Perceptions and Practices of Teachers, Principals, and Counsellors Regarding School Completion

Susan M. Baker

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Abstract

In this study, intervention strategies for improving school completion rates were explored by researching practices and programs that would best serve students in grades seven to nine. Teachers’, counsellors’, and administrators’ perceptions regarding their role in facilitating school completion for their at-risk students at that age level were examined in order to provide a sense of school and staff culture in this researcher’s own context. A mixed-methods approach was taken using two tools, a paper based survey and personal interviews. Sixty-three educators from School District #79 (Cowichan Valley) were invited to participate. Thirty-one responded to the survey and seven were interviewed. It was thought that the participants would identify a variety of strategies currently in use to address the needs of their at-risk students and teachers, counsellors, and administrators would have distinct perceptions about their roles in facilitating school completion for at-risk learners. Barriers to implementing new and effective strategies were expected to be few but significant, and some commonalities between the three stakeholders’ answers were expected. Data collection from the study confirmed that teachers, counsellors, and administrators at the grade seven to nine level are using many of the practices and strategies that are common to successful programs for increasing graduation rates. There is a strong indication that more opportunities for meeting the needs of at-risk learners in the intermediate years are needed and that there are some critical barriers preventing their attainment and usage.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Purpose of the Study

The complex issue of school dropout and the cost to individuals and society has been a major focus of discussion among educators for many years. The purpose of this study was to investigate intervention strategies for improving school completion rates. The goals were to explore practices and programs that would best serve students in grades seven to nine and to investigate teacher, counsellor, and administrator perceptions regarding their role in facilitating school completion for their at-risk students at that age level.

The five-year trend from 2010 to 2015 in British Columbia indicated an increase in the graduation rate; however, there were still a significant number of students who did not complete school in a timely manner. The six-year completion rate for the 2014-2015 school year was 84.2% (BC Ministry of Education, 2015). In that year over 2,400 eligible students did not graduate with a British Columbia Dogwood or an Evergreen Certificate. Students that do not complete high school often face a life that includes poverty, underemployment or unemployment, poor health and higher rates of incarceration (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006). The cost to society can be staggering. It is estimated that, in Canada, $969 million per year goes toward social services for dropouts and $378 million in tax revenue is lost (Hankivsky, 2008). Moreover, each cohort then increases the likelihood of producing another generation of dropouts (Bridgeland et al., 2006). “Given the consequences to society and the individual, the importance of facilitating school completion for all students is a critical concern for researchers, policymakers, and educators across the country” (Lehr, Hansen, Sinclair, & Christenson 2003, p. 342).
As a school counsellor and team leader for Learning Services in a grade eight to twelve school, this researcher has observed many students with various learning and social issues disengage from school prior to grade ten. The students that are most affected are often those that do not qualify for a Ministry of Education designation and are, therefore, not necessarily “flagged” as having special needs. For these students, there do not seem to be relevant programs or in-class interventions in relation to their needs that also take into consideration their age and developmental stage. Once these students enter the British Columbia Graduation Program in grade ten, they struggle to attend school or progress academically and, consequently, do not complete school within six years of entering grade eight for the first time.

Over the course of eleven years, this researcher has been fortunate to work with some dedicated colleagues who have examined and changed their practices of classroom management, assessment, and lesson designs to improve learning for all students. Despite their efforts, there are still a significant number of students who disengage from their learning by grade ten. Teachers, counsellors, and administrators in the school are distressed to see students who appear to have given up on themselves as learners and who feel that educators have given up on them. These at-risk students sometimes have parents and caregivers that are unable or unwilling to advocate for their child’s educational needs, leading this researcher to feel a moral and professional obligation to advocate for them and to try to affect changes within the school that could help to facilitate meaningful school completion.

**Justification of the Study**

A review of past and current literature reveals that interventions needed to remediate dropout rates are as complex as the reasons students do not complete school. Many studies have been done to look at the factors that may influence a student’s choice to drop out of school and
researchers have identified various indicators of school completion. Dropping out of school is described as being complex and multidimensional (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Godber, 2001) and usually preceded by a “long process of disengagement with measurable indicators that are present in the early grades” (Lehr et al., 2003, p. 343).

Based on a synthesis of empirical research, Rosenthal (1998) compiled a comprehensive list of non-school correlate indicators of school completion. She divided them into categories related to students’ community, family, involvement with education, social conformity, social deviance, and personality. As recognized by Christianson et al. (2001), these variables can be further divided into demographic characteristics that are unalterable and practices that are amenable to change. Additional research indicates there are academic indicators that can predict dropout. Failing math or English in grade six, for example, is considered a high yield predictor (Balfanz, Herzog, & MacIver, 2007). In response to addressing the needs of students who exhibit early indicators of school dropout, educators have attempted to create interventions. Crooks, Chido, Thomas, and Hughes (2009) provide examples of strength-based interventions. Further research supports considering strength-based approaches based on resiliency theory research to guide intervention design (Zimmerman, 2013). Various alternate education programs have also been developed. In a meta-analysis of dropout programs, in-house alternative programs in particular were found to be effective (Kilma, Miller, & Nunlist, 2009).

Recent literature reveals a trend toward using a tiered approach to target interventions to prevent school dropout. Commonly referred to as Response to Intervention (RtI) models, tiered systems of intervention begin at tier one with universal strategies in the classroom and school setting that can benefit all students. As students are identified as needing further intervention, they are shifted into tier two, where more targeted interventions are provided. If the targeted
interventions are not successful, students move into tier three where intense and individualized interventions are implemented. Studies have been conducted on the effectiveness of schools that use systematic identification of early indicators of dropout to implement effective interventions (Balfanz et al., 2007; Davis, Herzog, & Legters, 2013). One of the most obvious indicators of dropout is a poor attendance pattern. To address this issue, Kearney, and Graczyk (2013) also suggested using a tiered intervention model. The advantage of using consistent and systematic methods to identify and remediate issues related to school dropout is that participants reported that it helped identify at-risk students who may have previously gone unnoticed (Davis et al., 2013).

The literature reveals that researchers agree on the severity and complexity of the issue of student dropout. While much has been written on the subject, there appears to be a gap in research regarding dropout recovery (Zammit & Anderson-Ketchmark, 2011). There is a further gap in research regarding effective interventions targeted specifically toward students in the intermediate years (Ziomek-Daigle & Andrews, 2009).

