Life in The Margins:

The Experiences of Students in the General Level High School Program

On Prince Edward Island

A Thesis

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Abstract

This study explores and describes the experiences and feelings of students who have been streamed into non-acedemic programs, specifically known as the general program. Individual interviews were conducted with six participants. The participants shared their feelings and experiences about being identified as general level students. The stories shared by the participants confirm what the literature suggests and many educators feel about how labeling affects students. The findings illustrate the serious issue of labeling and placing students in non academic streams. The study proposes directions for change and further inquiry.

Acknowledgements

In concluding this research project, I must acknowledge those who have helped me in my path of continuing education. First, I would like to thank the students I have worked with. They have taught me many things and inspired me to pursue this research. Additionally, I must thank the participants who generously shared their time and experiences with me. Second, I would like to thank my primary advisor, Fiona O'Donahue. Fiona's assistance was immeasurable! Fiona's scholarly direction and inspiration plus gentle encouragement are what helped me find my own direction and kept on the path to completion. Finally, I would like to to thank my family for being so supportive and patient.

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Chapter I: Introduction

"Some students are labeled minimally educable; as a consequence they are educated minimally and then grow up educated minimally" (Edwards, 1999, p.4)

Nine years ago, when I first began teaching, I knew very little about what I was getting into. My personal school experiences were relatively ordinary because I was insulated by being somewhat average. I knew nothing first-hand about the great academic divide that exists in our schools. My first and existing teaching assignment was in a rural high school teaching, among other classes, several general and practical classes. This was really my first direct exposure to students who were not "mainstream"and they taught me many valuable lessons about teaching, and my own assumptions about people. It is because of these students that I have pursued this research in my Master of Education degree.

When I first began to think about what I wanted to research I knew that it would revolve around the general program. I feel for these students in many ways. Most really want to do well, but for different reasons, that may not necessarily include ability, they do not thrive in the academic stream; others have learned to hate school from an early age and appear to be ambivalent even resistant to learning; and still others may be academic level students with attendance or behavior problems. I do not propose to be an authority on teaching general students. In fact, doing this research has made me face my own frailties as a teacher. I have to admit I have had many trying days coping with the myriad of difficulties that one faces in a general classroom. Some days it takes every ounce of my

resources to teach these classes, yet my fondest memories and most memorable students have come from general classes. What I do propose is that we need to listen to our students very carefully to be sure that we are truly providing the best education for all. That is what I have tried to do in my research and in my teaching, and I believe it has revealed some truths that we need to hear as educators.

There are so many avenues of research that beg to be explored when it comes to this unique population. For instance: variety of programing, quality of text books and resources, access to specialty programs and sports, and post graduation options to only name a few. Much of the current literature on non-academic programs deals with programming options, teaching methods, learning methods, or engagement of students. When I really began to dig and explore the issues surrounding general students, I kept coming back to how the students 'feel' about being general.

Time after time I can recall some big burly students who were perfectly self-assured in the working world of men and machines practically turn themselves inside out with embarrassment when walking into the 'general classroom'. Of course this could be, and usually was, laughed off with a good round of teasing each other, but the painful discomfort of being different or perhaps 'not as good,' was still apparent. More often than not, girls tend to be a minority in general classrooms. However, I have seen the pain on more than one girl's face as she left her peers to join me for general math. I have also seen students fail an academic course three or four times rather than go general because of the fear of being labeled stupid and being considered different than their friends. I have also seen a general student carry around academic text books so he would not stand out as

being different or perceived as less intelligent. Many students employ defense mechanisms where they say they don't care if they are general, that it's cool because it's easier, and some students even believe that general is the same work but only completed more slowly. Such behavior can easily be taken on first glance as ambivalence but behind the "whatever" and " it doesn't matter" lie deep feelings.

What is tracking and where does the idea of having different levels come from? According to Lipton & Oakes in *Access to Knowledge* (1990), tracking originated at a time when schools had to provide an emerging industrial society with a trained work force already sorted by ability levels (Goodlad, 1990). Tracking is a way of sorting or 'streaming' students that determines what kinds of resources, skills and knowledge will be available to them. As outlined in an action paper for parents completed by the National Coalition of Education Activists *(2002, p. 7)* tracking does "not raise students expectations. It does not encourage effort. It is not designed to help students progress. Tracking does, however, pigeon hole students, without developing a plan for moving them forward." Tracking exists in many forms, but in the context of this study I looked specifically at the non-academic stream of students on Prince Edward Island, generally known as general and practical. For the purposes of this research the terms tracking and streaming are used relatively interchangeably referring to the process of organizing students in some way in regards to their abilities. Specifically, for this research, tracking refers to the process of ability grouping students into university preparatory classes called academic, and non-university preparatory classes called general and practical. Practical being a lower track than general.

The policy of tracking and streaming students in Island schools has existed for several decades and has resulted in a multitude of labels in order to categorize students. Labeling of students can have many detrimental effects, especially for students who are in a lower track. As many have observed, there is hardly a person who isn't bright enough to understand he/she isn't considered very bright. Labeling can come from many avenues, even from the students themselves. An unfortunate side effect of labeling, as explored in the literature review section in this thesis, is the tendency for a label to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

To many people tracking may seem like a good idea, and in our current system we try to do the best with it that we can. It may be difficult to imagine a system without systemic tracking. However, we must realize that the major flaw in tracking lies with the fact that it tends to assume that students come into high school with fixed academic abilities that will not change. As a result, once a student is placed in a low track it is almost impossible for him/her to get out. This can affect a student in many ways. Some students give up on learning, some drop out and others will work hard within their track only to find that many avenues of post-graduation study are closed.

In Prince Edward Island schools, students may be tracked through their elementary and junior high school years and streamed when they reach high school. These streams, currently known as academic, general, and practical set up a social hierarchy within the schools. Students placed in non-academic /general programing may experience frustration with school because of labeling and alienation from their peers and possibly differential treatment from staff.

<u>Background</u>

This research study will use a qualitative method of inquiry following the tradition of phenomenological inquiry to explore and describe the experiences and feelings of six students who were or are presently part of the "general" program in high school. This study will deepen our understanding about the experiences of students who are streamed into non-academic programs so that teachers, principals, and program developers might better understand students who are not in the "mainstream" of school. My hope is that with this insight into students' perceptions and feelings, educators will be better equipped to provide support and education to these students.

Students placed in non-academic/general programs may experience frustration with school because of labeling and alienation from their peers. Additionally, being labeled a general student carries with it many other types of discrimination and negative consequences. These may include adverse relationships with staff and administration (Finn, 1993). Current research has looked at this topic from different perspectives: identifying at-risk students, probable causes, and strategies to work with the students. However, there is limited research on how the student feels about his/her own achievement in school. Knowledge about these feelings may assist educators when teaching or developing programs for low achieving or at-risk students. This is important because the number of at-risk students in the school system is growing. One study reports that as many as 40% of America's school-aged children are at risk of failure within the current educational system (Dorell, 1992). The general student shares many characteristics of the at-risk student which makes him/her vulnerable to drop out and experience school failure (Anderson and

Keith, 1997).

Students in the general program at the high school level share many characteristics, and are typically considered to be at-risk students. Many at-risk students get streamed into the general programs due to a lack of achievement and/or failure in the regular academic high school programs. One of the primary theories connected to school achievement and overall success in school is motivation. Students who do not achieve well in school often have low motivation (Robertson, 1977). Studies suggest that student motivation exerts a strong effect on academic achievement among at-risk learners when motivation is measured using both behavioral and cognitive definitions (Anderson and Keith, 1997). Behavioral expressions of motivation include: truancy, attendance, time spent on learning, homework, and preparation for class. Cognitive expressions of motivation are characterized by student ratings of locus of control, interest in school, enjoyment in school, and educational aspirations. Where the research in this area tends to be weak is pin pointing when motivation becomes a delineating factor. There may be a point when motivation is both a symptom and a cause.

Dryfus (1997) defines high-risk youth as persons with low probabilities of gaining an education, getting a job, parenting effectively, or being able to participate in the political process. Comparatively, another study simply defines at risk students as those who are in danger of not graduating from school (Rodriguez, 1997). Additionally, many students who may be at-risk do not belong to positive social and academic settings, which makes the likelihood of adjustment and finishing school problematic (Nunn, 1992). Many factors outside of school, such as poverty and debilitating parent and family influences,

also contribute to school failure. Other factors such as ability, quality of schooling, student motivation, and academic course work are important predictors of academic achievement (Anderson and Keith, 1997).

Other factors that interfere with academic growth reveal a changing school population, a decline in parental supervision, a lack of sufficient support personnel, and a curriculum overload. Some professional literature also suggests that students' lack of responsibility for their own learning and behavior, changes in societal values, an insensitivity to diverse cultures, and a lack of social skills all contribute to poor student achievement. Many of these factors that help identify at-risk students may be symptomatic of underlying problems. For example, poor grades, absenteeism, lack of motivation and behavior problems are indicators that a student is at risk. These are the common behaviors that we see in general students in the school system. What events took place for these behaviors to develop? Where in their educational career did they begin to fail? Do they have different needs than their more successful peers? Were they grouped by ability at an early age, for example homogenous reading groups or resource? Did their learning style needs conflict with a teacher at some point to foster the students' feeling of ineptness? Did behavior issues erupt with a teacher to result in the student being further marginalized in that class and further labeled? Did the student lack the social skills that are invariably needed to succeed in the school setting? These are questions that beg to be answered if we are to fully understand and meet the needs of some students.

Significance

This study is significant because it explores the perceptions of general level students about their experiences of being a general level student and through this process exposes the inequality that exists in our education system. My hope is that with this insight into students' perceptions and feelings, teachers, principals, and program developers will better understand students who are in non-academic programs in school and as a result they will be better equipped to provide support and education to these students. The goal of the study is to explore and describe the experiences and feelings of students who have been streamed into non-academic programs. The results of the research findings will be significant as it is necessary to understand the thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, and assumptions these students have about their experiences in order to provide appropriate services.

