

- They have a minimum of five years teaching experience within a secondary school or postsecondary setting in order to draw on a broader range of experience than would be possible with a beginning teacher.

- The participant must be working in a school in one of Toronto’s “priority neighbourhoods” because I am interested in learning how students deemed at-risk (including socio-economic marginalization) are provided with opportunities for transition support.

- The participant must be involved with a collaborative credit-bearing transition support program affiliated with a research-intensive university. As this study focuses on a particular aspect of transition support, that being a collaborative credit-bearing program, as well as a specific transition support program, it is necessary for the participant to be affiliated with that particular program.
3.3.2: Sampling Procedures/Recruitment

I found my participants by contacting the relevant collaborative credit-bearing transition support program’s university office. My sampling procedures did rely on convenience sampling, as I am a part of the community of teacher candidates and mentor teachers. As such, I was able to use existing networks to lead me to the specific program that this study focuses on. I implemented a purposive sampling strategy that focused on finding participants that were involved in a specific transition support program in Ontario and who were willing to be interviewed and provide information based on their years of experience involved in credit-bearing transition support programs as either high school educators or as university instructors. Purposive sampling can be seen as an “informant selection tool” used in both qualitative and quantitative studies, whereby the researcher deliberately chooses who the participants are based on the qualifications that the participants possess (Tongco, 2007, p. 147). A particular strategy of purposive sampling that I used was criterion sampling, which is when the researcher selects participants based on whether the participants met the criterion that the researcher set (Palys, 2008). The criteria that were used for the selection of participants for my research study were addressed in 3.3.1 (Sampling Criteria) within this chapter.

I first contacted the program’s university office and discussed my research with a representative. On the approval of the program’s administrator, an email was sent out to all individuals associated with the program outlining my intentions to conduct research. In the email, I provided my personal information, context for the research study, and statement that were added to emphasize the fact that I was looking for voluntary participants and not to make the individuals feel pressured into participating. I had five individuals respond, but due to various reasons only three were able to volunteer their time to be interviewed. All of the participants
understood the topic of the research project, as well as the academic nature of the research, and signed a consent form that outlined their roles and rights prior to the interviews being conducted (see Appendix A).

3.3.3: Participant Bios
For the sake of anonymity, each participant was given a pseudonym. Scott has been teaching for twenty-six years with the Toronto District School Board. He started teaching the junior division for eight years until he moved into teaching intermediate English and media studies within a couple of TDSB secondary schools. Scott earned his Doctorate in Sociology, and as a result had been involved in the transition support program as both the high school instructor and university instructor up until the end of last year (2014).

Jackie is a TDSB secondary school educator with thirteen years’ experience. She teaches grades 9 through 12 with a focus on leadership, food and nutrition, and Canadian and world studies. In addition to this, she serves as guidance counsellor at her school. Jackie has been involved with the collaborative transition support program for the past five years.

Claire is a sociology instructor at a major Ontario university who has been involved with the credit-bearing transition support program for the past fifteen years. Through this role, Claire has been working in affiliation with the TDSB partner schools involved with the transition support program. She teaches the sociology instructor for one of the courses offered through the transition support program, and in this capacity she enters the secondary schools two times a week to teach the participating secondary students.
3.4: Data Analysis

The process of data analysis is a crucial step in the qualitative research process. Data collected during interviews is first transcribed and then coded in a manner that allows the research to statically analyze said data into a “theoretical explanatory scheme” that sees the data collected organized into different themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.11). Data analysis involves studying a small sample of cases in greater detail and without predetermined categories, or in other words, there tends to be no prior linear model in which to follow (Maxwell, 2013). This allows for qualitative researchers to find emerging patterns in the data through the coding process.

There were three stages involved in the data analysis of the participants’ interviews for my qualitative study. The first stage involved using my research questions as an interpretive tool and individually coding each transcript and identifying different categories of data. The second step included identifying categories and themes found throughout the various transcripts against one another in order to find relevant similarities. These similar themes were then synthesized into more specific categories. Through this process, one was able to note where there were divergences in the topics addressed by the participants during the interview. Lastly, the themes uncovered were examined in order to speak to why those themes are important and applicable to the qualitative study conducted, as well as how the findings address issues already discussed in the literature review.

After conducting and transcribing the interviews, I reread the transcripts numerous times in order to identify themes and patterns that were relevant to my research questions. The following (number to fill in at a later date) were uncovered- discuss themes once found.
Similarly, subsequent themes were coded as null data, meaning that the topics were relevant to the research study but were not addressed by the participants. The null data included matter on (fill in once completed). The overall findings of the data analysis are explored in greater detail in the following chapter.

**3.5: Ethical Review Procedure**

This research study followed the ethical procedures outlined by the Master of Teaching Program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and the University of Toronto. Interview participants were given letters of informed consent prior to engaging in the interview process, which they were required to read and sign before the interview (see Appendix A). A copy of this form was given to the participant, and another copy was retained for the records of this study. Participants were given all of the necessary information about content, consent, and confidentiality. All efforts were made to ensure the participants’ comfort and willingness to participate in the interview.

At the beginning of each interview, I reviewed my topic of research with the voluntary participant. I informed participants that they could choose to refrain from commenting on any question, that they could review or revise their answers, and that they could change their mind about the use of the data at any point during the research process. The interviews were conducted at a place and time chosen by the participants so to make the participants feel as comfortable as possible during the interview process.

All procedures were conducted in the manner specified to the participants in the consent forms they signed. No changes were made to those procedures throughout the course of my research and writing process. There were no known risks to participation in this study. All of the
information that could compromise the anonymity of a participant was adapted through the use of pseudonyms for individuals and institutions. All individual-specific information has been omitted or changed as necessary to protect the participants’ anonymity. Any identifying markers related to their school or students were excluded from the study. The interviewees were also informed that only my supervisor and myself would have access to the data and that their identities would remain anonymous. The data will be stored on a password protected computer, in restricted-access files, for a total of five years before being permanently destroyed.

3.6: Strengths and Limitations

3.6.1: Limitations

As a researcher, I have my own biases and perspectives on the issue of access to higher education for urban students from socioeconomic communities, as well as how transition support programs should be implemented. Although I grew up in a rural community and was a high academic achiever who was able to attend a research-intensive university with an entrance scholarship, I did struggle in my first year of university adjusting to the academic standards of the program that I was enrolled in. Due to this difficulty, I was not able to retain my undergraduate scholarship for the following year. After a tough year of adjustment, I was able to maintain a 3.8 GPA throughout my undergraduate degree. In order to minimize researcher bias, the interview questions were formatted prior to the interviews being conducted. As the research topic is personally relevant, I made every effort to stay reflexive about how my own experiences informed my interpretation of the data.

Another major limitation of this qualitative study was the limited scope. The program in which I am enrolled in only has ethical approval to conduct interviews with teachers, and thus I
was not able to interview students. The participants selected for interviews were secondary school teachers and a university instructor working within low socioeconomic communities, and thus the data collected reflects only a small percentage of the educators in the area. Furthermore, the small sample size only highlighted the lived experiences of a small segment of the educational community involved in credit-bearing transition support programs. Thus, the data was not generalized to a broader population. Moreover, as I was only able to interview teachers, I was not able to determine what students, or parents with students involved in transition support programs, believe are the important factors that contribute to students smoother transitions from high school into university. It would have been beneficial to see if these groups would have reached different conclusions than the teachers that were interview. Additionally, I believe that as my study focuses on how to support students at-risk for that transitional process, it would have added a greater impact to what is being highlighted in my study if the students’ voices were present in this document. Thus, this creates a limiting of perspective, as I could not collect data from secondary students to the ways in which their teachers could support them in transition from high school to university, and other issues relating to access to higher education.