Implementing strategies to improve school completion rates ultimately relies on school staff to carry out any new initiatives. Investigating current teachers’, counsellors,’ and administrators’ perceptions regarding their roles in facilitating school completion for their at-risk students has the potential to provide valuable information to educational leaders endeavoring to shift to new methods and systems of intervention. In order for change to be effective and lasting, leaders have to challenge current practices and processes (Kouzes & Posner, 2012). Current practices and processes related to addressing the needs of at-risk students were perceived by this researcher to be rooted in school culture. Barth (2001) suggests that to change culture you have to first be aware of it, and then use it to support change.
Research Questions

Given this researcher’s desire to initiate appropriate intervention strategies to facilitate school completion for at-risk students and knowing that any strategies would have to be supported by school staff, two questions emerged. The research questions were: What are educators’ perceptions of their current practices and current roles in facilitating school completion for their at-risk learners; What are the perceived barriers preventing implementation of new strategies and programs?

It was thought that participants would identify a variety of strategies currently in use to address the needs of their at-risk students. In addition, it was believed that teachers, counsellors, and administrators would have distinct perceptions as to their own roles and each others’ roles in facilitating school completion for at-risk learners. Barriers to implementing new and effective strategies were expected to be few but significant and some commonalities between the three stakeholders’ answers were expected.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, several key terms needed to be defined to clarify their operational definitions within the context of the research questions.

The term school completion is a reference to students that have received either a British Columbia Dogwood Graduation Certificate or a British Columbia Evergreen Certificate. The British Columbia Dogwood Graduation Certificate is a diploma granted to high school students who have earned a minimum of 80 approved credits. This certificate indicates that at least a minimum standard has been achieved in an academic program. The British Columbia Evergreen is a certificate of school completion granted to students who have met the goals of an
Individualized Education Plan (IEP) but could not earn a British Columbia Dogwood Certificate. The program may have included some academic courses, however, it indicates that the student is deficient in general academic skills.

In the current study, the term *counsellors* refers to itinerant or in-school counsellors whose role may include personal, academic and career counselling, and programming recommendations. School counsellors may also teach some classes. *Administrators* are the principals and vice-principals in the schools.

*At-risk learners and students* are those who struggle to or are unable to meet the learning outcomes in one or more core subjects at grade level. Some of these students may be at risk of dropping out of school before completion. Students may have additional risk factors outside of school such as poverty, inadequate parental and community support, problems related to substance use, or personal factors such as mental health issues.

*Practices and strategies* describe methods of instruction, classroom management, and interventions used in the classroom or school to reach the academic, social, and emotional needs of students. *Interventions* are terms used to describe practices and strategies that are designed to assist students with their learning, social, and emotional needs that are different from what would be needed for the majority of students.

**Brief Overview of the Study**

A mixed methods approach was used to investigate teacher, counsellor, and administrator perceptions and practices regarding school completion for their at-risk students. The participants represented a convenience sampling of teachers, counsellors, and administrators working with students in grades seven to nine in the Cowichan Valley School District. An anonymous paper-based survey was circulated to schools where students in grade seven, eight, and nine are
enrolled. Completing the survey was voluntary. Attached to the survey was an invitation for participants to voluntarily take part in individual interviews with the researcher.

The survey included a section designed to elicit basic demographic information regarding the participants’ primary role in their school, the number of years of experience of the participant, and their total caseload of students at the time of the survey. There were fourteen statements on the survey accompanied by a five-point Likert scale. The questions were designed to gather data related to participants’ current practices that they perceived lead to improved school completion rates, to identify participants’ perceptions of their role in facilitating school completion, and if they perceived any barriers to providing appropriate interventions for at-risk learners. There were four open-ended questions at the end of the survey to give participants an opportunity to provide more in-depth information about their current practices, what additional supports they perceived to be needed, and barriers that they perceived were preventing the attainment of additional supports for their at-risk learners.

Participants were also given the opportunity to participate in an interview with the researcher. Twenty open-ended questions were asked regarding how the participants perceived their role in improving school completion rates, what practices they used that they thought were most successful and why, and what might have prevented them from implementing new strategies to improve school completion rates. Thirty minutes were allotted for each interview.

The quantitative data collected from the survey tool were analyzed using descriptive statistics and organized into table format and stacked bar graphs to provide a visual presentation of the results that would distinguish the responses of each of the three types of participants (teachers, counsellors, and administrators). The qualitative data obtained from the survey tool and the interviews were coded to look for emergent themes in the participants’ responses.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

To provide background for the current study, this chapter will look to past and current literature related to school completion. Current trends regarding school completion rates in British Columbia are included to set a local context. Factors contributing to school dropout and its associated costs are examined. Common elements of programs believed to be successful are highlighted with special attention paid to student engagement and school climate. Literature about response to intervention models, alternative education, strength-based approaches and its relationship to resiliency theory are also reviewed.

In British Columbia, school completion data is collected annually and reported in multiple formats. One such method looks at school completion rates by examining the progression of students over six-years. This six-year completion rate tracks students beginning in the year that they enrolled in grade eight for the first time. This format of reporting is a useful way to look at the data as it includes students that dropped out of school during or prior to entering grade 12. The six-year cohort tracked through to the 2014 – 2015 school year had a school completion rate of 84.2% and that figure was indicative of a steady increase since 2008 (BC Ministry of Education, 2105). During that same time period, the rate was 76.5% in School District #79 (Cowichan Valley). Despite the reported upward trend, these statistics indicate that a significant number of British Columbians have not attained school completion prior to turning 19 years of age.

The reasons students drop out of school and the impact that it has on their lives is well documented. It is clear that there are early indicators of potential dropout and some successful interventions to address the issue at the elementary and secondary levels. However, it is not clear which interventions or programs could be most successful in the intermediate years.
Dropping out of school is a multifaceted and complicated procedure (Christenson et al., 2001). It involves a long process of increasing disengagement with indicators that may be discernable at an early age (Lehr et al., 2003). Researchers have identified many indicators of school completion. Based on her synthesis of empirical research, Rosenthal (1998) compiled a comprehensive list of non-school correlates and divided them into 12 categories. Four categories related to the students’ community: socioeconomic status, minority group status, gender, and community characteristics. Four categories related to the students’ family: household stress, taking on adult roles, social support for remaining in school, and family process. Student involvement with education, social conformity versus autonomy, social deviance, and personality were the final four categories. Christianson et al. (2001), distinguished that these variables can be further categorized into demographic characteristics that are fixed and practices that may be responsive to change.

Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006) referred to the problem of student dropout as “The Silent Epidemic.” They assert that students that do not complete high school often face devastating personal costs including poverty, unemployment, health issues, criminal activity, and offspring that also drop out of school. Additionally there are costs to society associated with dropouts as they are more likely to use social services and are not likely to contribute to tax revenues at the same rate as high school graduates. These costs are estimated to be $1.3 billion dollars annually in Canada (Hankivsky, 2008). Due to personal and societal costs associated with non-completion of school, Lehr, Hansen, Sinclair, and Christenson (2003) urge all stakeholders to make addressing school completion one of critical importance.
Drop-out Prevention and Recovery

The interventions needed to remediate dropout rates are as complex as the reasons students are failing to complete school. Zammitt and Anderson-Ketchmark (2011) describe methods of reengaging students as dropout recovery, retrieval, and reentry interventions. This description highlights that the process must be comprehensive and is not as easy as just getting students through the door of the school. Martin and Halperin (2006) created a list of characteristics that were observed to be part of effective programs. Included were: self-paced curriculum, flexible scheduling, relationship-based learning communities, opportunities for employment through career-oriented curriculum, positive rewards for learning, extensive support services, and a variety of program options.

Student engagement is a widely used term in research related to school completion. Christenson et al. (2001) suggest that student engagement relates to belonging, participation, identification, and school membership. Furthermore, to be engaged students “must develop connections with others in their educational environments and become active members in the school community” (p. 474). They further describe engagement in school as a continuum where, at one end, students have sporadic attendance and lack active involvement in their learning and, at the other end, students have positive relationships in the learning community and are consistent learners with regular attendance. The use of the continuum emphasizes that engagement cannot be attained through attendance alone and that increased attendance does not necessarily increase school completion rates.

Dunleavy and Milton (2010) describe engagement as a multi-dimensional concept that includes social, academic, and intellectual connections. Social engagement refers to students’ participation in school life while academic engagement refers to participating in the requirements
necessary for school success. Intellectual engagement is the depth to which students are invested in their learning. Dunleavy and Milton (2010) suggest that by considering each of the three parts of engagement, separately and as a whole, educators can transform schools so that more students will be effective learners.

In describing student engagement, researchers emphasize building and maintaining positive relationships with adults as a critical component. Some research indicates, however, that students’ positive relationships with school adults may not be enough to overcome the factors outside the school community that can have negative impacts on school completion. In their study, Wirth-Bond, Coyne, and Adams (1991) hypothesized that high-risk students would be less likely to drop out if they could identify a school staff member as a significant other from among the school staff. However, they found that their hypothesis was not supported by the data collected. They surveyed students who were in a Vocational Special Needs program. Entrance requirements to the program required all of the students to meet criteria for being at-risk of dropping out. The results of their study found that, although the overall dropout number was low, the students that did leave school prematurely could identify a significant other and that they had a sense of belonging when they were in the program. Wirth-Bond et al. (1991) concluded that further studies would have to control for external risk factors.

**School Climate**

A review of the literature points to school climate as an important factor in school achievement for all students. Dewitt and Slade (2014) list four critical elements of school climate: engagement, empowerment and autonomy, inclusivity and equity, and environment. They state that “improving the climate of your school and classroom improves teaching and learning, improves student growth and development, and improves the well-being of everyone at
Moreover, addressing school climate should be an ongoing pedagogical practice. A further description of school climate adds that an important aspect is the effect it has on perceptions of safety and connectedness (Cohen & Geier, 2010). The importance of relationships between students and school staff is a vital component of school climate. Academic achievement is better when there is a positive relationship between students and school personnel, especially teachers (Niebuhr & Niebuhr, 1999). Positive relationships are characterized as being supportive and respectful and can increase engagement, attendance, and address problem behavior. Additionally, having a support network of adults at school could be of particular importance to students who live in low-income families by providing extra support when the family situation is under stress (Hopson & Lee, 2011).

In a study of the effects of school climate on at-risk students living in areas with high poverty, Hopson and Lee (2011) found that the perception of school climate did not differ based on the students’ family income. In other words, students from low-income families did not report a sense of more or less support from school staff than students from higher family income levels. They did, however, find some differences related to students’ family income level and student behavior. The results of the study revealed that students who indicated a sense of poor school climate had more behavioral issues if they were from low-income families than those from average-income families who also reported a negative school climate. Conversely, students from any income level who reported a positive school climate had better overall behavior. They suggested that this shows school climate plays a more important role in students’ behavior if the climate is positive.

Hopson and Lee (2011) found that a positive school climate did not help to manage the negative relationship between academic achievement and poverty. They postulated that the
effects of perceived school climate are not as strong as the effects of poverty on students’ ability to be academically successful. The final conclusions to the study indicated that school climate has more impact on students’ behavior than it does on academic success.

Research points to the need to include perceptions of school climate from the point of view of students and adults within the system. One study suggests that school climate is perceived differently by students than it may be by their teachers (Conderman, Walker, Neto, & Kackar-Cam, 2013). The purpose of the research was to add a mixed-methods study to support previous studies. The researchers used observations, focus groups, and surveys to collect data. Notable differences between teachers’ and students’ perceptions included how they determined school climate. While students based their perceptions on school-level factors, teachers tended to base their perceptions on classroom-level factors. Teachers perceived that the quality of academic instruction was higher than their students’ perceptions. Classes that had more hands-on opportunities, were challenging, and had reasonable expectations were perceived by the students as enhancing school climate. Students suggested that extra-curricular activities that were highly structured by teachers did not help them develop spontaneous peer groups, contrary to teachers’ beliefs. Overall, students tended to think of school climate in a singular manner, seeing it as either positive or negative regardless of exceptions. Teachers had a more multi-dimensional way of evaluating school climate, comparing and contrasting academic, social, and emotional components. The study also highlighted that students’ perceptions of their schools’ climate declined between grades six and eight. In the study’s conclusion, the researchers echo DewWitt and Slade’s (2014) belief that assessing school culture should be done periodically. They add, based on the findings of such assessments, that further action within a school should be a collaborative effort between school staff and students. They maintain that “developing and
implementing a systematic plan for reaching agreed-on goals helps create a learning environment that maximizes student and faculty engagement, promotes safety, and creates an overall positive school experience” (Conderman et al., 2013, p. 188).