This exploration will show patterns of experiences that could help educators assist other struggling learners. It may also help teachers better understand some of the young people with whom they are working with in schools. Additionally, with more insight, administrators and teachers may be better equipped to provide support and education for these students. Currently, the programs that at-risk students are usually placed into are general level classes and alternative schools. The further development of alternative schools, according to the literature reviewed, should be dealt with very carefully as it may only further marginalize the students (Anderson and Keith, 1997, p. 262).

The general programs on PEI are under review and there may be some changes in the future. In 1998, the Department of Education published a proposal called *Senior High*

School Transitions (Department of Education, 1998) where they propose to revise the current system because it is evident that there are serious problems with the general program.

I also hope to raise awareness and provoke some thought about the complex issue of tracking and streaming. I do not propose to address the complex issues around the systemic use of tracking as it is well beyond the scope of this project and the answers are not easy ones. My research has provided more questions for me than answers. It is clear to me, from this research, that streaming is detrimental to students' self esteem. Unfortunately, there are no easy solutions to this dilemma, as tracking and streaming are deeply rooted in the educational system, even if inadvertently. Tracking and streaming are systemic, and radical restructuring and reculturing in the system would be required to make any tangible difference. I hope that this research can help educators and counselors recognize that some students may have very mixed emotions about being defined as a general student.

Limitations

There are a number of possible limitations associated with this research. The participants involved may not be able to adequately voice their insight into their own experiences. I did find that, compared to those remaining in school, the two students that I interviewed who had already graduated from school were able to reflect much more openly about their experiences and were able to articulate their feelings very well. The current students that were interviewed had a much more difficult time expressing

themselves. There was a certain level of self-protection in their initial responses. This

reluctance to discuss their feelings could be related to the fact that I was a stranger, a

teacher, or because the interviews were within the school. The participants may also have

been reluctant if discussing their experiences and feelings involved unpleasant associations

from the past for them.

Chapter Two

Review of Related Literature

Introduction

An extensive search on the topic of general high school students in journals,

books, the ERIC database and the internet located a number of different journal articles

and books. I sought materials that were written after 1990; however, I did choose to cite

some pre-1990 material that is important in this field of inquiry. Additionally, I excluded

material that only refers to one area of teaching, for example "students who are failing

mathematics", and to students specifically with learning disabilities. I also attempted to

limit the research to include only adolescent learners. The literature I found included

critical pedagogy in the area of school equality and reform, the labeling theory, affects of

labeling students, at-risk students, school failure, low motivation, and tracking/streaming.

These are some of the key areas of research that relate directly to this topic. It is important

to note that most of the research was conducted specifically with inner-city minority

youth, second language, or otherwise culturally or socially disadvantaged youth. Very

little information was available in Canada, with respect to rural, mainstream students

completing school at a general or practical level.

The professional literature provided me with the information to develop a

framework around my research. Although it helped me with an overall interpretation and

understanding of the current research in the related areas, with the exception of a couple

of anecdotal stories, the results of the literature search provided very little information

with respect to the students' perspective on their experiences.

<u>At-Risk Students</u>

There is a lot of research in the area of at-risk students. However, as stated earlier, the research is primarily American-based and deals with inner city minority youth, second language, or otherwise culturally or socially disadvantaged youth. Upon review of some of the current literature, I began to feel the at risk learner and the average general student may share some key characteristics. However, not all general level students can be classified as at-risk.. I have identified several themes in the literature that relate to the study of at-risk students as they are relevant to this study. The themes explored in this section will include how at-risk students are identified, motivation, psychosocial issues, influence of teaching and parenting styles, remedial and preventive strategies, and learning styles.

The methods of identifying which students fall into the category of at-risk varies. Dryfus (1997) defines high risk youth as young persons with low probabilities of gaining an education, getting a job, parenting effectively, or being able to participate in the political process. Another author simply defines at-risk students as those who are in danger of not graduating from school (Rodriguez, 1997) .

Students who are not thriving in the educational community are usually easy to identify once a method of identification is made available. There are several common theories found in current literature that help to identify the risk factors. Robertson (1997) notes that some of the common indicators of adolescents at risk for school failure are:

- Attention problems as a young child - the student has a school history of attention issues or disruptive behavior.
- Multiple retentions in grade - the student has been retained one or more years.
- Poor grades - the student consistently performs at barely average or below average levels.
- Absenteeism - the student is absent five or more days a term.
- Lack of connection within the school - the student is not involved in sports, music, or other school related extracurricular activities.
- Behavior problems - the student may be frequently disciplined or show a sudden change in school behavior, such as withdrawing from class discussions.
- Lack of confidence - the student believes that success is native to intelligence rather than hard work, and believes that his or her own ability is insufficient, and nothing can be done to change the situation.
- Limited goals for the future - the student seems unaware of career options available or how to attain those goals.

An analysis of probable cause data on behaviors that interfere with academic growth revealed that a changing school population, a decline in parental supervision, a lack of sufficient support personnel, and a curriculum overload contribute to the problem. Professional literature also suggests students' lack of responsibility for their own behavior and learning, changes in societal values, an insensitivity to diverse cultures, and a lack of social skills all contribute to low school achievement (Dare, Durand, et al, 1997). Other factors such as ability, quality of schooling, student motivation, and academic course work are important predictors of academic achievement (Anderson & Keith, 1997).

Some of the research in the area of low achieving or at-risk students involves poor learning strategies and lack of motivation. A survey on the ways to increase student

achievement with at-risk students found the following probable causes for the students

lack of participation and motivation: the schools' tracking systems, departmentalization

leading to curriculum being taught in isolation, teacher-directed classes, the lack of basic

skills, and the lack of self-regulatory learning skills (Lidgus & Vassos, 1996). In an online

article about tracking titled *Untracking for Equity On Tracking and Individual*

Differences: A Conversation with Jeannie Oakes, she discusses motivation and notes that:

> One thing we should keep in mind is that kindergartners coming to school show
>
> enormous interest in learning, and this cuts across socio-economic, racial, and
>
> ethnic lines. The willingness of 4- and 5-year-olds to work hard at learning is just
>
> extraordinary, both in school and out of school. But as kids go through school, if
>
> they don't have successful experiences and if they aren't considered shining stars,
>
> they learn that their effort does not pay off. So by high school we see a real
>
> diminishing of interest in school and willingness to do any hard work (1992, p.5).

A number of the studies specifically focused on student learning styles and

psychosocial characteristics. One study focused on previously identified at-risk students

and found that "styles of learning indicated a profile of at-risk students who were less

motivated toward achievement, had lower self-concepts as learners, and desired a more

informal and nontraditional approach to learning" (Nunn & Parish, 1992, p. 438).

Another study, by Claude Beamish (1995), focused on how educational problems, such as

anger and anxiety, that can lead to low achievement may be caused by differing human

temperaments.

Unfortunately, our understanding of the factors that explain the achievement patterns of at-risk-students is limited. The literature on at- risk learners largely has described what at-risk learners lack personally, or by way of their families, communities, or schools that might lead to academic failure. To optimize learning environments and maximize the potential of at-risk learners, educators must also understand which factors contribute to academic success (Anderson & Keith, 1997).

When considering the factors that contribute to failure and success, in *Life in Schools, An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy in the Foundations of Education* (1989), Peter McLaren says that school failure is structurally located and culturally mediated. He cautions educators to recognize the deficit model of student failure. In the following quote, McLaren identifies the deficit model of student failure,

> ...it [the deficit model] rests on the propensity of teachers to 'psychologize' that failure. 'Psychologizing' student failure amounts to blaming it on an individual trait or series of traits (eg., lack of motivation or low self-concept)....This attitude is particularly frightening because teachers are often unaware of their complicity in its debilitating effects. Psychologizing school failure is a part of the hidden curriculum that relieves teachers from the need to engage in pedagogical self-scrutiny or in any serious critique of their personal roles within the school, and the school's role within the wider society. In effect, psychologizing school failure indicts the student while simultaneously protecting the social environment from sustained criticism(1989, p. 221).

The research available in the area of remedial or preventative strategies is wide ranging. Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences, parenting and teaching styles, teacher collaboration, individual learning, and early identification are all factors that can influence student learning (Dare et al, 1997; Fasko, 1992). Much of the research makes a correlation between motivation and achievement.

One study, on the psychosocial characteristics of at-risk students, presented a number of basic principles which were derived from successful experiences with at-risk learners. These principles all focus on the development of self-esteem, fostering positive social and academic settings, and creating a connection between the student and the school environment (Nunn and Parish, 1992).

Another study by Fasko (1992) on the learning strategies of at-risk learners indicates that learners differ in their preferences for learning mode and strategies. Implications for instruction and assessment are discussed as they relate to the Theory of Multiple Intelligences of Howard Gardner (1983) and the principles of the *Learner Centered Psychological Principles* of the American Psychological Association. The principles of the American Psychological Association stipulate that learners have unique abilities and have acquired different preferences for how they learn, as well different preferences for how they respond to learning situations. The Theory of Multiple Intelligences describes seven forms of human competence that are relatively independent-logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal intelligences. Some schools apply Gardner's theory, and preliminary results from teachers in these programs suggest that students are more motivated and that at risk students can

excel.

Parenting and teaching style were dealt with in a number of the articles as an issue that may have a causal relationship to school failure. Parenting style may have an impact on the students' school behavior. Many experts distinguish among different types of parenting styles but the author states that when an authoritative style is used - in which parents offer warmth and support in addition to limit setting and supervision - the adolescent may be more likely to experience school success (Robertson, 1997). The same author also recognizes that if parents step back and let the students 'figure it out' or ' take responsibility for their own learning' a deeper cycle of failure within the school environment may result.

According to Dorell (1992), within the school, the most effective intervention factor for at-risk students is the individual classroom teacher. The best teachers are not always those with the most content knowledge, but rather those who are willing to risk themselves and care about the whole child. Additionally, Dorell notes that schools which have diversity in curriculum, an adequate support staff, and a variety of student extra-curricular activities, yet are small in size generally are more effective with those students who do not achieve. The size of the student population is of most importance within the individual classroom (1992).