Another contributing limitation to my study is that I had to strictly follow the interview research method laid out in my program’s requirements for degree completion. As a consequence, I was not able to conduct observations, whereby I might have been able to sit in on a couple of the classes that students in the specific credit-bearing transition support program participated in. Nor was I able to conduct surveys or polls with students or other stakeholders (i.e. parents, secondary school and university administrations, etc.) to determine the factors that they believed contributed to a more difficult or easier transitional process, as well as how
teachers might be able to help that process. By only being able to use a single research method, I was limited in the type and amount of data that I received. Moreover, I feel that I could have used statistical data gathered from surveys and the like to further emphasize the issue of transition support, instead of solely relying on the perspective (although very valuable nonetheless) of the teachers that I interviewed.

3.6.2: Strengths

Although there are limitations to this study, there are numerous strengths to be found within it. The interview process enabled the participants to share about their lived experiences, which not only validated their voices but acknowledged the valuable contributions that they were making in order to support their students’ access into higher education. The teachers were able to speak to issues that were important to them and make meaning from their work. Thus, by consenting to be interviewed, the participants agreed to give their knowledge to the greater educational community for research purposes. Not only were the participants able to provide insights into specific applicable topics, but they were able to do so in more detail and in a more relaxed setting, than if they were to have completed a survey. As with qualitative research interviews, the participants were able to share extensive descriptions of the particular phenomenon, that were based on the meanings that their life experiences held for them (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Furthermore, since the study looks at a specific transition support program, it acknowledges the value that said program has on the Toronto community, as well as those students participating in the program. The study examines themes that are applicable to the program’s mandate and could provide future considerations for those involved with the program. As a teacher candidate, I had the opportunity to learn about different methods in which I could support students and their desires to attend postsecondary once I have my own classroom.
3.7: Conclusion

This chapter examined the research approach and procedures used in this qualitative study. My study implemented the methodological approaches of a case study and phenomenology by focusing on a contemporary phenomenon and the lived experiences that the participants had in relation to the issue of transition supports to postsecondary institutions. Through the use of semi-structured interviews, I was able to collect data and organize it into relevant themes and patterns relating to how secondary school teachers can support students in their transition into institutions of higher education, these themes and patterns will be explored in chapter four.

Ethical considerations were detailed in this chapter by outlining the need for confidentiality and anonymity. The limitations of the study were discussed, which included issues of researcher’s biases, limited sample size, and scope. In addition, the strengths of the qualitative study were also highlighted which comprised of the participants being able to make meaning and giving a voice to issues that they feel are important, acknowledging their work and the transition support program they are affiliated with as valuable to the educational community, as well as providing insight and an opportunity to learn from experienced teachers. In the following chapter, Chapter 4, I will provide an overview of the research findings.
4.0: Introduction

This chapter consolidates the information and findings discovered from interviews conducted with three educators associated with a collaborative credit-based transition support program in Toronto, Ontario. For the purpose of anonymity, the three participants will be referred to by their pseudonyms Scott, Jackie, and Claire. The purpose of this study is to examine the ways in which educators, particularly those involved in transition support programs, can better support students deemed to be at-risk by their school system for the transition from secondary school into institutions of higher education.

After analysing the data collected from the participants’ interviews, six themes emerged. As a result this chapter will be divided into six themes, as well as subthemes, in order to provide a more in-depth analysis of the issues addressed as it relates to the research questions of my study. If applicable for each theme and subthemes I will include the participants’ voices in order to provide support to my analysis of the data. After analysing the data collected, the following themes stood out: barriers to access to higher education; demystification of postsecondary education; connections to lived experience, within this is the idea of relevancy; academic skill development, specifically reading and comprehension skills, and critical inquiry; sense of belonging, including the navigation of space; and fostering self-confidence in students.

4.1: Barriers that Hinder Access to Higher Education

When the question was asked about factors that can hinder access to higher education for students from low socioeconomic communities, all three participants provided answers that
aligned with the literature on the issue. Such influences included the financial cost to attend postsecondary, family expectations, as well as social and cultural oppression.

4.1.1: Financial Cost

Through analysis of the data collected from all three interviews, financial cost was determined to be one of the major factors that can impede a student’s access to postsecondary institutions. Scott demonstrated this understanding when he mentioned that many students and “their families would […] be shocked by the cost of tuition and books.” A similar sentiment was expressed by Jackie when she was asked the same question. Jackie described how students from low socioeconomic families faced increased difficulty when considering attending postsecondary. Some of her students work part time jobs in order to assist their families with the expenses at home. She commented on how many of her students have difficulty understanding the financial situation because they do not have the lived experience to grasp how “prohibitive” tuition and living expenses can be.

This emphasizes the idea that there is a disconnect, or lack of financial comprehension, happening when it comes to the students’ lived experiences and the cost of university or college. This might occur because their financial realities are so far removed from the amount that is needed to attend postsecondary. Claire provided further insight into this:

University cost mega bucks and […] it can seem insurmountable to a kid who’s poor […] when you consider that the biggest barrier to going on to college or university is the cost […] and if your poor or if your working class and […] I mean five six thousand bucks is a lot of money […] it’s not the kind of money that you can make in a summer job […] if they don’t have that kind of access to ready wealth within their family system to contribute then the cost is the biggest issue.

Where […] appears in participant quotes, I have edited repeated phrases.
All three of the participants provided insight into how difficult it is for students from low socioeconomic neighbourhoods to save enough money to attend postsecondary. Financial constraints (Frempong, Ma, & Mensah, 2011) and access to financial support has been considered by researchers to be one of the major deciding factors for students from lower socioeconomic areas when thinking about going on to university of college.

4.1.2: Family Expectations

Another major obstacle that can contribute to a student’s decision to attend institutions of higher education are the expectations placed on them by their family. In his interview, Scott mentioned how many of the students involved in the program have additional pressures placed on them in their homes. The students’ parents want their children to go on to postsecondary, but are pushing them towards the professional institutions, those being law or medicine, and according to Scott, these families “might not have a lot of […] context for […] that advice.” In this situation, family expectations can be seen as families placing pressure on their children in terms of potential occupations and career path. Thus, students might feel the need to oblige their parents’ desires.

Additional stress might be due to whether the students’ parents attended postsecondary, or if the students are the first in their family to be going into higher education. Claire explained how many of the students participating in the transition support program at her school are the first in their family to be able to go to university, yet some of those students because of this, “may not be thinking of university as a possible option.” Consequently, first generation students, in other words those students “whose parents’ highest level of education is a high school diploma or less,” can face challenges when conceptualizing what university entails (National Centre for
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Education Statistics, 1998, p. 7). Moreover, since they are the first of their family to have access to postsecondary, and as Scott emphasized, parents might want to direct their children to take certain academic fields or disciplines.

Furthermore, it is not only the pressure that students are feeling from their families when it comes to academic direction, but additional stress based on parents’ fears of abandonment and feelings of self-entitlement or betterment. As Jackie elaborates:

Up until the day she left her parents were saying oh so you think you’re better than us leaving now that your leaving for […] oh so you think that now that you are getting a degree you are smarter than us you just want to leave us all behind and […] so even within their homes it’s […] a really delicate issue right to say I want to leave and go to university […] because there it there is some tension within homes right so even though families might […] move and believe they want their kids to have a better life I think there is also […] a bit of trepidation on what that actually means a better life right and fear around that.