Another study reiterated that differences between students’ and teachers’ perceptions about the same learning environment can be substantial (Konings, Seidel, Brand-Gruwel, von Merrienboer, & Jeroen, 2014). The results of the study showed that students who had the greatest difference in the perception of their learning environment from their teachers were more likely to be described as exhibiting behaviors that could lead to poor school performance. Additional evidence in their study showed that at-risk students experienced less friction in their relationships with their teachers when paired with teachers who were classified as adaptive rather than idealistic. Konings, Seidel, Brand-Gruwel, von Merrienboer, and Jeroen (2014) concluded that the implications of their study indicated that asking for and considering students’ perceptions of their learning environment could prevent “losing students during their school careers” (p. 27). They contend that perception differences can affect student behavior, thus predicting the effectiveness of a learning environment. The recommendations of the study repeated the recommendations of an earlier study (Conderman et al., 2013) suggest using perceptions of all stakeholders to inform instructional practices.

**Educator Perceptions of At-risk Students**

Exploring educators’ perceptions regarding the needs of their at-risk students and their roles and responsibilities has the potential to reveal how these perceptions can affect the types of interventions preferred by teachers. Jordan, Kircaali-Iftar, and Diamond (2006) rated teachers’ beliefs about working with at-risk students on a continuum of their perspectives. At one end of the scale, teachers were classified as responding to the needs of their at-risk students in a
restorative manner and at the other end, in a preventive manner. They proposed that the differing belief systems may be a factor in teachers’ perceptions of their role in working with at-risk students. Jordan et al. (2006) went on to further hypothesize that teachers’ assumptions about their responsibilities in responding to their at-risk students needs were related to their sense of self-efficacy. It is important to note that, for the purpose of their study, at-risk students included students already designated as having special needs and did not focus specifically on students determined as at-risk of dropping out. After analyzing the results of their survey of teachers, the researchers found that those who tended to answer questions toward the restorative end of the spectrum assumed that problems with school achievement resided with the student and that they preferred a pull-out system of interventions. On the other hand, teachers whose responses tended toward the preventive end of the scale preferred to work in consultation with specialist teachers to support their at-risk students’ needs within their classroom (Jordan et al., 2006).

The study also confirmed that teachers’ perceptions of their own self-efficacy was related to teachers being characterized as restorative or preventive in their practices in working with at-risk students (Jordan et al., 2006). Teachers who indicated that they were confident in their abilities to create conditions in their classroom so that positive outcomes were more likely for their at-risk students were rated as having a preventive belief system. Teachers characterized as having a restorative belief system tended to see factors such as the students’ families as having a greater influence on their at-risk students than they, as teachers, did. The researchers did not make any conclusions about how teachers are characterized is related to what they see as their responsibilities in working with their at-risk students but suggested that further studies could investigate the idea (Jordan et al., 2006).
A Response to Intervention Model

One of the most obvious indicators that a student may not complete school is a poor attendance pattern. To address this issue Kearney and Graczyk (2013) suggest using a Response to Intervention (RtI) model. Their theoretical paper outlines, in detail, the RtI model and how it could be applied in the school setting before students completely drop out. RtI models are widely used, with some variations, to address learning and behavioral issues in all grade levels. The format uses a three-tiered approach. Tier one includes universal interventions that are directed towards all students. Tier two involves targeted intervention for students who are at-risk in some way, and tier three interventions are for students with severe problems (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013).

A key component of the RtI model is regular progress monitoring to facilitate ongoing identification of at-risk learners and their level of need for intervention. The frequency of tracking increases from tier one to tier three. Essential components to using this as a model of intervention for students with attendance issues is early identification, progress monitoring, functional behavioral assessment, procedures, protocols, and a team-based approach.

Universal interventions at the tier one level address issues of school climate. Kearney and Graczyk (2013) postulate that whole-school interventions that address school climate can be especially relevant in the intermediate and secondary grades in promoting school attendance. School climate issues include using a Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support model (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013). Safety-oriented strategies, such as bullying and violence prevention programs used in conjunction with increased supervision, counselling, and mentoring could lead to a learning environment where students feel safe. School-based mental health services such as programs to address substance abuse, conflict resolution, sex education, and pro-
social skills are programs that could be specifically targeted toward middle and secondary school students. Using strategies to encourage parental involvement is another whole-school intervention in tier one. “Strategies to boost parental involvement involve school, family, and community partnerships” (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013, p. 8). The strategies would help to address issues of language barriers, cultural differences, and home-school communication. Another important part of intervention at this level is monitoring students as they transition from one school to another. Appropriate orientation activities could ease anxiety about changing schools (Kearney & Graczyk, 2013).

Once students are identified as being at risk in terms of their attendance patterns, tier two interventions would be put into place. The goals at this level are to stabilize attendance and create clear strategies to address the perceived obstacles to regular attendance. The obstacles may involve anxiety, mental health issues, deficits in academic achievement or ability, safety concerns such as bullying, home routines, and family issues. Strategies to reach attendance goals include parental involvement, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, peer mentoring, building relationships that foster parent involvement, and student engagement. Regular monitoring of students at this level is imperative and recommended to occur daily to weekly (Kearny & Graczyk, 2013).

In Kearny and Graczyk’s (2013) proposed RtI model, tier three involves substantially expanded tier two approaches. At this level, students with serious absenteeism would be best served by a support team of professionals, both school and community-based, and would include family involvement. Individualized scheduling and adapted or modified course work may be necessary for students identified as needing tier three intervention. Alternate education in some form may be considered. As well, student attendance and progress would be monitored on a
daily basis. Kearney and Graczyk (2013) state that the interventions and assessments they recommend is a “blueprint” and that the needs of the individual students, schools, and communities must be considered.