Research also suggests that retaining students does not work. Brown (1999), Dorell (1992), Beamish (1995), Rodriguez (1997) and Songaylo & Shreeve (1993), all noted that retaining students can perpetuate failure. Roderick (1995) states that educational policy trends have contributed to rising rates of student grade retention over

the past decades. She notes that there is a strong association between retention and

dropping out. Literature on grade retention suggests that the retention experience may

place students at risk of school failure and early school leaving. As a remediation strategy,

retention does not appear to improve school performance. In addition, it sends a strong

message that the teacher and school do not consider the student capable; it may increase

the chances of the student leaving school because it makes a student over-age for the

grade during adolescence and may increase school frustration and disengagement

(Rodriguez, 1995). Songaylo and Shreeves (1993) study indicated that retention should

never take place and students should be provided with alternatives to retention, including

nongraded or multigraded classrooms and mastery-based education.

Labeling

The literature also seems to discourage the use of labeling and narrow-based

programs like special education, alternative settings, general, and practical programs. In an

article, *Serving Students in the Margins*, Wang (1995), the author notes that lay people

are beginning to ask why so many students are set aside in categorical programs which

have produced too few benefits. He adds that between 1988 and 1990, the number of

teachers employed in cross-categorical programs increased by 131 percent. Another

author states that chronically disruptive students are often funneled into watered-down

alternative schools that warehouse rather than educate them (Kellmayer, 1995).

The policy of systematically tracking and streaming students in schools has existed

for several decades and has resulted in a multitude of labels in order to categorize students

(Brown,1995; Lipton & Oakes, 1990; National Coalition of Education Activists (NCEA), 2002). In Prince Edward Island schools, labeling may occur when a student is identified as special needs, takes resource, or attends non-academic classes, currently known as general or practical. One of the most damaging affects of labeling is it sets up a social and educational hierarchy within the schools. In my experience, students who are labeled as general or practical seem compelled to typify and behave in ways they believe characterize general students. These students are often seen as the ones with behavioral problems and who challenge authority. These students might rather be percieved as being 'bad' instead of 'dumb.' General students may not like putting forth a great deal of effort because they feel there is no point. They are embarrassed to show they tried; it may be easier for them to believe they are in the general stream due to some reason other than academics. Self-fulfilling prophecy is a well documented phenomenon with students who experience labeling (Brown,1995; Edwards, 1999; Lipton & Oakes, 1990; NCEA, 2002; Pink, 1982).

Many general level students suffer from low self esteem and are often socially stigmatized by their placement at the bottom of the school hierarchy. Often the students carry different labels prior to hitting high school, labels such as Conduct Disorder, a behavioral problem, Impulse Disorder, Attention Deficit Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or learning disabilities. When they come to high school they are further labeled by being streamed as non-academic; they are positioned in a place within the social and educational structure of the school where they can feel very little positive achievement. (Brown,1995; Lipton&Oakes, 1990; Kozol, 1991, McLaren, 1989;

Brown,1995; ; NCEA, 2002). I believe the labels children are subjected to have serious

negative effects on their education and social and emotional growth.

The Labeling Theory.

I believe the term "labeling," as it refers to education, grew out of the sociological

field which developed the "labeling theory" to help understand criminal and deviant

behavior. The theory rests on a proposition put forward by the philosopher W. I. Thomas

in 1928: "if men define situations as real they are real in their consequences" (in Vagg nd,

p. 3). The name 'labeling theory' derives from the concept of a 'label', that is, a social

definition of an individual which carries a moral force (Vagg, nd). Labeling theorists hold

to the view that the very process by which society or the vested authorities 'label'

individuals further depresses the self-concept of a child who already has low self-esteem.

At its worst, the process of labeling may indeed cause an 'amplification' in deviant behavior

(Lemert, 1951, 1967). In terms of education, this means that we, as educators, develop

the parameters within which we define labels. If a student is labeled, he or she is likely to

fulfill the parameters of the definition and become characteristic of the label.

The labeling theory is also known as the societal reaction theory which began in

the 1930's and was described in 1938 by Tannenbaum as, "The process of making a

criminal is a process of tagging, defining, identifying, segregating, describing, emphasizing,

making conscious and self-conscious; it becomes a way of stimulating, suggesting and

evoking the very traits that are complained of. The person becomes the thing he is

described as being.....The way out is through the refusal to dramatize the evil. The less

said about it the better" (Grove,1975, p. 3). It is ironic that the labeling theory in criminology bears such close resemblance to how we label and sort children in our schools. In terms of labeling students as general or practical, an examination of this theory is required.

Students who are in non-academic streamed programs like general, practical or vocational, are labeled by everyone in the school. They are usually roundly known by all as up to nothing and trouble makers. Teachers sometimes have lower expectations for them than their academic counterparts and therefore demand less from them academically. As a result, they may rarely be pushed to exceed and may be allowed or even expected to fail.

Students labeled as general or practical by the system often suffer from even worse labels from their peers. Names I have heard include: Speds, Romper Stompers, and Bonehead classes. This stigmatization from people within the school must affect the students who are already carrying beaten self esteem. I believe that in order to survive with their own perceived dignity, these students wear a mask of not caring which often carries over to developing a hatred for school. These students usually feel less confident about their futures and often participate in self-destructive or reckless behavior (Dryfoos, 1997).

General and practical students are less likely than academic students to complete school. There have been a number of studies completed on the effect of labeling on success or failure in school. Pam Gilbert, in her 1997 Radford lecture, succinctly describes the situation for these students, "By being designated as reading failures, boys are positioned differently within school cultures, and are often withdrawn from the general

curriculum and invited to see themselves as school drop-outs" (Gilbert, 1998, p. 25).

Pink (1982) was able to demonstrate that disruptive behavior, failure and negative school

climate were all related to the practice of labeling students (Edwards, 1999). A

subsequent study completed by Polk found resistance flowing from students where the

school engaged in heavy labeling (Polk 1988).

In the landmark ethnographic study by Paul Willis, *Learning to Labour* (1981),

the young men he studied fulfilled their roles and the expectations of the society. The

following quote describes the feelings about the role of education in society that many

educational theorists have discussed, "Education was not about equality, but

inequality....Education's main purpose of social integration of class society could be

achieved only by preparing most kids for an unequal future" (cited in Aronowitz &

Giroux, 1985, pp. 69-70). This theme is evident in the works of Michelle Fine (1994),

Peter McLaren (1986, 1989), and Jonathon Kozol (1991).

Tracking

The term tracking has many different meanings depending on the educational

context in which it is used. It is often used interchangeable with streaming, steering,

homogeneous grouping, and ability grouping. For the purposes of this research, tracking

refers to the way students are sorted. There is a clear body of current research in this field,

most of which indicates that tracking is detrimental to students learning and/or self

esteem(Brown,1995; Edwards, 1998; Lipton & Oakes,1990; NCEA, 2002). Tracking

has been condemned by such prominent groups as the National Governors' Association,

the ACLU, the Children's Defense Fund, the Carnegie Corporation, the College Board, and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. Professors of education overwhelmingly deplore it (Loveless, 1999).

Tracking, as an educational tool, came into use at the turn of the century in response to the immigration explosion and social disruptions related to factory based industry. According to Lipton & Oakes (1990), schools chose solutions that were compatible with the social beliefs about racial and ethnic differences. Two other phenomena Lipton and Oakes cite supported different schooling for different children were the use of standardized testing and the philosophy of scientific management. Both of these developments probably made sense to educators at the time but eventually the solutions themselves perpetuated the problems their creators intended to solve (Lipton & Oakes, 1990).

In *Making the Best of Schools* (Lipton & Oakes, 1990, p.156), suggest that tracking does not promote achievement for the average and lower ability children who make up approximately 70 % of the school population. In fact, it may not even benefit the higher ability children. Additionally, Lipton & Oakes state that research suggests even students in vocational preparation tracks may be even less employable than if they had not taken the vocation education track.

According to Oakes and Lipton (1990), over the years of schooling, ability grouped classes can exaggerate children's earlier developmental and motivational differences. Younger children who are initially fairly similar in background and skills become increasingly different when they are separated into classes with different abilities.

Their hopes for the future also change in ways that are consistent with their track placement. Schools consistently and sincerely present this near-guarantee that children will fall farther behind as an "opportunity to catch up" (Oakes and Lipton, p. 157). Additionally, in a paper called *Tracking Re-visited: Old Measures for New Times*, Brian Edwards commented that, "Transition programs and Remedial English programs may indeed be motivated by the best of intentions but they also play a significant part in setting a school path for certain students which may generate serious misbehavior and end in school failure for the student *(*1998, p. 2).

In an article titled, *What's Wrong With Tracking*, by Stan Karp (2002), tracking is identified as taking many forms, from ability grouped reading groups in grade one to explicitly different curriculum placements in high school. Tracking, he suggests, restricts and actually depresses the educational achievements of the majority of tracked students, and socially deforms and impoverishes the experience of all groups.

A 1990 pilot study, *Assessing Student Attitudes Toward Heterogeneous Grouping, from Oak Hill High School, Maine*, looked at tracking (Poppish, Trevorow, Ford, Hughes, LeBlanc, Wooten, Fuller, 1990). The study was undertaken as a result of several teachers' and administrators' growing conviction that the "practice of tracking is counterproductive to the philosophy and goals of the school. More importantly, tracking may be detrimental to the needs of students as they approach the 21'st century" (Poppish, et al.,1990, p.1). The authors of this study pointed to the growing body of literature that suggests tracking not only engenders inequality in student opportunity, but also fails to benefit any one group of students. Some of the negative repercussions cited in this study

are as follows:

1. A concern that the tracked school provides a weaker learning environment for the lower tracked student.

2. A lowering of expectations and subsequent stigmatization of the lower tracked student as well as major deficiencies in curriculum implementation for that student.

3. A significant widening of the gap between students in the top and bottom tracks over time, coupled with student inability to move vertically out of lower and into higher tracks.

4. Discrimination against socioeconomic classes as a natural outgrowth of inequity in educational opportunity (Braddock and McPortland, 1990).

Conclusion

From my review of the literature, I discovered that there is a great deal of research related to the issues around general students in terms of labeling, at-risk characteristics, and tracking that is relevant to my research. The research points to the fact the students in the general program are not helped by being tracked but are in fact more likely to be hindered. These students experience a wide range of difficulties that are aggravated by having a different education.