This portion of Jackie’s interview serves to highlight the importance of parental emotional support for students trying to decide whether to go to college or university. According to Jackie’s statement, part of the response of the parents is the fear they have to let their children leave home, and the other half are beliefs that their children are acting like they are better than their parents for wanting to go. This tension is one that is often overlooked when considering the issues that can be barriers for students’ access to institutions of higher education. After conducting a review of the literature, I also noticed that there is a lack of scholarship in this area. There were only a handful of scholars who examined parents’ emotional support for their students, and these were focused primarily within the context of middle-school and secondary school environments, or on too broad of postsecondary student demographic (Richman,
Rosenfeld, & Bowen, 1998; Azmitia, Syed, & Radmacher 2013). Consequently, this is a subject area that might need to be further investigated.

4.1.3: Systemic and Cultural Oppression

While interviewing both Scott and Jackie, the topic of systemic oppression was addressed as a factor that can impede one’s access to postsecondary. Both educators made it apparent that they were aware that their students were facing systemic and cultural oppression. They provided evidence of this to include police carding, poverty, religion, first-generation students, and racism, to name but a few. Jackie pointed out that part of her role within the program is “to make these students feel like they are successful and that they can go on to postsecondary.” Scott further expanded upon this idea to include this recognition as a tool for student empowerment:

Being aware of them I think allows them to advocate for themselves and […] recognize it’s not a personal experience it’s not stupid […] too poor to attend but that there are systemic factors that are making it more difficult for them but that they can by recognizing those factors that I think that it does empower them as individuals.

Thus, according to Scott one of the ways that teachers can support their at-risk students is by having the students recognize the influences that can impact their educational decisions, and provide encouragement and motivation to foster self-belief in each of their students. This recognition, however, can lead to students having difficult conversations with their parents. As Scott stressed the students would go home and discuss with their parents what they were learning in class about notions of inequality and the like. This can lead to “uncomfortable” conversations with family members, especially as the students start to engage in deeper intellectual conversations and they “recognize their situation and their parents’ situations in many ways informed by […] social structures […] it was enlightening for the students but I do not think the
parents knew what to do with it.” As a consequence, although the parents are aware of the societal factors that influence their lives, they might not feel that they are able to articulate or rationalize those reasons, or feel at ease talking to their children about them. This can lend itself to the lack of comprehension of the university process for students. Through my examination of this subject, I found there to be a lack of academic writing on the issue. Perhaps more research into parental involvement in student transition support programs, especially when it comes to discussing sensitive topics with their children, would be beneficial to conduct.

The factors that were uncovered during my analysis of each of the interviews corresponded to the scholarship on the subject. The financial cost of university, family expectations, and systemic and cultural oppression are all barriers that hinder access to higher education for students from low socioeconomic areas (Finnie, Wismer, & Mueller, 2015; Frenette, 2007; Sweet et al., 2010). These are constraints that can be seen to hinder “genuine freedom and fair access to opportunities, and […] to a life of genuine and valuable choices for each individual” (Walker, 2008, p. 268). Thus, each of the participants felt that part of their roles within the transition support program is to assist their students in gaining a better understanding of what postsecondary entails.

4.2: “Demystification” of Postsecondary

The primary focus of this study is on how educators involved in a specific credit-bearing transition support program are supporting students from socioeconomic neighbourhoods for the transition from secondary into higher education. Due to this, the questions in the interviews not only addressed the barriers that students might face, as previously identified, but the ways in which these educators are supporting their students’ transitions. It was with this in mind that one
of the questions posed to the participants was clarifying the mandate or goals of the particular transition support program.

For students who might be the first in their family to attend postsecondary this can pose a challenge. Scott felt that many of the students in the program tend to come from families that are newly arrived to Canada, or “first generation Canadians,” and as a result, many of the families do not have postsecondary experience. According to Scott, there appears to be some hesitancy on the part of the parents, and although they want their children to attend university, the parents felt that this was something they could not deliver any sort of insight into the situation. Due to this lack of comprehension of the higher education process, it is up to the educator to introduce students to what to expect at university and to encourage the students to think of university as a feasible option. Through his role as the high school and university instructor, Scott felt that he was able to help demystify university and provide reassurance to his students. He would encourage the students to consider university by saying “that this is not something that is beyond you in fact this is very relevant to your life in fact you can be successful in this place you might not have a lot of information about.” Jackie also mentioned how for educators the important part is “really allowing these students see themselves and see postsecondary as a real possibility for them […] most of our students actually believe that they can’t do it and so this is showing them what is possible.” Teachers should ensure that their students, especially first generation students, understand what is expected of them if they decide to attend postsecondary.

Due to this lack of relatability or understanding of the university experience, credit-bearing transition programs can support students from these communities by providing them exposure to what postsecondary is like for those who attend it. This was one of the primary goals
of the collaborative transition support program that this study focused on. Claire summarized the
goals of the program in the following way:

First and foremost we want to demystify university […] present it as a very welcoming place […] the vast majority of our kids […] would not have had a university experience in their family group so they may not be thinking of university as a possible option […] or they may not think that they’re smart enough or that […] so first and foremost the goal is to demystify university […] secondly through the work that I do and the work that the […] teacher does we want to build different skill sets for these students that a will [make] first year university or first year college in a lot of ways a breeze.

The answers that Scott, Jackie, and Claire provided pointed towards the need for teachers to clarify the university process and expose the students to what is expected of them when they enter institutions of higher education as first-year students. The learning goals of the collaborative transition support program under examination can therefore be seen to: a) clarify the postsecondary process and expose participating students to what it can be like to attend such institutions of higher education, and b) develop the skill sets of students for an easier transition from secondary to postsecondary, so that they can have a successful transition.

4.3: Connections to Lived Experience
When it came to how to get students engaged with the curricular material and developing the skills necessary for success at university, the participants of the study emphasized the need for educators to make what they are learning as applicable to their lived experiences as possible.

When analysing the data, a subtheme of relevancy came to the forefront.

4.3.1: Relevancy of Teachers’ Curricular Content to Students’ Lives
Jackie and Scott both discussed the need for educators to engage their students by connecting their lessons to their students’ lives. By making the subject matter relevant, students will tend to be more engaged and, as a result, teachers can provide their students with the skills they need if they decide to go onto postsecondary. As Scott explains, “I think just again to make
the information relevant not that the textbook considers this data that you need to memorize but it contains information that connects with human life […] and should be meaningful.” In Scott’s view having the subject matter applicable to the lives of the students, and having the students be able to extrapolate personal meaning out of that content, should be embedded within good teaching practices.

For Jackie, it is important for high school teachers to foster this association. She noted the need to establish a connection to not only the experiences of the students, but issues relating to the common human experience. Jackie stressed how teachers need to teach students how to connect their lived experiences “to the bigger theory out there […] how to use their voice and how to articulate it.” Jackie believes that part of her job as an educator is to provide her students with the “language to make their arguments stronger and not to make their arguments louder but to make their arguments stronger or their beliefs stronger.” According to her, teachers need to help students recognize the skills that each of them has and how that connects to larger societal issues out there. Through interviewing her, it became apparent that she felt strongly about the role that educators play in making the curriculum relevant to students. Jackie articulated this belief through the following:

That’s our job is to honour their experiences connect it to the curriculum and create spaces for them to actually articulate what’s happening in their lives […] in a way that’s not just that’s not just token but to really connect it to the bigger struggles your struggle is my struggle so how do we actually engage in your struggle in my struggle […] but I think I think that’s the role of all teachers if teachers don’t do that I don’t think they should be in the system.