A program called “Diplomas Now School Transformational Model” provides an example of an RtI program. The program is designed to implement interventions to increase graduation rates by making the middle school environment more supportive and engaging. As is common to most RtI models, the program uses universal interventions at the tier one level to improve classroom instruction and school climate. At the tier two level, students who are still struggling may have frequent check-ins from an adult in the school and parents are immediately informed of any absences. Tier three interventions are more intense and may include community involvement. Davis, Herzog and Legters (2013) set out to examine how Diplomas Now schools monitor the implementation of interventions and the early warning indicators (EWIs) for students at risk of dropping out. This qualitative study collected data through observations and interviews with EWI response teams. Overall, the researchers indicated that the Diplomas Now program showed promise. Participants reported that using a list of early warning indicators helped to identify at-risk students who may have previously gone unnoticed. As with most pilot programs, however, initiating and maintaining the interventions proved to have multiple challenges. Most of them were organizational in nature due to time constraints such as finding time for teams to meet. There were also issues related to following up on the recommended interventions, again, due to busy workloads and time shortage issues (Davis et al., 2013)

Caution should be exercised, however, when implementing any multileveled program to ensure that there is not a rigid expectation that students must spend a predetermined amount of time in any one tier. Doing so may mean some students might have to wait too long to access
more intensive interventions while other students may remain at a level too intense for their needs (Fuchs, Fuchs & Compton, 2012).

**Alternative Education Programs**

In a meta-analysis of targeted truancy and dropout programs, Kilma et al. (2009) found that in-house alternative programs could be effective. They emphasized the difference between alternative education programs and alternative schools. The main distinction is that alternative education programs take place within a traditional school while alternative schools are housed in facilities that are completely separate from conventional middle and high schools. Their study investigated four outcomes: dropout, presence at school, achievement, and graduation. In-school alternative programs that offered smaller class sizes, individualized instruction, and differentiated instruction models and materials showed a positive effect in all four areas of expected outcomes. Conversely, off-site alternative programs had no positive outcomes. In particular, the most effective programs used a Career Academy model. “They combine an academic and technical curriculum around a career theme (which differs based on local interest). Additionally, they offer work-based learning through partnerships with community employers” (Kilma et al., 2009, p. 3).

Kilma et al. (2009) noted that it is not clear why alternative schools did not show positive outcomes but they speculated that the off-site programs might have set students up to have more negative peer influences while on-site programs offer students the opportunity to have a more diverse peer group. They also pondered the possibility that students’ enrollment in alternative schools may not have been their choice, thus having an impact on their motivation to stay in school.
Strength-based Approaches and Resiliency Theory

Two models with potential to address school completion are strength-based programming and resiliency theory. Prince-Embry (2008) stated that resiliency has been a topic of study for at least 50 years. Developmental theorists explored the notion that some people are able to overcome adversity while others are not. This lead researchers to identify individual and environmental factors that “appeared to serve as protective or mitigating variables to the impact of adversity” (Price-Embry, 2008, p. 4). Price-Embry conceded that the abundance and complex nature of the research about resiliency could make it difficult to put the theory into practical applications. Adding to the complexity is that, while a set of common factors has been determined, resiliency is unique to each individual and their specific situation. Nevertheless, she proposed that there are opportunities to use the theory in the school setting to target interventions for at-risk students. Price-Embry (2008) noted that school personnel, such as school psychologists, have opportunities to assess and observe individuals to determine what resilient strengths and weaknesses they have. The observations would then guide individualized and whole-class interventions designed to build resiliency.

A connection between resiliency theory and strength-based programs and interventions can be made. “Resiliency theory provides a conceptual framework for considering a strengths-based approach to understanding child and adolescent development and informing intervention design” (Zimmerman, 2013, p. 381). A strength-based approach to intervention involves enhancing individual assets such as self-esteem and self-efficacy by providing opportunities to gain knowledge and skills, build confidence, and form relationships with adults. Facilitating acquisition of these assets builds resiliency (Zimmerman, 2013).
Crooks et al. (2009) provide examples of strength-based interventions. The school-based programs were specifically targeted to increase engagement in First Nations youth. They suggested that youth engagement is enhanced by a strength-based approach and further went on to describe it as a protective, resiliency factor that could, among other things, reduce dropout rates. The programs they developed and trialed included a peer-mentoring program, a leadership course, and a transition activity for students moving from elementary to secondary school. Their initial findings showed a positive outcome in youth engagement as well as the development of partnerships between educators and community members.

Past and current literature reveals that researchers agree on the severity and complexity of the issue of student dropout. While much has been written on the subject, there appears to be a gap in research regarding dropout recovery (Zammit & Anderson-Ketchmark, 2011). This may be because evaluations of the programs and interventions have not been rigorous (Kilma et al., 2009). There is a further gap in research regarding effective interventions in the intermediate years. This is significant given the long lead up to students disengaging completely from school. “Dropout prevention efforts cannot wait until high school. By then, far too many students have already dropped out, figuratively, if not yet literally” (Ziomek-Daigle & Andrews, 2009, p. 59). More research and rigorous evaluations need to be done to determine effective school practices and interventions in the intermediate years to facilitate school completion.
Chapter Three: Procedures and Methods

Description of the Research Design

The purpose of this study was to investigate intervention strategies for improving school completion rates. The goals were to explore practices and programs that could improve school completion rates beginning in the intermediate years and to investigate teacher, counsellor, and administrator perceptions regarding their role in facilitating school completion for their at-risk students in grade seven, eight, and nine. For this study a mixed methods, paper-based survey was designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. Further qualitative data were collected through individual interviews. The participants all worked in School District #79 (Cowichan Valley) on Vancouver Island in schools that had students in grades seven, eight, or nine. Participation was voluntary for both the survey (Appendix A) and the interviews; the surveys were anonymous. The qualitative data collected from the interviews and the open-ended questions on the survey were coded to look for themes. This is a common way to look at data that has been collected for the purpose of attaining a sense of culture in a school. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the quantitative data collected from the Likert scale portion of the surveys. Finally, triangulation was used to compare the results acquired from both of the instruments used.