Little research looked specifically at the students' perspectives. I designed my research to discover the thoughts and experiences of students on Prince Edward Island who take general level classes. While the literature I reviewed looked at how non-academic programs affect students, there was a lack of input from the perspective of students themselves. It is the stories of experience from the students themselves that I hoped to capture in this research. I believe that hearing the stories of general students will provide a snapshot of what it is like to be in a general program on PEI.

Chapter Three

The Research Story

Introduction

The preceding chapters have presented the thesis topic and a summary of the relevant literature that relates to the research. This chapter discusses the research methodology and the overall design of the study. According to McMillan & Schumacher, the design "describes the procedures for conducting the study, including when, from whom, and under what conditions the data will be obtained. In other words, the design indicates how the research is set up (1997. p. 33).

The methodology and design selected to frame this research emerged naturally as I initially explored the literature and my own thoughts about the experiences of students in the general programs on PEI. This section of the thesis explores how this research was established and addresses the following areas related to this research:

- qualitative research, overall strategy, and rationale;

- site and participant selection;

- the researcher's role;

- the format used to collect, organize, and analyse the data;

- trustworthiness features;

- the time-line for the study (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Research Genre and Strategy

When considering the methodology for this study, it was obvious to me that given

the goals of this study, a qualitative approach was necessary in order to obtain the rich personal information I was seeking. Furthermore, I decided that personal interviews would be the most appropriate method to ascertain the students' feelings about their experiences as general level students.

Selecting a qualitative research genre allowed me to explore, through personal interviews, the feelings that general level students had about their experiences. A qualitative methodology, as discussed by Macmillan & Schumacher, in *Research in Education* (1997, p.17), provides the researcher with the opportunity to be immersed and flexible in the research method and process in order to understand a social situation from participants' perspectives and to ultimately provide research that has detailed, context bound generalizations (1997, p.17). Within the qualitative genre, my research follows the phenomenological tradition as it studies the lived experiences of the students. Within the tradition of phenomenology, the researcher is a participant and needs to be aware of his/her own preconceptions, feelings, and experiences. This helps the researcher to bracket, and focus on, the phenomena that the participants share. The purpose of this type of research, according to Marshall & Rossman (1999, p.112) is to describe the meaning of a concept or phenomena that several people share.

I decided that two relatively unstructured and informal interviews would be the most appropriate considering the participants I would be interviewing and the type of research I was conducting. I decided, in this research it is the subjective view of the participants that is most valuable, so the interview facilitates in uncovering and describing the participants' perspectives on their experiences (Marshall & Rossman 1999, p. 110).

According to Marshall and Rossman, interviews are valuable as a research tool because they allow the researcher to understand the meanings that people hold for their everyday activities (1999). This method of data collection has a number of strengths, primarily that it will allow the researcher to understand the meanings the participants hold for their experiences as general level students. Patton (1990, p. 228) describes the purpose for interviewing as a tool for entering into another person's perspective and begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit. Marshall & Rossman (1999) say the interview process, combined with observation, allow the interviewer to understand the meanings people hold for their everyday activities. I had originally planned to conduct two full interviews; however, the first interview provided rich and detailed stories of experiences. During the second interview time we had scheduled, I followed up with each participant and we discussed their transcripts and any concerns or ideas that came out of our discussions.

Researcher's Role

The motivation for pursuing this research is two-fold. First, it is a topic that became important to me over the years as a teacher of mostly general and practical students, and second, it is a component of fulfilling the Master's of Education program at the University of Prince Edward Island. When I began teaching nine years ago in a rural high school, it was my first teaching assignment and I was fresh from completing my Bachelor of Education degree. My teaching assignment included several multi-grade and multi-level classes. My education really did not prepare me for the type of course load that

existed. Someone said to me at the time that starting the way I did was like being baptized into the teaching profession by fire. One of the things that really began to nag at me was the feeling that the system really wasn't fair to "my" students. I did everything I could to minimize the stigmatization I knew that they felt, but over time I began to feel there was something inherently wrong with the education system. When I decided to further my education by doing my Master's degree, I focussed all of my research and readings around issues related to streaming and labelling of students. Pursuing this topic to fulfill the Master's program was a natural progression of my research in this area.

In conducting this research, I see my role as participant observer and an interviewer. According to Marshall & Rossman (1997) participant observation is to some degree an element in all qualitative studies and that it demands first-hand involvement in the social worlds chosen for the study. As a teacher of primarily general level and practical students for eight years, I have been immersed in the social context of this group. I realize that my experiences as a teacher are from a different perspective than the participants; however, I have more shared experiences and empathy for the participants than a total outsider or a hired researcher. Additionally, Macmillan & Shumacher suggest that "Qualitative researchers also frequently cite personal or professional experiences that enable them to empathize with the participants - that is, they recognize more readily the observed processes and subtle participant meanings than those lacking such experiences" (1997, p. 413). I believe this succinctly defines my role in this research plan as it was my own experience in teaching that drew me to this topic.

<u>Population Selection</u>

After I was granted approval by the University of Prince Edward Island Research Ethics Board (REB) and the Eastern School District (ESD) to proceed with my study, I contacted two local high school principals to request permission to access the guidance counsellors and students in their schools. I then met individually with a guidance teacher from each school to discuss the purpose of my study. Additionally, I told each guidance teacher I was interested in speaking with students who would be considered average general students as I was hoping to capture the experiences and feelings of the average student rather than the exceptionally high or low achieving student. With respect to gender, I did not specify the numbers of males or females but decided to let the male/female selection ratio occur naturally. From my observations as a teacher in general and practical classes, I have noticed there are consistently more males in the general and practical classes; however, the incidence of females in these programs may be on the rise.

I left my research proposal and some explanation sheets designed for the students with each guidance counsellor. The guidance counsellors contacted students whom they thought would be interested and fit the criteria for the study. Arrangements were made through the guidance departments of each schools to set up an initial meeting with each student. I was unable to have contact prior to the first interview with two of the in school students as we could not meet during the school day and they both worked after school. However, I left information sheets and consent forms to be sent home, signed, and returned to me before the interview. When I met with each student, I told them who I was and why I wanted to conduct this research. I told them that I had been teaching general

students for nine years and was interested in their experiences as general students. I also discussed issues related to informed consent and sent consent forms home to be signed by the parent/guardian and the participant.

I hoped to interview four general students, two from each school, who were currently enrolled in general level courses and two general level students who had recently graduated. All interviews were conducted on the school grounds, and with the exception of one interview that took place in a small work room, the interviews were conducted in the guidance areas of each of the schools. The graduated students returned to the school for the interviews. I contacted the guidance counsellor before conducting the interviews to make sure they were readily available should any of the participants reveal an emotional issue and require support.

The final participant profile consisted of a total of six participants. Four of the participants currently attended school. Three of the students were in their final year, taking grade eleven or twelve courses while one of them was in grade eleven. Of the six participants, four were male and two were female. Both females were in their final year of school. As mentioned previously, I did not specify a number of males to females; however, I believe that this ratio accurately reflects the number of males to females in the general stream in high schools.

Conducting the Research

The method of data collection for this study involved a personal interview with each participant, and the close observation of the participants during the interviews. In

designing the interview, I referred to the fundamental principle of qualitative interviewing, as described by Patton (1990), which suggests the goal is to provide a framework within which respondents can express their own understandings in their own terms. I used this fundamental principle, other insights from literature and well as my own experience from working in the field of education to develop my interview questions. These questions served as a guide for conducting the interviews. Patton (1990, p. 283) refers to the use of the interview guide as providing topics for the interviewer to explore yet remain free to be spontaneous and to establish a conversational style. When I was developing the guiding questions for the interview process, I was very mindful to develop questions that would allow the participants' perspective to unfold as they experienced or saw it.

The type of interview process I had decided upon was very informal, loosely structured with open-ended questions. I believed this format would make the participants most comfortable with sharing their stories while still allowing me some structure and flexibility. I used ten questions to guide our conversations. I found this useful because I was inexperienced at conducting interviews. I found with each successive interview I became more adept at keeping our conversations flowing.

My experience working with general level students has shown me that sometimes there can be trust issues with people in authority. In preparing for the interview, I tried to dress casually and not appear too authoritative. I wanted the participants to feel like they could talk freely with me and I was afraid if they saw me as an authority figure, they might not be as willing to share their thoughts with me. Additionally, I assured each participant full confidentiality and discussed my methods of using pseudonyms, data storage, and

other issues. However, I did not find that confidentiality appeared to be a concern with any of the participants and several informed other students about their participation in the interview before it began.

All of the interviews were conducted over a three-week period in September and October 2002 as the participants were available. During the interview session, I explained clearly that their participation was voluntary, in no way tied to marks or grades, and that our discussions could stop any time they liked. Additionally, I asked, and received, permission to audio-tape our discussions. I explained that I would provide them with a transcript prior to our next meeting so they could read it and make any additions or omissions. After confirming their willingness to participate, I shared with them my belief that each of them had unique experiences because they were not mainstream academic students. I told them their experiences were important and I was interested in hearing about them.

The interviews lasted in duration from thirty minutes to approximately seventy-five minutes. In hindsight I believe to some extent both the participants and I were inhibited at times by being audio-taped. I tried to select locations in the school that would be quiet and relatively private. In most cases the interviews took place within the guidance areas and were generally acceptable areas except I later found the recorded sound quality to be poor in some cases. This was due to the concrete structure, high ceilings and PA interruptions. The interview area in one school was a very comfortable office of someone the participants were familiar with and would likely have been in before. The interview area in the other school, though within the guidance area, was not as appealing. It was a

very sterile environment; I found out later that it is sometimes used as a sick room. Unfortunately, it was the only private area available to me at the time. In hindsight, I should have pressed for less inhibiting environment.

Following each interview we set a date for the following week for a follow-up meeting to discuss the transcript and any feelings or thoughts that developed in the mean time. I offered to provide each participant a copy of the transcript before the next meeting, however, only one participant expressed interest in obtaining a copy, which I provided. Immediately following each interview I made careful notes about my observations, feelings and areas to pursue with the participant at the follow-up meeting

Following each interview the data was transcribed. This allowed me to review the transcript very quickly and note anything I wished to clarify or address in the second meeting. At the second meeting, I gave each participant a copy of the transcript from the first interview. I read and discussed the transcript with each participant and discussed any impressions I had from the interview. Each participant was given time alone to add, delete, or otherwise modify his/her transcripts. None of the participants made any changes. Each participant verified the transcript and signed a transcript release form. My impression at this phase of the process was that the participants were impressed and proud of their input and participation in my project. Several of them thanked me for allowing them the opportunity to be heard in this manner.