As the interview continued, and I asked her what the roles of the high school and community are within a collaborative transition support program, Jackie noted some challenges that high schools can experience when trying to establish that connection, “but it gets
complicated because if seventy percent of our students don’t come […] from the neighbourhood around our school […] how do we build that connection.” Thus, according to Jackie a difficulty for many high school teachers is not only how to relate to their students and have them engaged in the learning process, but getting the community involved in supporting all the students that attend the institution, even if the majority do not live in the immediate vicinity. Jackie notes that there might be a disconnect occurring between the community and the secondary school in supporting all of the students. This statement serves to emphasize the problems that educators can face when trying to connect to their students, and getting their invested in their educational growth.

In Scott’s case, it was through the teaching of the sociology course that he was able to engage the students participating in the transition support program in higher level thinking by drawing connections between their lives and what is being taught. Through the sociology course students are introduced to theoretical perspectives that are applicable to their lives, and that can be used to understand their own situations so that they can make informed decisions. Moreover, by connecting the course content to the students’ lived experiences teachers can enable students to become more aware of their self-worth and understanding that they have the ability to do well in university. Even though students might have a limited understanding of what postsecondary is like due to lack of exposure, they do have the comprehension skills needed to succeed in places of higher education. This relates back to the goals of this particular transition support program, which according to the participants is introducing students to postsecondary, as well as the associated academic expectations and skills needed to be developed in order to provide a smoother transition.
The issue that Jackie brought up about community involvement in the academic success of the students enrolled within the area’s secondary schools links back to what Cunningham (2004) highlighted as the need to build stronger relationships between the high school and the community in order to improve the academic performance of the students. Although the majority of some secondary schools’ students do not live in the immediate area, the community still needs to support the initiatives of the schools to promote student success and wellbeing. This belief has been echoed by the Ontario Ministry of Education (2014) in their Achieving Excellence document, wherein it states that the overall student wellbeing and academic success within school depends on “the knowledge, wisdom and willingness of students, parents and guardians, community organizations, service providers, government ministries and others to create an environment that is healthy, safe and caring” (p.14). All members of the community need to come together to ensure student success.

4.4: Academic Skill Development

To reiterate, one of the goals of the transition support program is to develop students’ academic skill sets in order to prepare them for the academic expectations found within institutions of higher education. Although academic skill development did not come up as a repeated code during the analysis of the data collected, I am still including the participants’ conclusions regarding this topic as important results that need to be highlighted. Throughout the interviews, all three participants provided insight into the academic skills that they believed needed to be further developed in their students. Included within these skillsets were reading and writing comprehension and fostering critical inquiry.
4.4.1: Reading and Writing Comprehension

In order to develop critical literacy within students, teachers need to promote students’ reading and writing comprehension skills. This academic skill building was brought up again and again by participants. During my interview with Claire, and in her role as the university instructor for the transition support program’s sociology course, she noted the need for students to be able to enter the first year of postsecondary with the ability to critically engage with the text. This requires not only being able to interact with the text using deeper level thinking, but the abilities to be able to construct and write an essay in the proper format. Part of the problem, she believes, that can make the transition from high school to first-year so challenging for some students, is that some within the secondary education school system still model the five paragraph essay as the model for which to format an academic essay. As she explains, “one of my beefs with high school education is the five paragraph essay […] I tell my students take whatever you have been taught about that and pitch it out the nearest window […] this is not university writing.” There was general agreement amongst the participants of this study for the need to develop thorough critical literacy skills in their students by focusing on the ability to research, format, and how to write an essay.

For Scott this came about by teaching the students complex sociology content that would in turn help them to improve their analytical writing skills. Oftentimes when Scott was in “lecture mode,” he would teach the students how to take proper lecture notes. This involved him emphasizing that the students do not need to transcribe verbatim but be able to balance the skimming of their notes with the important facts that he was presenting to the class. He stressed the need for students to be able to engage with the material and make meaning out of the content being learned in class. He felt that it was “incredibly important” for students to be able to
properly structure an essay, including being able to conduct additional research by incorporating academic secondary sources to enhance one’s arguments or interpretations. Students need to understand that “there’s a real process involved and by working through them with this like on an ongoing basis.” Due to this, one of the greatest challenges Scott encountered in his role within the program was assisting students in developing their analytical writing skills, as many of the students enrolled in the program did not demonstrate skills that were sufficient for success in a first-year university course. This sentiment was also expressed in Claire’s interview, as first year students, in her opinion, often struggled to find appropriate sources and articulate their answers in the first couple months of university. As a result, the transition support program really focuses on developing the students’ reading and comprehension skills.

Both Scott and Jackie provided examples of how some of their former students who went on to university would come back to visit their classrooms and say how they felt prepared for the critical reading and writing expectations of their first-year programs. As Scott provided:

Hey I got an A on my paper in first year and my friends in first year saying how did you ever get an A on it and well I just said just use what I learned in high-school and again that is part of going back to what you were saying about how to prepare students for success it is like kinda of getting in the trenches.

Jackie provided a similar observation:

So that every student whose gone through [the transition support program] whose gone onto postsecondary I think is like all of them be either college or university come back and they’re like miss all my other friends have no clue how to read their textbook […] and I’m the one that is showing them how to talk to the text or how to highlight or how to read things or how to file things differently.

The beliefs expressed by Scott and Jackie about the need for educators to promote their students’ comprehensions in reading and writing are supported by the literature on the subject. Researchers have noted the need to develop these skillsets in order for students to do well when they enter
university (Wambach, 1998; Patterson & Duer, 2006). From the interviews, it appears that the students involved in the program, for the most part, felt prepared for the expectations placed on them in terms of academic writing in institutions of higher education. Moreover, it seems that the participants felt that they were able to structure their course content and assessment pieces in ways that supported the development of strong academic reading and writing in their students.

4.4.2: Critical Inquiry

Alongside developing comprehensive reading and writing skills was a focus on building critical thinking in students. This was most evident in my interview with Claire, in which she states that, “another goal is building critical thinking skills I’m always saying to them so what do you think is good about this theory what’s strong what is it explain and where does it fall flat on its face ….” Claire encourages her students to see how the learning objectives of the course relate to larger issues in the world. In her classes, students encounter different theoretical lenses and see how perspectives can vary depending on one’s outlook. For her, the ability to think is one of the most important skills you can assist students in developing. This belief was also supported by Jackie, who believes that students are to be engaged with the subject matter in a manner that enables them to gain a better understanding of themselves, as well as various notions of identity.

There was general agreement amongst all three participants that educators should focus on developing reading, writing, and critical literacy comprehension skills in their students. The participants recognized the stark differences in academic writing expectations that many students experience when entering their first-year programs when compared to high school expectations. The literature supports the participants’ beliefs for the need to promote students reading, writing, and critical thinking skills, among others (Conley, 2008; Carlgren, 2013). It is important to note,
however, that the participants stress that this is only part of assisting students’ successful transitions from high school to postsecondary. Non-academic skills also need to be nurtured in students (i.e. financial literacy, time-management, etc.).

4.5: Sense of Belonging

From the interviews with my participants, I was able to gain a fuller picture of how those involved in the collaborative transition support program get students better prepared for the transition from secondary to postsecondary. In order to introduce the participating students (who are in Grades 11 and 12) to what it is like to attend institutions of higher education, this specific transition support program has the students come to the university campus three to four times a year. During their first visit, the students are issued a part-time university identification card, and are toured around the campus by their high school teacher and/or university course instructor if they are available. At this time they are also introduced to the university’s main libraries and attend a workshop on how to access the library databases and resources. On their subsequent visits, the students go for more comprehensive tours, listen in on a lecture, and use the library to study for their course assignments. Their last visit occurs when all the students participating in the program, not just those students in a specific partner school, go to the university to write the course’s final exam in one of the larger lecture halls.