Description of the Sample

The population chosen for this study represented a convenience sampling of teachers, counsellors, and administrators in this researcher’s school as well as from six elementary schools that feed into the high school. All of the schools are located in School District #79 (Cowichan Valley) on Vancouver Island, British Columbia.
This researcher’s school had a total population of 1520 students in grades eight to twelve on September 30, 2015. The two principals, three vice-principals, and 27 grade eight and nine teachers were invited to participate from the high school. There were four counsellors who worked in the school, two of whom did not work with grade eight or nine students, and this researcher, therefore only one secondary counsellor was invited to participate. At the elementary schools, there were seven principals and vice-principals, 19 teachers, and four itinerant counsellors who worked with grade seven students and all of them were asked to participate. In total, 31 people out of 63 responded to the survey (Appendix A) and 16 to the invitation to have an interview with the researcher (Appendix B). Seven of the sixteen were chosen to be interviewed and consisted of two administrators, one counsellor, and four teachers. The choices were made to ensure data collection that was representative of the demographics, by primary role, initially invited to participate.

Basic demographic information collected from the surveys indicated a range in years of experience, caseload, and job assignments. This sample was chosen because of the researcher’s desire to understand the participants’ practices and perceptions of their roles in facilitating school completion for their at-risk students. It was thought that this would lead to a greater understanding of the culture of this researcher’s school with the purpose of using the information to develop a tiered intervention strategy at the school that could possibly lead to increased school completion rates for at-risk students. This endeavor is within the researcher’s locus of control given the scope of her role as Learning Services Team leader.

The schools’ students represent a wide socioeconomic group because the elementary schools and the secondary school in the sample represent all of the schools within the community. The other schools in the district are located in other communities. At the time of the
study, 9.5% of the student population held a Ministry of Education special needs designation, 30% were of First Nations or Metis ancestry, and 16% were registered in the French Immersion Program. In the previous school year, 35% of the student population was minimally meeting or not yet meeting the learning outcomes in two or more of their five core subjects (C. Coleman, personal communication, October 19, 2015).

**Description of the Instruments Used**

Two instruments were used in this study to collect data. Quantitative and qualitative data were gathered by means of a survey (Appendix A). Before filling out the survey, participants were asked to give basic demographic information regarding their primary role, the length of time that they had been in the field of education, and where they had spent the majority of their career. These questions were included to give the researcher context for each participant and to be able to compare responses of each demographic grouping. Given that the sample size was small and that this researcher was part of the same staff as many of the participants, care was taken to make sure the demographic information was not specific enough to easily identify any participants. Three key terms, school completion, at-risk learners and interventions, were defined so that the participants would understand the context in which they were being used in the questions that followed.

The survey consisted of fourteen statements accompanied by a five-point Likert scale through which quantitative data were collected. Each question was crafted to elicit a response related the purpose of the study which was to find out about the perceptions of teachers, counsellors, and administrators regarding their practices and roles in facilitating school completion for at-risk students. At the end of the survey, four open-ended questions were asked to give participants a chance to expand on some of the questions asked on the quantitative part of
the survey in an effort to provide additional data that could provide a deeper understanding of the participants’ perceptions.

Additional qualitative data were gathered during individual interviews. The 20 questions (Appendix C) were designed to provide a structured framework for the interviews so that the same questions would be posed to each participant and to keep the interviewer focused on the purpose of the study. The questions paralleled the statements used for the open-ended questions and the Likert scale portion of the questionnaire in an effort to employ triangulation when analyzing the data. All of the interview participants consented to being recorded using an iPad equipped with voice recognition software to capture verbatim responses. Survey and interview questions were loosely based on the work of Stanovich and Jordan (1998) and Jordan et al. (2006) from their empirical studies on teachers’ and principals’ beliefs about inclusive education and at-risk students.

**Explanation of the Procedures Followed**

After creating the instruments to be used in this study and obtaining approval from both the Vancouver Island University Ethics Board and School District #79 (Cowichan Valley), seven principals were contacted by telephone (Appendix D) in order to obtain consent to administer the survey in their schools and to arrange a time for distribution. The researcher spoke directly with the principal of her own school. Survey packages were taken to teacher contacts at each of the elementary schools by the researcher during the month of October, 2015. All teacher contacts were chosen because they held Master’s degrees leading the researcher to believe that they would understand the confidential nature of anonymous surveys. Included in the packages were Informed Letters of Consent (Appendix E), and invitations to participate in an interview with the researcher (Appendix B). A collection envelope was also included in the package. The teacher
contacts distributed the packages into the participants’ school mailboxes or gave them directly to the participants. The researcher asked the teacher contacts to place the collection envelope in the main office. The participants were asked to return the surveys and any completed invitations to participate in an interview to the collection envelope by November 30, 2015. The collection envelopes were returned by each of the teacher contacts by mail to a research assistant at the researcher’s own school. The research assistant sorted them into piles according to the role of the participant (administrator, counsellor, or teacher) and then put each pile in random order before giving them to the researcher to reduce the possibility of the researcher ascertaining from where the surveys originated. No names were on the surveys to ensure anonymity. Names and contact information was provided on a separate form (Appendix B) for those interested in participating in an interview.

After receiving the completed Invitations to Interview (Appendix B), participants were chosen based on their primary role in their school. The sample was meant to approximate similar ratios to those invited to participate. In cases where more volunteers than needed had responded, participants were randomly selected by the research assistant. Two administrators were chosen, one elementary and one secondary. One elementary school counsellor responded and was, therefore, chosen. Four teachers from various school were chosen, one of them indicating that they were a specialist teacher. Participants chosen to interview were then contacted by telephone to set up a time and location of their choice to be interviewed by the researcher. Volunteers not chosen were contacted via email and thanked for their offer to participate. The interviews were completed throughout the months of January and February of 2016. All participants were given two Informed Letters of Consent – Interview (Appendix F) to sign and instructed to retain one for their records. On the Informed Letter of Consent (Appendix F), all participants agreed to
allow the researcher to record their interviews. The same 20 questions (Appendix C) were asked of each interview participant and the researcher followed the Research Protocol (Appendix G). The average length of time for the interviews was 46 minutes.