Analysis

At the completion of the interview and transcript verification phase, I carefully read and reread the transcripts of the interviews and researcher's notes for any general themes and categories related to the research questions. During the analysis process, I coded and recoded the emerging themes as I sifted through them and noted the patterns that began to emerge. What began as many themes gradually grew into several categories of meanings as held by the participants in the study. Through this repeated reading and categorizing of key words and patterns of belief, several key themes emerged and will be discussed in chapter four

What emerged is a heart-wrenching picture of what some students experience in school careers. The experiences these students related to me mirrors many of the comments I have heard from students over the years and also many of the unspoken truths about being 'general' that becomes apparent in the way students act, respond and carry themselves.

Time-Line

The time-line for completing the thesis has spanned two years. From the spring of 2002 to submitting the research proposal to the REB in June of 2002, I have met many times with my research advisor, compleyed extensive reading and literature review, and refined my thoughts about what direction to pursue in the interview process. In that time I developed a research strategy and an interview guide to be prepared to conduct interviews in the fall of 2002. The timing for the interviews was perhaps not advantageous as the

students were just coming back after two months of summer vacation; however, it was the most practical time for me to conduct the interviews. I conducted the interviews in September and October 2002 and from then until present I have worked at completing the thesis.

Completing the research has taken longer than I had originally hoped. It has spanned the birth of my first child, renovations, illnesses, taking a new teaching position and all of the minutia that accompanies ones life. However, the time and experiences have allowed me the luxury of reflecting carefully and at length. I have been able to read and reread the transcripts so many times that I know most of it by heart.

Conclusion

In my experience as a teacher, I have met many students whose stories concur with those I have obtained through this research. I believe the findings, which will be discussed in chapter four, will illuminate this dark corner of our present system which categorizes and deals with students who are not in mainstream education.

When I was developing the methodology for my research, I was aware of the issue of trustworthiness and therefore tried to build this into my research. I believe the research is trustworthy because trust was established with the participants, stories were shared, transcripts were confirmed and careful documentation was maintained. This is a small study. It is relevant specifically to educators and anyone interested in the issue of streaming students in the general program in PEI high schools. I believe it could be useful, in a broader scope, to someone interested in the marginalization of students and how

students perceive their education.

Chapter Four

Analysis

The foundation of every state is the education of its youth.

- Diogenes

<u>Introduction</u>

In the previous chapters I have examined the literature and discussed the methods I used to complete the research. In this chapter, I will introduce the participants who shared their stories with me and discuss the findings that emerged from the interviews. As the themes are discussed it is apparent that some participants responded in more depth than others. Additionally, some participants, especially the two participants who had already left school, were able to discuss their own educational careers with greater insight. As the themes are explored, it is important to remember that the participants are high school students, students who have not experienced a great deal of success in school. Each participant, provides a unique perspectives on his/her own character and expresses his/her experiences in different ways. All participants, regardless of their age or range of comfort and insight, shared interesting and valuable perceptions about their experiences. In this chapter, I will use a pseudonym for each participant.

The themes explored in this chapter are a collection of the many themes that initially emerged from the interviews. These themes or categories have been grouped together into three larger themes which encompass several related themes. The themes addressed in the chapter are

- Adapting to the Culture of the General Student

- Level of Challenge

- Rationalizing and Denial

- A means to an End

- Insight: Participants Reflections

The Participants

"Jill" was a 20 year old student who was hoping to graduate in June of 2003. My initial impression of Jill was of a very externally tough but candid and honest young woman. She exhibited an 'I don't give a care' attitude. She insisted that she wasn't really a general student, that she was smart enough to do academic work, but a series of things prevented her from taking academic courses. She admitted a history of failing courses and skipping school a lot. She spoke about having personality conflicts with many of her teachers. Jill was very worldly in her experiences and had a very busy social life. She had friends in both the academic and general streams.

"Becky" worked after school and was working hard to graduate in June of 2002. Becky is tall, conservatively dressed and soft-spoken. Her parents were both professionals. Becky has a very positive attitude about school and wanted to go to college after graduation. All of Becky's friends were high achieving academic students and she had retained her social group. Becky had a history of skipping class and started taking general classes after failing several core academic classes in grades ten and eleven.

" Tyler" was a grade eleven student who had failed a number of classes in the two years he was in school. Tyler was very nervous and fidgety and not very communicative. I think if it had have been a different topic he would have been very chatty. Tyler worked after school and said he would rather be working or sleeping than going to school. He said he hated school and always has. Tyler tried to be very cool but I got the impression that he cared a lot more than he would like to admit. Tyler entered general classes in grade ten coming straight from junior high. All of Tyler's friends were in the general stream.

"Todd" was a grade twelve student from a rural area. He worked almost everyday after school. Our interviews were limited as the only time we could meet was after school but before work. Todd appeared to me to be a mature, hard working, no-nonsense type of young man. Todd began taking general classes after failing some core courses.

"Robert" had graduated from high school in June of 2002 and was attending Holland Collage. He was polite, conservatively dressed, and articulate. Robert displayed remarkable insight about his education. He seemed to be highly motivated to prove to his old teachers that he was smart. He had been in alternative programs since grade seven and had taken both general and practical courses in high school.

"John" also graduated in June 2002 and now attends Holland Collage. He was a very articulate and polite person. We met initially in the hallway where he came over, introduced himself and shook hands. He appeared very self assured, although he admitted

he was very embarrassed about taking general classes in school. John showed tremendous insight in looking at his own situation. He had friends in both the academic and general streams and was involved in sports in school. John had failed grade one and been in alternative programs since grade two.

Themes

Adapting to the Culture of the General Program.

A significant theme that emerges from analysis of the transcripts relates to comments about the culture of the general program. Culture as defined by *Gage Canadian Concise Dictionary* (2003) refers to the customs, values and other characteristics that belong to a particular community. In the context of this research, I consider culture to refer to all aspects of what it is like being in the general program, including how the participants perceive themselves, how they think others perceive them, self-fulfilling prophecy, influence of peers, and what being in class is actually like. The participants discussed their misconceptions about the general program. Though they believed they knew what it was like, they found it was quite different but they were not able to put all of it into words. Culture, as it relates to general students is expressed well by Jay Hill from the article *Tracking in Schools... A Thing of the Past?*

> The groups are a very public part of the school's culture that reflects judgments
> that adults have made about children's current and future abilities. Within that
> culture, the groups take on a very hierarchical nature: we talk about top groups,
> bottom groups, middle groups, high groups, low groups. And often in the culture

of the schools, the "top group" quickly becomes the "top kids," in a very value-laden way. So the students take their place in the hierarchy and the values associated with it (2002, pp. 2).

The comments that follow were made by the participants and illustrate some of the ways the they identify aspects of what I call the general culture.

It's sort of like new people to a school, you know, academic people to a general classroom. Like new people to a school, you don't know how it's going, you don't know how it's run. It's all new to you. I never really thought it would be any different than academic classes but it really is.

Whenever I walk into a class, I'm thinking, you know, I should be in an academic class. People are gonna think "Stupid" or whatever, or that I can't do the work. Like, I've been here for four years anyway, this is my fourth year, so they are gonna know that I wasn't really paying attention, and, like now, I just kinda get looks from people, it's almost like, 'you have to take this course because you're stupid'. It is a lower course, but it's the same amount of work.

..they don't say anything to me. It's just inside.....but people have said stuff to me about it, like people who are having the problem. Like, "people are looking at me funny." I can go into this class but I can't do anything else about it. Nobody has

ever called me stupid to my face. They can say whatever they want behind my back and it really doesn't bother me. But they've never said anything to my face.

Some people in my class joke around when the teacher's giving us a lot of work and go 'Hey, we're in general.'

Some people, like in grade 10 whenever I took it, I didn't, like, fuck-up other people in class just because they wouldn't be quiet. I'm with them continuously because they are always in the same class. There is not a lot of people in general math or anything. ....Well they don't really let the teacher finish talking, when they are explaining stuff, if you want to note something you have to pay really close attention.

The quote above refers to a social aspect that a number of the participants mentioned and that I can attest to from my own experience. Very often, because of the limited number of alternative type classes, general students can be grouped together for most of the day. From my experience, this can create a culture where the students identify strongly with each other and the pressures to conform to the norms of the group are strong. Additionally, it further separates the students from their other peer groups, particularly the "academics" who form their own culture.

The literature refers to the self-fulfilling prophecy that is a phenomenon with

children that experience labeling. The participants made reference to the fact that once you are in with a group you go along to fit in. The pressures of conforming are strong. From my own experience, I have seen and heard this type of behavior often where a student changes his/her own behavior and expectations because he/she is in a general program. I have taught the same students in several different environments, for example general, as opposed to an academic class with modifications, or an open class. The change in behavior and attitude is significant in many situations. These personal observations of mine are mirrored by the following quotes by the participants.

... what I've noticed is general students kinda, a lot of them just don't do too much. You know, they'll go out and cause trouble and whatnot but, a lot of people fall into that trap I think. But you know if you're sitting in class and somebody behind you is talking about what they are going to do this weekend and you want to do it, then you're going to go. I think it might be the same way with academic, as well. Like I think it goes both ways. Like, if you're in an academic course you're going to do what they are doing. You think, *'These are my new people when I'm in this class and maybe I should change myself around.' I think it's maybe an inside thing with just yourself. You'd act like them, instead of staying the way you are* [italics added].

People in the general, they can curse and swear and stuff in practical, and they can go on, like, really immature, I find, and they get away with it. If someone in

academic did or said something like that, they would be suspended immediately.

As reflected in many of the previous quotes, the participants reveal they experience embarrassment about being in the general program. Four of the six participants made comments that referred to the fact they were embarrassed or otherwise uncomfortable with being identified as general. Two of the participants did not forthrightly say this but the subtle comments about no one knowing what classes you took and that general wasn't written on the door, suggest these negative feelings. In my own experience, I have seen many students cope with the embarrassment and negative feelings by making jokes about it. The quotes that follow illustrate the negative feelings the participants feel.