These visits are meant to give the students a taste of what it means to be a postsecondary student, and to encourage them to think of university as a real possibility for them. Jackie expressed this perspective in her interview as allowing those students to go to the institute of higher education and “make it feel like they own the place or make it feel like they belong.” For her, this is “one of the most important tools for them to see themselves there” as it fosters in
them the self-confidence or self-assurance that they deserve to be there. Developing that sense of belonging in students is an important component of this specific transition support program. A subtheme that became evident through the interviews with Jackie and Claire was the navigation of space. More specifically, how the navigation of the physical space of postsecondary can promote feelings of belonging and self-assurance in these students.

4.5.1: Navigation of Space

As Claire emphasized, many of the students participating in the program may be the first in their families thinking of attending university, and as such have preconceived notions as to what university is like and stereotypes of the students who attend such institutions. Showing the students around campus can help dispel those fixed mindsets. This can lead to some surprising realizations for the students, as Scott explains:

When we come down to campus they are surprised to see that hey there are black kids, there are Asian kids, and there are South Asian kids here as well so I think that that’s an important eye-opener just to get physically get them down on campus walking around looking at the uh the heterogeneity of the population down here.

Scott’s statement underscores the importance for teachers to show their learners that they can belong at university, and that students such as themselves do attend these places.

When Jackie was asked about the core competencies that students need to learn in order to be prepared for the academic rigours of university, she responded by explaining the need to have the students feel like they belong at university. To her this involved making sure that on their visits to campus the students would set time aside to just be in the physical space of the university:

I think the physical being in a place is does that and [transition support program] does that we go three times a year […] we might listen to a lecture for two hours and then we I
get them to hang out in one of the fields and I bring a Frisbee and play like just kinda hangout and take up space […] cause if you are constantly told you’re in the wrong space because of police carding because of […] however they feel in their neighbourhoods because their mom is so nervous of them being outside and that they don’t let them outside of their apartment / how do they […] begin to feel comfortable in new places and that they belong in that place.

Jackie revealed an interesting insight when it comes to why it is important for the participating students to take the time to take up space. As the students within the transition support program come from low socioeconomic areas, for the most part, and as they tend to be first generation students, there is this hesitancy on the part of the parents, as well as the students, to engage in this process of navigating the physical space of the postsecondary institution. This might also be due to a lack of social or cultural connection to university, due to a lack of shared lived experience. Moreover, even though they have the capacity to attend postsecondary, they may not “have the social or the cultural connections to understanding […] postsecondary and how to actually navigate that within a Canadian context.” Thus, the challenge for Jackie is trying to get the students to believe in themselves and that they belong. The transition support program is a way for the students to “actually feel like they can be successful at postsecondary in a really supportive environment.” In Jackie’s case, part of making the students feel that they can do well at university is showing students that they have the capabilities to attend these institutions, and providing opportunities for the students to get a feel for the campus, so that they can see themselves actually going there.

In congruence with the literature, the notion of self-awareness, as it relates back to how the students are able to see themselves going to university and feeling a sense of belonging when they visit the campus, can therefore be seen as a non-cognitive skill that high school teachers should foster to support at-risk students for the transition to university (Roderick, Nagaoka, &
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Coca, 2009). This can lead to a greater understanding of how high school students see themselves, as well as what academic direction they would like to take upon graduation.

4.6: Fostering Self-Confidence in Students

An important feature of the transition support program that all three participants commented on was the focus on the promotion of self-confidence in the students. Students can feel a lack of self-confidence in a variety of ways. The most recognizable form is where students are shy about presenting their findings in front of their classmates. This is not strictly an issue just with students from low socioeconomic areas, but generally with all students. Nevertheless, Claire commented on how when students in her class are shy, she focuses on making them feel comfortable in being able to conduct their presentations in front of their peers. Jackie provided a more understated example that particularly applies to first generation students within the transition support program:

I believe that the students that I have you know we can teach the skills on how to write an annotated bibliography but to have the confidence to be able to meet at the corner of […] and then I say ok I am going to leave you I want you to meet me here in two hours and […] their like […] you’re leaving us you’re leaving us it’s like yes because when you go to university no one is going to hold your hand and walk you around […] no one’s going to be a teacher following you around saying are you ok / did you do your homework where were you yesterday no one is they’re going to take your ten thousand dollars and they’re going to pocket it.

Jackie highlighted how going to the visit the university for the first time can be a very stressful experience for the students in the program. They might have never been to the area around the campus before, and as such, feel out of place in the environment. Yet, as Jackie further explained, by visiting the campus multiple times throughout the year, with teacher accompaniment or with peers, can not only make them feel as though they belong on the campus, but confidence in being in that environment.
In my interview with Scott, he stated how he enjoyed seeing the students develop greater confidence in their academic abilities as the course progressed:

Growing confidence from kids at the beginning of the year who see this huge textbook and think oh I don’t know what I have […] gotten myself into to this gradual awakening they recognize that [...] research is important and [...] that their opinions matter [...] every year we had [...] a few kids who didn’t see themselves as university [...] material at the beginning of the year who definitely were going to university by the end [...] that needs to happen on a much larger scale.

Therefore, according to Claire and Scott, the building of self-confidence in students is a skillset that teachers need to develop in order for their students to feel prepared to meet the expectations sets out for students preparing to attend postsecondary institutions. Nelson Laird (2005) defines academic self-confidence as “one’s academic and intellectual abilities in general as well as confidence in particular aspects of that ability” (p. 367). The idea of self-confidence can also relate to the sense of belonging that the students feel when thinking about attending university, as they both deal with students’ responses connected to their lived experiences, as opposed to more tangible academic skillsets that educators can foster.

4.7: Conclusion
This chapter examined the six themes and the seven subthemes that were found after analyzing the data collected from the interviews I conducted with my participants. The first theme was barriers to access to higher education, containing the subthemes financial cost, family expectations, and social and cultural capital. The second included the demystification of university. The third theme presented was connections to lived experience, which included the subtheme of relevancy. The fourth theme to be identified was academic skill developing, more specifically, reading and comprehension skill, and critical inquiry. Next, was the sense of
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belonging, including the subtheme of the navigation of space. The last theme to be identified was fostering self-confidence in students.

In general, these themes all relate to each other as these were the areas that my three participants addressed when asked how teachers can support students traditionally deemed at-risk by their school systems, and involved in transition support programs, for the transition from high school to postsecondary. Both Scott and Jackie spoke at length about the various challenges that students from low socioeconomic neighbourhoods face when deciding about attending postsecondary, particularly as it concerns family expectations and social and cultural capital. Claire primarily focused on the cost of university and the difficulty that some families face in providing financial support to their students. The different focuses for all three participants might stem from the fact that as high school teachers, Scott and Jackie have the opportunity to interact with their students on a more constant, if not daily, basis. Thus they felt more comfortable being able to highlight examples of systemic oppression that they know their students experienced. Claire, on the other hand, might have concentrated on the aspect of financial cost because as the university course instructor she sees this as one of the major obstacles for access to university.