The method for distribution and collection for the surveys and interviews was chosen to ensure that participants did not feel any pressure to participate by the researcher or their administrators. Once received by the researcher, the surveys and interview consent forms were stored in a locked filing cabinet at the researcher’s home. Data from both instruments were stored on the researchers personal, password secured computer and iPad.

**Discussion of Validity**

No attempts were made to ensure external validity in this study given its purpose of examining the researcher’s own colleagues’ perspectives on working with at-risk students in order to gain insights into the researcher’s staff culture. This insight was thought to be useful in determining how to proceed with implementing new strategies within the school that could potentially increase school completion rates. To improve the internal validity of this study, the instruments used were field tested in other schools within the same school district. Teachers, counsellors, and administrators were consulted regarding the clarity of the questions being asked and to see if they would elicit the intended types of responses. The timing of the survey distribution and the interviews was chosen carefully so as not to coincide with any formal reporting periods, parent teacher interviews, school start up, or holiday celebrations.

While the sample was one of convenience, it was important to the researcher to invite all of the schools’ teachers, administrators, and counsellors to participate in order to gain some level of internal validity. The participants were informed of the purpose of the study and given assurance that their answers would be anonymous; no names were put on the surveys and the
researcher did not refer to interview participants by name in any data analysis. It was decided to include both a Likert scale and some open-ended questions on the survey so that there would be qualitative and quantitative data. Demographic information was collected as part of the survey to give a clear context for others who might wish to examine the data for transferability purposes. The choice to conduct interviews as well as collect surveys was made to cross check data by comparing similar questions asked in different ways. It was also thought that the interview questions could provide deeper insight into the perceptions of the participants’ roles in facilitating school completion for their at-risk students.

Analysis Techniques

A tally of the survey question responses, generated by Microsoft Excel software, was used to analyze the quantitative data gathered from the survey. Stacked bar charts were created from the data to compare percentages of the response categories (strongly agree, agree, unsure, disagree, strongly disagree). Additional stacked bar charts, indicating demographic information, were generated where it was determined that the responses were notably different depending on the respondents’ primary role in the school.

The qualitative data collected in the open-ended portion of the survey and from the individual interviews were coded to assist in looking for emergent themes related to the research questions. The themes were cross-checked with the quantitative data to extend the analysis. Some direct quotes from the surveys were used as a way of representing typical responses. All of the data were examined to determine if the key research questions had been answered and how it compared to current and past literature.
Chapter Four: Findings and Results

This researcher sought to answer the following questions: *What are educators’ perceptions of their current practices and of their current roles in facilitating school completion for their at-risk learners?* *What are the perceived barriers preventing implementation of new strategies and programs?* These questions were thought to have the potential to provide information to support the purpose of the study which was to investigate intervention strategies for improving school completion rates. More specifically, the goals of the study were to explore practices and programs that would best serve students in grades seven to nine, and to investigate teacher, counsellor, and administrator perceptions regarding their role in facilitating school completion for their at-risk students in the intermediate years. Data gathered is intended to be used by this researcher and shared with school leaders, providing information that could guide practices intended to address the needs of students while in their intermediate years who are at risk of not completing school.

The sample chosen was one of convenience in an attempt to gather data from the researcher’s local context. In October 2015, 63 surveys (Appendix A) were sent out to teachers, counsellors, and administrators in a family of seven schools in School District #79 (Cowichan Valley). The schools included a grade eight to twelve secondary school and six elementary schools that feed into it. Surveys were distributed only to participants who worked directly with students in grades seven, eight, and nine. The survey consisted of 14 statements to be rated on a Likert scale and four open-ended questions. Included in the survey package was an invitation to participate in an individual interview (Appendix B). By the end of December 2015, 31 surveys had been returned yielding a 49.2% return rate. Sixteen participants, 51.6%, responded to the
invitation to participate in an interview and the researcher chose seven of the volunteers to interview. Interviews took place in January and February 2016.

Demographic information was solicited at the beginning of the survey to find out the primary roles, years of experience, and where the respondents had spent the majority of their careers. The results indicate that the respondents were representative of the overall sample group to whom surveys were sent. 74.2% of the respondents were teachers; 73% of the surveys sent out were to teachers. 6.4% of the respondents were counsellors; 8% of the surveys were sent out to counsellors, and, 19.4% of the respondents were principals or vice principals; 19% of the surveys sent out were to principals and vice principals. When indicating their years of experience in the field of education, 6% of the respondents said that they have had zero to 10 years, 55% had 11 to 20 years, and 39% had more than 20 years of experience. Sixty-eight percent of the respondents reported that they had spent the majority of their career in School District #79 (Cowichan Valley) with 52% of the total respondents working in multiple schools while 16% had just worked in their current school. Twenty-nine percent of the respondents reported that they had worked in multiple districts and one person chose not to answer the question.

When asked how many students they were teaching or were on their caseload, the answers ranged from zero to 1500. Classroom teachers indicated that they were teaching between 27 and 200 students during the course of the 2015-16 school year while specialist teachers’ caseloads had a range of 16 to 200 students. The caseload of the counsellors had a range of 72 to 100 students. The largest caseload was specified by a principal who has 1500 students in his school, followed by one at 250, one at 100, and one at 60. It is unclear why two principals indicated that they had zero students in their school.
Fourteen statements, accompanied by a five-point Likert scale, made up the first part of the survey. Each point indicated a level of agreement or disagreement to the statements; one signified strongly disagree, two signified disagree, three signified unsure, four signified agree, and five signified strongly agree. The statements were designed to gain information regarding the participants’ perceptions about commonly used strategies for at-risk students, the availability of resources, and their awareness of the British Columbia Graduation Program.

The total frequency response for the 14 Likert scale survey statements is presented in the form of percentages in Table 4.1. As indicated on Table 4.1, the range in frequency was 0% to 71%. Nine of the statements had zero percent for at least one of the Likert scale categories. One or more participants chose not to respond to nine of the 14 statements.