It's kind of embarrassing because most of your friends know that you are in the general/practical programs. Right? In my case, I fit in with the people in the academic programs and they are my... I hang out with them. I find it embarrassing though, because I wish I could be with them.... like I was embarrassed. It was embarrassing. Like, some people do need — I don't think I ever did need it.

Well, I think there's a lot of people in my class that it's their first time taking general.... Like, all the general students have their friends, but with myself, I know them, but I've never really gotten around with them. So you know, you'll see the ones in there that are paying attention to every little thing. Then there's the ones who are talking. And with me, if I pay attention, like, I don't really talk a lot in

classes, I'm just listening, because I just want to get out of here, so I want to do everything I possibly can. But, *I think a lot of people that do that are the ones that are self-conscious about it, they're the ones that sit there and listen and don't really talk a lot because they don't want to be there and they are going to do everything they can to get out of there* [italics added].

I wasn't [teased]. But other kids in the hallway were teased and bugged by academic students....Just bullies, stupid people.

Some people look down at you because you're in general classes, you're a dumbass, that sort of thing, and they're academic, but pretty much they are snobs anyway, and they hardly have any friends, kind of thing, just because they are snobs... some people don't even talk to you when they are academics, I'm too good for you, type of thing.

I prompted the participant who made the above quote to tell me how that made him feel . He responded:

"It's ok, because I'm just, like, whatever. I don't care what people think of me. Other people do, but I don't."

I then asked him if he thought it bothered other people and he replied:

Some do, pretty much, yeah.... *Not that* [they are being looked down on], *but, they're getting a better education,* [italics added] type thing. When they get out of school they can go to a better college, and stuff, but they can still go to college. Some people get really pissed off at that kind of thing. But, I don't know.

This exchange took place with Tyler, who from the beginning of the interview, very strongly asserted that he hated school and didn't care about it at all. Throughout the interview he tried to convince me that everything was ok, that nothing bothered him at all, and in fact that general was great because he didn't have to do as much. During the above exchange, however, he became increasingly uncomfortable as his protective veneer began to crack. He ended this exchange by mumbling that he was no good at this stuff and could we change the subject.

The following quote is from John. He had already left school and was experiencing some success in a third level education program. He recognizes that he struggled in school but he has very strong opinions on how the general program made him feel.

Sometimes, yeah. I'd be embarrassed. They'd put me out of class sometimes. They'd give me tests individually which I didn't like and I didn't ask for it. They knew I could have done it. Certain teachers would always kind of pity you and ask, "Did you understand that?" Yeah. I didn't like that. I do understand it. [In response to how that made him feel] Embarrassed, a little upset. But I never ever said anything, just kept doing my work. I had my fun, had friends, socialized.

Following this exchange John continued to comment on what he would have done differently if he had the opportunity to change things.

> I would have taken the academic courses regardless of what they said, and tried the first semester and if it didn't work out, then I would have taken general ... my Dad was a big part of it. He didn't want me doing it either. Right now I feel I could have. All I'd do is study. I always found it hard to study but I do study and now I'm learning how to study. I believe I would have, I know I could have done it.

Skipping class is a theme related to the culture of general because skipping is a very common occurrence in general programs. In my own experience, I saw that skipping occurred with greater frequency in general courses than in academic. Four of the six participants admitted to skipping frequently and said that interfered with their school performance.

> [in response to why students skip]... and they feel stupid because they're in general, and they don't want to tell anyone what they are in because they are probably scared that they are going to be made fun of. But I think that if they had been in an academic class, they would come, and get through...

> But, with math I just skipped a lot

The computer one was whatever, and the math and English was general. But,

that's what you get for not showing up [in response to what courses the

participant failed last term]

Because I never went to class. I was too busy in the hallways. I could do the

work I just didn't....Well I wish I would have actually went to class because then I

would have been out of here by now, be in university already. But at the time, you

don't think of that.

The factors that influence the culture that is associated with the general program

come from both external and internal sources for the participants. Many of the aspects of

the culture of the program as seen in this section, are related to the self-fulfilling prophecy

discussed in chapter two. The damaging influence of being labeled is very clear, as

illustrated in the participants words.

Level of Challenge.

Another significant theme that emerges concerns the participants' perception of the

level of challenge they experienced in the classroom. Five of the students commented they

felt that the work was easy and that they were not challenged enough. Though the

participants recognized that general is slower and they liked the idea of passing and

getting out of high school in the shortest amount of time possible, they also made

references to the fact that it was too easy. One participant, as previously quoted, implied

that some general students were unhappy because they knew people in the academic program were getting a better education. In commenting what school is like for students in a low track in school, Jeannie Oakes (1992) remarked that:

> It's typically dominated by strategies that are passive; students do lots of worksheets, they tend to work alone. We find in science, for example, that the amount of time students sit by themselves reading out of textbooks is far greater than in top-track classes, where students are more involved in doing science, often working in groups doing projects....   Ironically, we're finding out that for children who have difficulty in school, the kinds of experiences that are easiest for them are not low-level, abstract worksheets, or the disconnected, fragmented curriculum that is typical of the low track....

The following quotes illustrate the participants' perceptions of the type of the work they do.

> You don't get a lot of work to do. It's pretty good because you get to do whatever you want, kind of thing... You don't get a lot of work to do either, the teachers don't expect much from a general student, like doing a lot of work and stuff, ... most teachers are like that. They assign homework, they complain about it, and they are expecting it not to be done. Some people do it, some people don't, and stuff.

I find it almost too easy because you have to do something with some sort of a challenge.

Then I finally realized what the program was about. I never had to study really going through high school because it was easy material ...

I got more challenged with the open courses because they didn't know that I was in practical or general.

I'm getting high marks in it but take down the notes and read the book and you're alright.

Be challenged more; I like challenges you know; I'm not scared of a challenge. If I couldn't do it, then I'd say I couldn't do it. But I found it easy to work, but I found it's difficult like I was embarrassed.

I just wish that I was more challenged, like go to academic and try that, or be in a class with academic and just modify the program.

I believe I wasn't challenged enough.

If I was failing the general courses, I would probably think a little differently of myself, like I can't keep up with easy classes.

Some people do need the programs, and some people don't. I believe I could be challenged more. There's even people that don't wanna go and be challenged. They think they're going to get away with that even. But I think I should have been challenged more along the way.

Usually in math you do work for so long, they will give you a bunch of work and you do it, and there will be a half-hour left in class and you're just sitting there. If you don't know anyone then you just... sit there.

The following comments illustrate the perceptions the participants' feel educators and students have about general students. In terms of the participants' perceptions of the expectations of teachers and the differences in approaches to classroom management and style of teaching, several participants have expressed the following ideas:

I think they all expect them to be in the hallways more. I mean, anytime you walk around you can pick them out, like you can just see them never going in the classroom, like, a lot of them never go to class, ... you can just tell because they're the ones that are in the cafeteria, walking around, they're, like, the ones who are never in class. I think they get a lot more, like, I've noticed in my class that [the

teacher] doesn't comedown   hard as other teachers would. I don't know if that's

just [the teacher] or if it's because it's a general course, but a lot more teachers

would have been like, "You've missed four days, see ya later!" but he just gives a

little lecture whenever you come through the door, whenever you come back and

that's it.

I didn't mind because [teacher] was gonna teach it, and I know him, so I got along

with him good. Because if I have a hard time getting along with a teacher I can't

do the work; if I can't get along with them then I can't concentrate on the work.

So, I get along with him, so that's fine.

Some teachers don't care, others do. That sort of thing. Some teachers don't even

do hardly any work. Some do tons of it.

The quote from above was given in context of a discussion we were having about

expectations. I prompted him to expand on why he thought some teachers cared while

others didn't. He commented:

Like, some teachers don't really expect much from you, but others do. Some

teachers like you, or they don't want to be here, type of thing...Some teachers

don't even like the students. They're here just for the money. Pretty much some

teachers, not all.

As a teacher, I find the above quotes painful to read. However, I recognize that the participants have made these observations from their own experiences. I am also aware of the burden that is placed on general teachers. The individual classroom teacher can make a huge difference in how an individual perceives his or her own abilities, success, and place within the social context of the class. I believe that teachers of these classes try very hard to be professional and provide excellent learning opportunities; however, in my opinion, teaching these classes in the present system can test the resources of any skilled teacher. These thoughts are supported in an article by Jeannie Oakes where she comments about teachers who teach low tracked (general) classes. She said

Part of the answer is that the teachers who are most likely to be assigned to low-track classes are the least experienced..... Then there's the limit that all teachers face about how you balance rich educational activity with classroom control...In many schools, students who misbehave are placed in the low track. There's a strange belief in the culture of many schools that disruptive students are likely to do the least damage in the low track...So you find low-track teachers with a classroom full of students who have a history of school difficulties, school failures, or misbehavior. In those settings, even very skillful teachers often resort to classroom activities in which students are kept separate and quiet for purposes of control. These complex dynamics help perpetuate low-level curriculum for low-track students. That's one of the reasons I'm very suspicious about recommendations that schools simply "beef up" the low track... (Oakes, 1992, p.3)

recommendations that schools simply "beef up" the low track... (Oakes, 1992, p.3)

Rationalizing and Denial.

I found that, to some degree, all of the participants tried to rationalize the fact they were in general. The responses that I am framing as rationalizing are what I feel are the participants' subconscious attempt to explain why they are different. It is apparent from the responses that the participants are clearly troubled by their affiliation with being in the general stream. Responses varied from saying they did poorly because of skipping to saying that general is the same as academic only slower. Several participants said that though it didn't bother them, they knew it bothered other students. Related to rationalizing is denial. Some of the participants denied there was any difference between the programs or at the least tried to minimize the differences. The following quotes illustrate examples of rationalizing and denial.

> Like, I don't really care what they think, but you know it still kinda bothers you. Like you're kinda 'what are they thinking?' Like, it doesn't bother me if they say anything. Like myself, I could have done better

> It's probably better, you're learning all the same stuff, it just takes a longer time to do it.