The themes of connecting to lived experiences and academic skills often appeared in the data together. This might have occurred as the participants felt that in order to make the learning process and content meaningful to student, and help them understand the complex subject matter, they needed to make it relevant to their students’ lives. This was particularly evident in Jackie’s interview, which might be because she has experience teaching leadership to students as well as her work with the guidance department in her school. Additionally, sense of belonging and fostering self-confidence in students also tended to come up together in the data. As themes are
tied to the idea of fostering a sense of self-worth and belief in students, it came as no surprise to me as I went through the data that they were closely linked. One deals with being comfortable in the physical environment of postsecondary, while the other is being able to be comfortable and confident in their abilities to perform well in the academic expectations at university. All three participants wanted to promote this self-assurance in their students.

The data presented in this chapter has direct links to the literature review in my study. The barriers discussed in my literature review were also emphasized by my participants in my interviews with them, especially when it came to financial constraints and family expectations. The need to promote reading and writing comprehension appeared in the literature, but there was more emphasis on developing critical inquiry skills in students within the interview. One theme that did not appear in the review of the literature, but did in the interviews, was the emphasis that these educators placed on connecting the course content to the students’ lived experiences. With these considerations in mind, there appears to be a push to gain a better understanding of the factors that can hinder students from low socioeconomic areas for success at university, as well as how to facilitate successful transitions. This study, in particular, is examining how transition support programs can prepare students for the shift from the end of high school and into first-year programs.

This chapter has found that the final cost of attending postsecondary, family expectations, and systemic and cultural oppression are barriers that hinder students at-risk from accessing institutions of higher education. It also highlighted how transition support programs can assist educators in demystifying the university experience for students who previously had limited understanding of what postsecondary entails. This was found to be associated with the need to
make connections between the coursework that secondary students are engaging with and their lived experiences. Furthermore, this study determined that high school educators should be focused on developing students reading and writing comprehension, as well as their critical inquiry skills. It was not only academic skills that were found to be in need of further development, but promoting a sense of belonging within institutions of higher education. Lastly, it was found that students need to foster self-confidence in their academic abilities as well as self-assuredness that students at-risk are capable of attending postsecondary. The next chapter will further explore the issues highlighted in this chapter and provide recommendations for a variety of stakeholders connected to transition support programs and the support of at-risk youth.
Chapter Five: DISCUSSION

5.0: Introduction

I entered into this research project with the intent to uncover more about equity issues as it related to at-risk students access to postsecondary and how to support that transitional process. Throughout the extensive research process, I have discerned the crucial role that educators involved in transition support programs play in preparing students for the options that are available to them after they leave the secondary school system. Thus, the purpose of this project was to examine how Ontario educators can best support students’ academic transitions into institutions of higher education. The main research question posed by this research study was: how is a small sample of secondary teachers working collaboratively with transition support programs to prepare secondary school students deemed at-risk in Toronto’s priority neighborhoods for the transition from high school to university? Subsidiary questions included:

1. What are the learning goals of the transition support programs that these teachers work with and how do these educators create opportunities for students to reach them?
2. What factors and resources support and hinder their work?
3. What outcomes do these educators observe from their students?

Three semi-structured interviews were conducted, each lasting approximately fifty minutes in length. Two interviews took place in a public institution and one occurred at an elementary public school. The participants were asked a series of questions relating to the main and subsidiary questions, and their answers were recorded with a digital voice recorder and subsequently transcribed. Data was collected through the coding of the transcribed interviews, and after analysing the data six themes emerged that were in congruence with the review of the
literature, including: barriers that hinder access to higher education; the “demystification” of postsecondary; connection to lived experiences; academic skill development; sense of belonging; and fostering self-confidence in students.

This chapter will first provide an overview of the key findings from the fourth chapter, followed by a discussion on the broad and narrow implications of the findings as it relates to the educational community as well as my own teaching practices. From there, recommendations for the different stakeholders, including high school teachers, secondary school boards, and postsecondary administrators will be outlined. This will be followed by a section on areas for further research in the field of transitional support programs for students at-risk.

5.1: Overview of Key Findings and Their Significance

Through an analysis of the data collected in the interviews, and as presented in chapter four, six main themes were found that related to how teachers can best support at-risk students’ transitions from high school to postsecondary. One key finding that was found across these themes was the need for a holistic approach for transitioning students. For example, instead of looking at how to support students’ transitions from a financial support lens alone, other factors need to be considered when thinking about how to provide transitional support, including issues around family expectations, as well as systemic and cultural oppression. Another important discovery that was found was the impact that sense of belonging has in supporting students’ transitions from high school to university. This was an unexpected finding as it was not found in my review of the literature. Moreover, it reveals an area that needs to be further explored in research about transitional support. This led to an overarching finding about the need for high schools and universities to further establish additional transition support programs. These
findings were drawn from the themes that were uncovered during the interviews I had with my participants.

There were strong connections between the themes discovered in the interviews and those highlighted in the literature review. The first theme was barriers that hinder access to higher education. A major obstacle that at-risk students face when trying to gain access to higher education was determined by the participants to be the financial cost of postsecondary. This was followed by the expectations that families from low socioeconomic neighbourhoods place on their children when deciding whether to attend university or not. The last main complication that students can face when trying to transition from high school to institutions of higher learning was seen by the interviewees to be systemic and cultural oppression. As highlighted in the interviews and found in the literature on the issue, students from these neighbourhoods might not be able to rely on their parents for financial support, nor might their parents have access or be aware of the financial assistance available to their children due to language or social barriers (De La Rosa & Tierney, 2006). Moreover, parents might be indifferent to their children’s desires to attend university or may not want them to move away from home (College Student Alliance et al., 2011; Frenette, 2004). This led to the second theme, the “demystification” of university, being revealed. The participants expressed their beliefs that the university process needs to be more transparent, as well as understanding what attending such institution entails, including the demographics of student population, and the overall university experience.

The third theme found was connection to lived experience. This involves making the academic content and activities relevant to the lives of one’s students. The fourth theme that was uncovered was that of academic skill development. Included within this is the development of
students’ reading and writing comprehension, as well as their critical thinking skills. This had direct connections to the literature review, in which cognitive strategies (i.e. problem solving, researching, and reasoning) and content knowledge (i.e. reading comprehension, text analysis, etc.) were highlighted as a few of the academic skills that needed to be developed for a smoother transition into first year undergraduate courses (Conley, 2008). Sense of belonging was the fifth theme revealed through the analysis of the transcribed interviews. Within this theme was the subtheme of navigation of space. The last result that emerged from an analysis of the data collected was the need to foster self-confidence in students. Both sense of belonging and fostering self-confidence in students can be seen as non-academic learning skills that can be developed in order to assist with postsecondary readiness (Roderick et al. 2009). The themes uncovered led to many important implications for the education community to consider when thinking about how to best support at-risk students’ transitions from secondary school to institutions of higher education.

5.2: Implications

After spending two years examining transition support programs and the ways in which educators can support students at-risk transitions into university, I have come to realize just how important the teacher’s role is in providing transitional support. Moreover, after conducting a literature review and interviews with my participants, I am now more cognisant of the challenges that some high school students have to face in order to graduate and gain access to institutions of higher education. The implications discussed below will outline the broader implications, as it relates to the educational community, as well as narrow implications which include my own teaching and research practices.
5.2.1: Broad Implications: The Educational Research Community

One of the main themes uncovered during the interviews I conducted with participants were the barriers that students at-risk face when trying to access to university. In particular, Jackie noted that some of her students who were involved in the transition support program worked part-time jobs or looked after younger siblings to help support their families. This has wider implications for the educational community as those students have competing social responsibilities that can potentially result in them deciding not to attend university. More specifically, when compared to their peers these students might have less time to study which could result in dropping out of high school or impact their decision on whether or not to take academic courses. Furthermore, if they do decide to attend university will these students decide to stay close to home or move farther away, and if they decide the later will their decisions be supported by their families? Some students are deciding to stay closer to home due to what Frenette argues is the “negative effect of distance,” which examines how students from low socioeconomic areas when compared to their more affluent peers tend to stay within easy commuting distance to a local university or college (Frenette, 2004, p. 428). This decision of where to go has the potential to disadvantage those students who decide to stay close to home. If, for example, a student has the opportunity to attend a prestigious program at a university outside of their local area but is unable to attend due to financial constraints or family expectations and proceeds to opt for a lesser known program, is that setting the student up for future success in their chosen career?