> ...it was basically the same stuff

General. Only a couple of people take academic. They're all the same, we do all the same stuff, doesn't bother me. [in response to whether the participants' friends were academic or general]

Well, in my experience in being in general classes, *it's the same as being in academic...* So you get to do, like, you learn it slower and stuff, instead of academic, where it's right there, right now. It's like, do this and then work on it for a week, and we're like *a month behind academic work and stuff,* but it's ok how it is. I'm fine with it, *it doesn't bother me.* [italics added]

You pretty much get to do stuff the same as academic people

I really personally don't care. They can think what they want. It doesn't bother me, but I know it bothers a lot of other people. But I just don't let it bother me.

Because I never went to class. I was too busy in the hallways. I could do the work I just didn't go.

Yeah, it's not like general is written on the door, and you could be in history with somebody and you don't know where they are going after class, so being in general doesn't really matter.

I questioned the participant, Becky, who made the last comment about her course selection and if she minded making the switch from academic to general. She replied:

> Well I doesn't really matter to me because the course I'm going into next year doesn't require it, just a science and math mark. I didn't really care, ... it was basically the same stuff.

The comment that Becky made about general not being written on the door, brought me to reflect on one of the frustrations I experienced as a teacher of general students. I was constantly battling the labels the students placed on themselves and others placed on them. One of my students' favorite names for themselves was the "Romper Stompers," as in Romper Room, a television show for young children . They also made references to the Polka Dot Door, another television show for young children . In my particular school, it was no mystery who took general classes because if they were in my room, it was likely a general or practical class. I felt the students used these terms as a method of self-protection. If they appeared to make it a joke and did not take it seriously, than others would not be as inclined to make fun of them. In my experience, it seemed to me young men were more adept at positioning themselves in this manner then the young women were.

A Means to an End.

Each of the participants justified the fact they were in the general program by

explaining that it was better than being in school for four or five years or even quitting.

They saw the general program as a means to get out of high school since they would have

no other way of completing school. Finishing school did seem to be an important goal for

all of the participants.

> I wanted to take academic if I could, but the general was the only way to get out
>
> of here. So I'll do whatever I have to do just to get out of here because, I won't
>
> have to see these people again

> The way I look at it, if I can't do academic, why not be sitting here instead of
>
> being here longer, like, next year.

> It's a lot better getting out of here in three years, than five.

Insight

Three of the six participants were placed in general coming out of junior high

school, one was in alternative programs from grade two. The other three participants

took general classes after failing academic classes in high school. The following quotes

illustrate the negative feelings the students have about their experiences but also they show

the remarkable insight some of the participants have about their experiences from being in

the general track in high school. I found that the two participants who had left school were

able to look at their experiences more reflectively than the students who were presently in

the school system.

I was put right into it, basically. Teachers talked. We went in for my sign-up, my

father and I, and they just basically told me, "This is what you're going to do."

They said "You can do it but You're not going to pass," and I wasn't sure whether

I was in general, academic or practical, but I'm thinking that I don't want to fail,

so I better do it. Then I finally realized what the program was about. I never had

to study really going through high school because it was easy material and now I

have to study. Now I'm starting. Like the first few months of my tour of college, I

found it hard, but I'm learning now, different ways now. I'm doing marks up to

85% now.

You see, back in grade two they put me in, back when I started essentially, they

put me in a resource program, so I never got a chance really to keep up with other

students and I always struggled. I don't feel I was challenged fairly, that's my

opinion. .... I failed in grade one, and I ended up, ever since then I was put in

slower programs, but I believe I could have done a lot better than they gave me the

opportunity to do. I believe I wasn't challenged enough.

I questioned the participant who made the above quote how that made him feel.

He replied:

...because I wanted to be like the other kids. I don't believe that they should have

practical and general. Everybody should be in the same area

The following quotes further illustrate, with heartbreaking insight, how the participants feel about their experiences as being identified as a general level student.

Not mad, you know. Not that I cry over it, get upset. I passed, I graduated you know. But, I wish I could have done better, in a higher program level. I'm at a level that I like now. Now I'm going to prove it to everybody that maybe I can do it. I can do it.

I would just put them all in the same program and generalize what there weaknesses are and get them help for that instead of putting them in general or practical courses. Then everyone can be in the same and you won't have anyone bugging the other kid that they are smarter than them and the kid that knows that they have a practical [course], they won't drop out and they can finish school and get a diploma.

So the kid doesn't feel like they are going to be stupid for the rest of their lives and drop out. Because some kids, they find out that they are in practical and they can't go anywhere after and they just drop out and they get no education. So, if they put them in the same class, then if they just take the same course.... if you are strong at something else than another kid, just modify the program for the other kid, but still

have them in the same class so the kids can get through and not drop out.

I just wish that I was more challenged, like go to academic and try that, or be in a class with academic and just modify the program. I could be with my friends then, and not feel left out from what my friends do and all that. They should just make it one big program. One of the teachers told me to go talk to the principal about it two years ago....Yeah, they should just make it one class. Because if the kids find out that they will not go anywhere after. So, they will just stop coming to school, and not get an education, and flip burgers the rest of their life. When they could probably change that, and get an education and move on to a skill or something, somewhere.

Conclusion

The participants who shared their experiences and wisdom with me during our interviews had widely varied experiences and backgrounds, yet they all shared a common experience; they were all in the general stream in high school. I believe the thoughts the participants shared with me illustrate the struggle that is unique to students in their positions. These students do not have an easy time coping with being labeled and their education and self esteem can be adversely affected for a significant number of years of their lives. In fact, their lives are shaped by this experience.

The participants in this study represent a segment of the school population that has

school. The participants interviewed were all fairly motivated to succeed and will hopefully pursue and find careers they find rewarding. However, I believe there is a lot of untapped potential in these students. Not represented in this study are the students who have become so disengaged from school that they drop out or the students the participants referred to as the ones who were bothered or the ones who created the challenging atmospheres in the classes by acting inappropriately.

The participants' words speak for themselves. They were embarrassed and unchallenged. These feelings are not the ones that should pervade students' perceptions when looking at their education. Sadly, what the participants have shared is overwhelmingly supported in educational literature and reinforces the growing feeling I had as a teacher, that there were serious issues to be looked at in the current system.

Chapter 5

Conclusion, Reflections, and Future Possibilities

The purpose of the Prince Edward Island public education system is to provide for the

development of children so that each may take a meaningful place in society

Prince Edward Island Department of Education, '*Philosophy of Education*', 1990.

Introduction

This research involved an exploration, a discovery and considerable reflection for

myself as a teacher. My experiences as a teacher led me to investigate students'

experiences in the general programs on Prince Edward Island so I am not shocked at what

I have found. The students' voices that were articulated in the previous chapter should be

enough to alarm educators, but they are supported by so much research in this area that

clearly supports a conclusion that the current system of homogeneous grouping of

students is not only unfair, but damaging and unethical. I did not begin this research

steeped in critical pedagogy and I don't see myself as an educational reformer or a radical

thinker. However, as I have said, this has been a journey of exploration that has led me to

deeply question the way placement in general courses positions students in a way that

actually contributes to, rather than addresses their academic needs. I have struggled, both

professionally and personally with challenging this sensitive topic that is so well

entrenched in our education system, but it is clear that this is necessary in light of my

findings. In this final chapter of the thesis, I am going to explore the connections between

the literature and this research, identify some implications of this study, some possibilities

for change and discuss some areas for future research.

Structuring Inequality

The themes that were introduced in chapter four are supported by current

research, particularly in the works of Jeannie Oakes, Michelle Fine, Peter McLaren, and

Jonathon Kozol, to name just a few. These researchers have been examining how schools

are structured and how the structure brings with it certain unwritten codes and

conventions that are reinforced within classrooms. This is revealed and supported from the

participants' perspective in their comments about how one tends to adapt to one's

surroundings so that one begins to act like everyone else. The influence of deep structure

and socialization has been explored by Peter McLaren who suggests that the classroom

presents symbols and paradigms that influence the way students think and do things

(McLaren, 1986). Jeannie Oakes and Martin Lipton (in Goodlad & Keating, 1990,

pp.193), identify three structural qualities of the tracking system:

- extensiveness - the number of subjects tracked and the type of distinct curricula

    offered

- specificity - the number of track levels offered

- flexibility - whether students can move from one track to another

Depending on which school students attend, our current system has a variety of

subjects offered in the three major streams that exist on Prince Edward Island. The

literature suggests that tracking is a cycle that can begin as early as grade one. Small differences compound over time as the cycle continues and each experience affects the next. This was expressed by one participant who said that he was put into resource in grade two and could never catch up. Once students get into a certain track it is very difficult for them to get out of it. As expressed by some of the participants, they can be strongly influenced to take courses in a particular stream, even if they don't want to and don't fully understand the ramifications of their decisions. One participant, on commenting about finding out that many doors were closed to her as a result of taking general courses said,

> Yeah, but then, I was in grade ten and it didn't matter, it was like 'who cares?'

The way the current system is structured traps the student in the low track. In this case I am referring to the general program, but it also applies to the practical program that exists in our system. Students' movements are restricted once they enter a lower level of course because many courses require a prerequisite. For example, if a student chose or was steered into taking general English in grade ten, English 431, but then decided they wanted to take academic grade eleven English in grade eleven, English 521, the student would need to have the prerequisite English 421. The student is then faced with having the choice of retaking grade ten academic English or to continue in the general stream. I know that some schools have policies that restrict students from going back to take the higher level unless they have achieved a high mark in the lower level first. As evident in many of the participants' comments, they are highly motivated to get out as quickly as possible.

The idea of electing to take the risk to go back and take the higher track course is not appealing to many students, some of whom don't fully understand the ramifications of their decisions. Additionally, they might not have been exposed to the skills required to be successful if they chose to repeat. I believe that exceptions have been made in some schools at the discretion of the administration; however, this would be rare. In my experience, I have seen many students who have gone through the general stream only to return a few years after leaving school to upgrade in order to pursue further education opportunities. This speaks to the loss of potential that can result from a system that predetermines a student's abilities by placing him/her in a non academic program.

In an extensive study about how schools structure the inequality in the system, Jeannie Oakes asserts that students in ability grouped classes have access to very different types of knowledge (Oakes, 1985). Additionally she suggests that track levels form boundaries around students' opportunities and as a result restrict what students can achieve (Oakes & Lipton, 1990, pp. 162). The boundaries go beyond academic limitations to social and cultural limitations; these students are positioned differently within the school culture. These feelings were clearly expressed by the participants in the previous chapter.

Gods and Clods

The crude title of this section comes from South Park, a popular television show that many young people watch and identify with. In an episode I watched recently, a student was told by his father that there are two main types of people in the world: Gods and Clods. The Gods of the world are the ones who get the good education, drive nice

cars, have big homes, and are otherwise successful. The Clods of the world are the ones

who pump the gas and do all of the things necessary for the Gods to have their good lives.

I think that examples from popular culture such as this reinforce to general students that

their place is determined; they are not part of the elite society. The values that are

presented to them in the types of learning they are exposed to reinforce that they are

destined to become the 'workers' and not the 'thinkers'. Far from being part of popular

culture, the idea of 'Gods and Clods' is related to critical pedagogy. In *Life in Schools*,

Peter McLaren explores one of the important areas of critical theory: hegemony.

Hegemony, according to McLaren refers to:

> ...the maintenance of domination not by sheer force but primarily through

consensual social practices, social forms, and social structures produced in specific sites

such as the church, the state, the school, the mass media, political system, and the family

....the subordinate class actively subscribes to many of the values and objectives of the

dominant class without being aware of the source of those values or the interests which

inform them (McLaren, 1989, pp. 173-174).

Hegemony is illustrated in the participants' responses when some of them said that

everything was ok, and that the system basically worked for them because it got them out

of school more quickly. These participants are buying into a program that is positioned to

them as their only way to successfully finish school. The actual outcomes are hidden and

even the teachers believe they are doing what is best for the students.

Directions For Change

The plight of the non-academic student has not gone unnoticed. I agree with Jeannie Oakes and Martin Lipton when they suggest that teachers "almost universally recognize and lament the negative consequences of tracking for students in low track classes...and many suspect that when a group of the lowest achieving and most poorly behaved students are together in classrooms, their performance is far below what it might be under other circumstances" (Lipton & Oakes, 1990, pp.196). Teachers, however have few choices. Tracking may be motivated by the best of intentions but it plays a significant part in setting a school path for certain students which may generate serious misbehavior and end in school failure for the student.

If the negative consequences of tracking are well documented in educational literature then why does it still exist? The path to answering this question is varied and complex. In *Tracking and Ability Grouping*, the authors suggest that tracking needs to be looked at in a larger societal context rather than in isolation (Lipton & Oakes, 1990, p. 196). I believe that tracking continues to exist because it is difficult to envision how else it might be done. The answers go beyond simply putting all students of all abilities together. Eliminating tracking would not guarantee that every student would succeed at the academic level, but it might help to eliminate unjust, artificial barriers to those students who could, and it would better reflect a democratic schooling experience. Lipton and Oakes (1990) identify that the final arguments against tracking must be both academic and social. We must decide whether tracking suits children's learning needs, whether it conforms to our democratic values, and what alternatives exists. Such changes require

courageous decision making and considerable commitment as they challenge a long-standing practice in our schools.

There are many alternatives to tracking. All of them require a shift in our assumptions about learning. Lipton and Oakes identify some promising avenues for educators and policy makers to pursue. The first is mixed-ability schooling. This goes beyond putting students of mixed abilities together, but rather it is organized around central concepts and themes. Students acquire skills as they become ready within a common conceptual framework (1990, pp. 202-201). This structure sounds like the module approach that is being suggested in the Senior High School Transitions Proposal by the Prince Edward Island Department of Education (1998). Other approaches Lipton and Oakes suggest are more gradual, for instance: the gradual reduction of tracked classes; making tracked classes suitable as prerequisites for higher level classes; and blurring the distinction between the academic and non-academic groups (Lipton & Oakes, 1990, pp. 2002-203).

The Senior High School Transitions Proposal is a step in the right direction. Program evaluators recognized that there are serious problems with the current program :

Many dedicated administrators, teachers and guidance counselors have done and continue to do all they can with limited resources and curriculum to provide for the needs of students who will soon be entering the workforce. However, most would agree that a better and more relevant curriculum, a greater focus on school to work transition skills, more information and support personnel to help with

employment options and opportunities, more inclusion into the school community and a greater respect for those students who, for whatever reason, decide to join the workforce sooner rather than later are all desirable....Recently, high school students from general, practical and those with lower grades in the academic stream have found it increasingly difficult to gain acceptance to post-secondary college courses and are often not equipped with the necessary skills to move directly into the labor market. In addition, the dropout rate for these students remains much higher than for those in the university preparatory track (1998, p. 3-4).

It is positive to note this proposal also suggests that students not be tracked until after their grade ten year, or that students who *excel* in a non-university preparatory course in grade ten may make the transition to a university preparatory course (Transitions Report, 1998, p.11). However, the report also makes it clear that the system of tracking essentially remains the same as evident in the goals of the proposal:

A goal is to make courses in the *general level* among the most attractive, useful and relevant of all of our course offerings. It is *not intended that all courses be destreamed* as has been attempted in other provinces, rather, we must insure that courses *allow students to meet appropriate outcomes. Some courses will be available to all students while others will need prerequisites* (Transitions Proposal, 1998, p. 5).

The Transitions Proposal recognizes the serious issues with the general program. However, it is merely a beefed up general program and the stigma of general will remain regardless of what it is named.

<u>Possibilities</u>

This is a small study and I have only scratched the surface of the volumes of literature related to social justice and school reform. What I can conclude from my experiences as a teacher and my experience in researching this issue is that we must become more cognizant of how sifting, sorting and labeling students affects them. I do not foresee that the significant structural and ideological reframing that is required to change this situation and develop a new vision of education will take place very soon on P.E.I. ; however, there are things that can be done in the short term to minimize the negative impact on students of being tracked on students. I suggest the following as some possibilities

- We must be careful when suggesting or allowing a student to leave the academic track because it can seriously alter the course of a young person's life. Students who may take non-academic classes should have future ramifications discussed honestly and openly with them and their parent/guardian.

- As educators, we must try to help students cope with the negative associations that are attached to non-academic programs.

- Minimize "individualized learning" that is so popular in non-academic classes, and

move towards cooperative learning

- Teachers who teach non-academic classes need much more support and resources. The burden on teachers of non-academic courses is extreme. These are the teachers who usually have large classes of the lowest achieving and worst behaved students with the most outdated and inappropriate course materials. These are usually the last classes to have access to technology.

- Encourage teachers with more experience to take up the challenge of teaching non-academic classes. The irony of this situation is the students who need the best teachers rarely get them. In most cases, it is the new teachers who get these classes.

- Provide teachers with more experienced mentors.

- Ask general/practical course students what can be done differently.

- Ensure non-acedemic students have a voice in school governance.

- Alignment of school structures and practices with the Department of Educations philosophy statement.

- Fewer students per class (requires significant funding)

The long term process of exploring this critical issue requires a "reimagining" of how we educate children. A reimagining of the education system is a complex task. However, through this process we might become more enlightened about what possibilities exist and as a result our current conceptualization of schooling might change. Some long term possibilities are suggested below.

- Further exploration of critical pedagogy .

- Critical reflection on and extended dialogue about the values and assumptions that underlie tracking and teaching.

- Find examples of best practices.

- Extensive school- and district-based data collection about tracking practices.

- A system wide change involving all levels.

<u>Conclusion</u>

I hope this research will shed some light on the current situation for tracked students on Prince Edward Island. I know I have developed more compassion for students who have been labeled low achieving by the education system, even when they say, 'it's ok, I'm alright.' I would like to thank the students I have taught over the years for inspiring me to pursue this important education issue and I would like to thank the participants for sharing their stories with me.

My hope is that as a system, we don't assume we know what students can and can not achieve. When we do this, we actually inhibit the students' potential for success by labeling them and offering them different education opportunities. I will conclude with my reflection on the quote at the beginning of this chapter from the Prince Edward Island Department of Education, 'Philosophy of Education' (1990) that states

'The purpose of the Prince Edward Island public education system is to provide for the development of children so that each may take a meaningful place in society'

I hope that we, as educators, don't prescribe to the Gods and Clods theory of education and as a result make assumptions about a student's potential. We should not determine, by placing educational barriers on students, what their place in society will be.

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Appendix A

Life In The Margins: The Experiences of General Level High School Students in P.E.I.

Informed Consent Form

Dear _____ :

I am a graduate student working towards a Master's degree in Education. Part of this program involves doing research and writing a thesis on that research. For my thesis, I wish to talk to young people who have been in general classes in high school. I would like to find out how these students see themselves and get their insight about their own education.

Participation in this study is strictly voluntary , please do not feel obliged to participate. The study involves two interviews which could take one to three hours in total. With your permission, the interviews will be audio taped and later transcribed. All information will be kept confidential and your real name will not be used in the study. You may review the transcripts of our interview. When my research is completed, I will meet with each participant, if they wish, to show them the results of the study, and to debrief them on their input.

Sincerely,

Patricia Oulton Birt

I, _____, have read and understand the conditions of my participation in this research. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time. I may retain a copy of this consent form.

Signed: _____ date:_____

Appendix B

Data/Transcript Release Form

I, _____, have reviewed the complete transcript of my personal

interview in this study, and acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said

in my personal interview with _____. I hereby authorize the release of

this transcript to _____ to be used in the manner described in the consent

form. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.

_____   _____

Participant   Date

_____   _____

Researcher   Date

Appendix C

Question Guide

1. What is your name and tell me a little about yourself? (Personal history)

2. What were some of the courses you took in school and what do you recall about being in those classes?

3. Did you ever want to take academic courses? (If not)Why do you think that you didn't?

4. Did you ever feel that you were treated any differently because you were not taking academic courses? Can you describe how you felt?

5. Are you happy with the course selections you have made, what would you have done differently?

6. What was the high school experience like for you? Do you believe your experience was affected in any way by being a general student? Please explain how it was or was not.

7. Do you think that people (teachers, staff, parents) have certain expectations, or lack of, because you are a general student?

8. Has being a general student affected you socially?

9. Please describe how you feel it is to be a general level student in your school.

10. Do you have anything else you would like to add about what it is like being a general student?