The interviews I conducted with Claire, Jackie, and Scott led to some interesting implications for educators. The one that primarily stood out was the need to connect the subject
matter to students’ lives, in other words, making the content relevant to their lives. If they cannot make the connection between their lives and the content then they might not have a desire to learn the content or find it useful and thus, it is a possibility that they could become disengaged with class and their academic performance could decline. Connected to this is the development of reading and writing comprehension skills, as if teachers are unable or unwilling to develop their students’ academic and writing skills, in addition to their critical thinking skills, then their students are not being setup for success in postsecondary.

Furthermore, if students do not have confidence in their academic skills and abilities than their school performance will be negatively affected, and might lead them to considering dropping out of school or discontinuing in the course. Additionally, if educators decline to address issues relating to sense of belonging in university (i.e. university student demographics, access to financial aid information, etc.) then students from low socioeconomic areas, especially those who are first generation students (National Centre for Education Statistics, 1998), might not see postsecondary as a viable option. This can lead to maintaining the white ivory tower perception of institutions of higher education; which sees postsecondary as primarily for wealthy Caucasian students and as a location that lacks diversity demographically (Cantor & Englot, 2013; Chantler, 2014). If teachers do not expose their students in general, and particularly those deemed to be at-risk, to different aspects of university life while still in high school those students might experience a harder transition process or select to not apply to postsecondary. These broader implications will also impact my own teaching practices.
5.2.2: Narrow Implications: Professional Identity and Practice

When I am in the classroom, I will need to be cognisant of the fact that some of my students might not be achieving their highest because they are tired and unable to concentrate on the subject matter since they have been looking after younger siblings or working part-time jobs to support their families. If this becomes the case, I would need to come up with a strategy for improvement in conjunction with the student to assist them in their schoolwork. Furthermore, I need to be aware of the use of terminology and how I connect with my future students. For instance, if I use the word family in the classroom I need to realize that not all families are nuclear families and that there are multiple ways to conceptualize what family means. I would not want to isolate my at-risk students or make them feel singled out if their lived experience is different from mine.

Thus from the study that I conducted, I have come to the understanding that one of the most important aspects of teaching is having those personal connections between myself as teacher and my students. Moreover, I need to foster self-confidence in my students and a sense of belonging in my classroom. This can lead to the students being more engaged with the content in class, and can pave the way for further developing their reading and writing comprehension, as well as their critical inquiry skills. I also need to make sure that I provide opportunities throughout my classes to have discussions with my students about what university life entails, as well as being a resource for my students who might have questions concerning the university admission process.

Doing this analysis has helped me see the issues that some students face when trying to access higher education, and that not all of my students will want to go on to postsecondary, as
they might want to enter the trades or community colleges. In addition, this study has made me more aware of the biases that I have regarding the issues I believe that students at-risk face when trying to gain access to university. Prior to conducting this study, I assumed that the main barrier to access to education would be financial, and although this did present itself as a major barrier, family expectations and systemic and cultural oppression were unexpected obstacles that I found through interviewing my participants. Conducting this study has further driven my passion for supporting equity issues in education (i.e. access to postsecondary). Due to this, I will be looking to work within school environments that have strong transition support programs in place, or if one is not established, then schools that are open to implementing such programs. Based on the broad and narrow implications previously discussed, the subsequent section will outline recommendations for the key stakeholders within the educational community, including high school educators, secondary school boards, and postsecondary administrators.

5.3: Recommendations

The following are recommendations that secondary school teachers, boards of secondary education (in particular the Toronto District School Board), and university administrators involved in transition support programs can implement in order to best support their students’ transitions from high school to university.

Secondary School Teachers.

Within the classroom, part of promoting student academic success involves teachers putting in the effort to create lessons that not only engage the students in developing their critical inquiry skills, but connect the subject matter being learned to their everyday lives. Secondary school educators can foster this development by using content material that engages the interests
of the students and has them be part of the meaning-making process. By making the content applicable and relevant, high school educators can create positive relationships with students deemed to be at-risk and make sure that they are feeling supported, as well as motivate to achieve high academic expectations (Baker, 1999). Through the interviews with Claire, Jackie, and Scott, it became clear that they felt that making the course content in high school relevant to their students’ lives was influential in fostering a belief in students that they had the capabilities to be able to go into higher education.

Educators within high schools should provide academic reading and writing workshops, both in class and school-wide that focus on content such as how to write a postsecondary essay or research and cite scholarly work. Additionally, teachers should use self-reflective practices that check their own biases, and reflect on how they compare to their students. Activities such as value lines in the classroom can be used to promote inclusivity, and to emphasize connections between one another. It is also important to engage in dialogue with family members and/or guardians on how to best support students transition from high school into their next steps, whether that be in trades, workforce, or higher education. Newsletters, emails, informational night sessions, and parent-teacher interviews can be used by teachers to facilitate such discussions.

Secondary School Board Level.

Aside from teachers, officials involved at the secondary school board level should implement sensitivity training in order to recognize how to interact and support at-risk youth. Professional development days should be provided that allocates time to explore how teachers can foster confidence, belonging, and self-esteem in their students. University instructors can be
hired or asked to volunteer time to go into local high schools and provide information about postsecondary for interested high school students and their families. Furthermore, principals should devote time and energy to establishing transition support programs or provide further support for those programs if they are already established in their schools.

*Postsecondary Administrators.*

It is not only at the secondary school level that support can be given to such programs, but also at the postsecondary level. Therefore, university and college administrations should collaborate with secondary schools to establish or further support existing credit-bearing transition support programs. Postsecondary institutions should establish online peer mentorship programs that provide grades eleven and twelve students with an undergraduate mentor in order for secondary students to gain a better understanding of what university entails. Moreover, funding should be given to conduct research studies that can further study how to best support students transitions from high school to university. As financial cost seems to be one of the greatest barriers for students at-risk to gain access to university, collaboration with financial institutions and governmental agencies should be undertaken by university administrations in order to provide further financial aid for students at-risk transitioning into university.

The recommendations highlighted above are meant to be suggestions that various members of the educational community can implement in order to provide assistance and guidance for those high school students wishing to attend institutions of higher education. Given the limited scope of this research study, the recommendations listed are only a small sample of the number of options that might be possible.
5.4: Areas for Further Research

While generalizations cannot be based on three participants, my research, including an analysis conducted of the participants’ interviews and a review of the literature, found that the financial cost of postsecondary can impede students from low socioeconomic areas from gaining access to such institution. Moreover, parental expectations and systemic and cultural oppression were seen to be further impediments. However, more research needs to be conducted on the reasons that influence families from low socioeconomic resisting their children’s decisions to attend postsecondary. Given the scope of this research project, this study did not explore parents support of their students desire to attend university. Thus, a qualitative study should be piloted that interviews both parents and students from low socioeconomic areas to determine the factors that influence their choices. A quantitative survey could be conducted that accompanies the qualitative report in order to see which issues are more prominently considered.

As this study only looked at a single credit-bearing transition support program within a specific geographical location (the Toronto District School Board in Ontario), further examination of other such transition support programs is necessary to fully determine how to best support students considered at-risk by their school boards for the transition from high school to university. Furthermore, as indicated in the review of the literature, there are many different forms of transition support programs in Ontario that are offered to students including peer mentoring programs (Oreopoulos, Brown, & Lavecchia, 2014; Pathways to Education, 2010). An analysis of the different forms of transition support should be undertaken by educational researchers in order to determine if a particular type of support program is better suited to providing such transitional support for the students participating in the programs.
Aside from transition support programs, academics within the educational community should further explore the idea of sense of belonging in relation to high school drop-out and graduation rate. Although research on the area has been conducted in this area (Parekh, 2014), a statistical analysis of grades nine through twelve students should be implemented to determine if there is a correlation between the two issues. Additionally, it might be beneficial to examine if that sense of belonging increases or decreases when students enter into first year undergraduate programs. A survey could be undertaken whereby first year university students are asked questions along the lines of whether they are being supported in their programs and university experiences overall, as well as having to answer questions about their sense of belonging in high school. Conducting such a survey could provide valuable information for secondary and postsecondary administrators (and others within the educational community) when determining how best to support students’ transitions into undergraduate programs.

5.5: Concluding Comments

After careful review of the literature and my participants’ transcribed interviews, my research indicates that in order to promote smoother transitions for students deemed at-risk by their school board into institutions of higher education, high school educators need to foster self-confidence in students, as well as a sense of belonging. In addition, my findings also suggests that secondary school teachers need to connect the course content to their students’ lived experiences and focus on developing academic reading and writing comprehension, as well as students’ critical thinking skills. Without these skills, students can face challenges when trying to gain admittance into university, as well as disinterest in continuing their educational journeys.
Furthermore, credit-bearing transition support programs can provide a route through which students at-risk can gain a better contextual understanding of university.

The research that was undertaken in this study is significant for high school teachers, secondary boards of education, postsecondary administrations, and others within the education community that are involved in transition support programs. Why is there such a pronounced disconnect between the end of high school and first year university? How can educators support their students in the transition process? During my interview with Scott, he emphasized this disconnect with the following statement:

“I think […] there’s this real disconnect between what is taught in senior level courses and what is expected in first year courses … I think that really needs to be addressed by creating […] more bridges between […] senior level high school and first year university”.

If there is such a great disconnect, as Scott suggests, high school educators and other involved parties need to begin to build those bridges with university administrations in order to ensure that students at-risk are receiving the support they need to go onto postsecondary. Teachers can be advocates for the creation of transition support programs in their schools as well. Setting students from low socioeconomic neighbourhoods up for success in postsecondary has to start in the classroom.

The end of high school is a critical transitionary period for students as they seek to choose a life path that will support their career and personal choices. Students have a variety of options available to them, as they might seek to enter the workforce, professional trades, community college, postsecondary, or other opportunities. It is important to recognize that every
student comes from different lived experiences, and due to these experiences have varying degrees of access to postsecondary programs.

Those within the educational community (i.e. teachers, school board and postsecondary administrators, etc.) can be the bridges by which students can access those different life paths. However, it is important to remember that due to their different lived experiences, not all students have an easy time in accessing postsecondary. In particular for those students from low socioeconomic neighbourhoods, this life path might not be an accessible option. Yet, as bridges educators can facilitate this work by fostering self-confidence, sense of belonging, and the critical literacy and inquiry skills in their students, which can set them up for a smoother transitional process. These students should feel that they can succeed at university, that postsecondary is a viable option for them (if they wish to pursue it), and that they are an important part of the university community. As a society, it is important to promote diversity within postsecondary communities as the lived experiences and collective knowledge that is found with such institutions can be harnessed to further facilitate initiatives that contribute to the continued creation of a fair and equitable society.
REFERENCES


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Parekh, G. (2014). *Students’ experiences of belonging in school* (Fact Sheet 1). Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Toronto District School Board.


Appendix A: LETTER OF CONSENT FOR INTERVIEW

Date: ________________

Dear ________________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying transition support programs for secondary school students deemed at-risk in Toronto’s priority neighborhoods planning to attend higher education for the purposes of investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Dr. Angela MacDonald-Vemic. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 45-60 minute interview that will be audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. You will be assigned a pseudonym and any identifying information will be excluded. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Sincerely,
Lindsay Thornton
Phone number added on original copy
Email added on original copy

Instructor’s Name: Dr. Angela MacDonald-Vemic
Phone number:
Email: _______________________

Research Supervisor’s Name: ________________________________
Phone #: ______________________ Email: _______________________

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by ______________________(name of researcher) and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ______________________________________________

Name (printed): _______________________________________

Date: ______________________
Appendix B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

I would like to first thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study. This study is aimed at learning how Ontario secondary school and postsecondary teachers prepare students deemed at-risk by the school system and living in Toronto’s “priority neighbourhoods” for academic transitions into institutions of higher education. The interview should take between forty-five and sixty minutes in length. I will ask questions related to your background as an educator, your involvement with credit-based transition year programs, and how your teaching practices support students transitioning from high school into higher education. I want to remind you that you are free to choose not to answer any of the questions asked. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Section 1: Background Information

1. How many years have you been teaching?
2. What grades and subjects have you taught?
3. Can you describe the community in which your school is situated?
4. How did you get involved with the ______ program?
5. For how long have you been involved with the program?
6. In your view, what is the mandate / what are the goals of this program?
7. On average, how many students do you have participating in the program each year?
   Who are these students?

Section 2: Beliefs/Values (Why?)

8. What factors do you believe hinder some students from gaining access to institutions of higher education?
9. What responsibility, if any, do you believe schools have for addressing these barriers?
10. How do you define student success?
11. A) What core competencies and attributes do you believe students need to learn in order to be prepared for the academic rigours of university? B) Why do you believe that these particular competencies are important to learn?
12. In your experience, do you believe that transition support programs are beneficial to students? If so, in what ways? If not, why?
13. A) What do you believe is the role of the following within a collaborative transition support program: the university, the secondary school, the community in which the student resides, the teacher or educationalist, and the student? B) In your opinion, how do these various roles play a part in fostering successful educational transitions?
14. In what ways, if any, do you think your own values and beliefs about access to higher education inform the kinds of support you provide (or do not) for your students?
Section 3: Teacher Practices (What/How?)

15. What is your specific role in supporting students to transition to higher education, in the context of your work with the ________ program? How do you enact this role?
16. Can you describe for me what a typical day in this role looks like for you?
17. What is the curriculum of this program? What kinds of learning takes place, and where? (in the school, in the community, outside…)
18. What are the learning goals that guide your teaching in this role?
19. What opportunities for learning do you create to realize those goals for students?
20. How do your students respond to your instruction? What outcomes do you observe from them?
21. Do you track student outcomes longitudinally? If yes, how? If yes, can you give me an example of a student that you kept in touch with after their participation in the transition program? What steps did they follow after the program?
22. Are there other teachers in your school who work with the program as well? How, if at all, do you collaborate?
23. In what ways, if any, do you work directly with the ______ program at the University?
24. A) What resources are available for you to support your students who are involved in the credit-based transition support program? B) Are there any resources that you think need to be further developed in order to provide those students with additional support?
25. What challenges do you experience working in this role, and how do you respond to these challenges?

Next Steps

26. In your view, how can the education system better respond to the barriers that students face that hinder their access to post-secondary education?
27. More specifically, what are some core practices that you believe teachers can enact to facilitate this work?

Thank you for your time and thoughtful responses.