The majority, 93.5%, of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that it is important for them to know which students are at risk before they enter their classroom or school. Furthermore, 76.7% agreed or strongly agreed that the students’ files gave them important information about their at-risk students’ needs, while 13.3% were unsure. The remaining 10% of the participants disagreed or strongly disagreed that the information in the students’ files contained important information. When asked to respond to the statement regarding their ability to predict which of their students was at risk of not completing school, 71% agreed and an additional 12.9% strongly agreed. When asked if it is important to inform the parents of their concerns that a student might not complete school, 62.1% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed, while 17.2% were unsure. In addition, 20.7% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.
Table 4.1  
Total Frequency Response for 14 Likert Scale Survey Statements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree (1)</th>
<th>Disagree (2)</th>
<th>Unsure (3)</th>
<th>Agree (4)</th>
<th>Strongly Agree (5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is important to me to be aware of which students are at risk before they enter my class/school.</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>54.8%</td>
<td>38.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can predict which students in my class/school are at-risk of not completing school.</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I find that the students’ files give me important information about my at-risk students’ needs.</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have strategies to us for my at-risk students.</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think it is important that all at-risk students have an IEP.</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>38.7%</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think it is important to adapt and/or modify my programs for my at-risk students even if they don’t have an IEP.</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>58.6%</td>
<td>37.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing adapted or modified assignments will embarrass my at-risk students.</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing adapted or modified assignments can improve my at-risk students’ attitudes toward learning.</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is important to inform the parents of my at-risk students of my concerns that they will not complete school.</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
<td>34.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are adequate resources in my school for my at-risk students.</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know how to refer students to the school’s Learning Services Team/School-Based Team.</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>38.7%</td>
<td>58.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know which programs are available At grades 10-12 that will lead to an Evergreen Certificate.</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am aware of the criteria for obtaining an Evergreen and Dogwood Certificate.</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers, counsellors and administrators have an important role in facilitating school completion for at-risk students.</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>32.3%</td>
<td>61.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. aN=30 bN=29 cN=30 dN=20 eN=30 fN=30 gN=30 hN=30 N=31
Only 6.4% of the participants indicated that they did not have strategies for their at-risk students or were unsure. There were two statements regarding IEP’s on the survey. In response, 38.7% of the participants disagreed that all at-risk students should have an IEP, while 25.8% were unsure; additionally, 35.5% agreed or strongly agreed. However, the majority, 96%, of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that it is important to adapt or modify their program for their at-risk students even if they did not have an IEP in place. Two of the statements elicited responses from the participants regarding their perceptions of the effects of providing adapted or modified work for their students. In total, 76.7% agreed or strongly agreed that it could improve their at-risk students attitude toward learning, however, 33.3% were unsure if providing adapted or modified work would embarrass their students.

Most of the participants, 96.8%, agreed or strongly agreed that they knew how to refer students to their Learning Services or School-based Teams. Ten percent of the participants were unsure if there were adequate resources in their school for at-risk students while 63.3% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. The results of the survey tally showed a diversity in the responses to the two questions regarding the BC Ministry of Education Graduation Program.

When indicating their awareness of the criteria for obtaining a BC Dogwood or Evergreen Certificate, 26.7% of the participants were unsure, 26.7% disagreed that they knew the criteria and 30% agreed. Similarly, 26.7% of the participants were unsure which programs lead to an Evergreen Certificate; 40% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they knew, while 33.3% agreed or strongly agreed that they knew. Only two participants, 6.5%, indicated that they were unsure that teachers, counsellors and, administrators have an important role in facilitating school completion for at-risk students. The remaining 93.6% agreed or strongly agreed to the statement.
Five of the survey questions elicited responses that had notable differences between the participants based on their primary role in their school. Figure 4.1 displays the responses to the statement regarding the importance of at-risk students having an IEP. 53.4% of the teachers agreed or strongly agreed that it is important that all at-risk students have an IEP, while 25% of the specialists agreed and 16.7% of the administrators agreed. Neither of the counsellors agreed or strongly agreed.

![Figure 4.1](image)

*Figure 4.1 Frequency Response by Primary Role to Likert Survey Statement: I think it is important that all at-risk students have an IEP.*

When asked if they thought that providing adapted or modified assignments would embarrass their at-risk students, administrators, counsellors, and specialist teachers all disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, however, 66.7% of the teachers were unsure. Figure 4.2 displays the responses by primary role in the school to the statement: Providing adapted or modified assignments will embarrass my at-risk students.
Figure 4.2 Frequency Response by Primary Role to Likert Survey Statement: Providing adapted and modified assignments will embarrass my at-risk students.

The responses to the statement regarding available resources were inconsistent among the participants based on their primary role. Figure 4.3 displays the responses to the statement: "There are adequate resources in my school for my at-risk students." None of the counsellors, 4.3% of the specialists, and 20% of the teachers agreed or strongly agreed to the statement while 66.7% of the administrators agreed or strongly agreed.

Figure 4.3 Frequency Response by Primary Role to Likert Survey Statement: There are adequate resources at my school for my at-risk students.
There was also a notable variance between the participants based on their primary roles in response to the two questions related to BC Evergreen and Dogwood criteria and programs. A majority, 73.3%, of the teachers were unsure, disagreed or strongly disagreed that they knew the criteria for obtaining Evergreen and Dogwood Certificates compared with 50% of the specialists and counsellors, and 40% of the administrators. Similarly, 78.5% of the teachers and specialists were unsure, disagreed or disagreed strongly to the statement suggesting they knew which programs are available in grades 10-12 that lead to an Evergreen Certificate compared with 50% of the counsellors and administrators. Figure 4.4 displays the responses based on primary role to the statement: I am aware of the criteria for obtaining Evergreen and Dogwood Certificates. Figure 4.5 displays the responses based on primary role to the statement: I know which programs are available at grades 10-12 that will lead to an Evergreen Certificate.

*Figure 4.4 Frequency Response by Primary Role to Likert Survey Statement: I am aware of the criteria for obtaining Evergreen and Dogwood Certificates.*
The second portion of the survey (Appendix A) consisted of four open-ended questions. Two of the questions related to participants’ current practices and their roles in facilitating school completion for their at-risk students. The remaining two related to additional supports that participants thought would be useful in working with their at-risk students and the barriers they perceived to be preventing their attainment.

In response to the first question, which asked participants what current practices they used in their classroom or school that are most effective for at-risk students, three main themes emerged: relationship building, differentiated learning, and small group instruction. Participants cited that establishing a relationship with their students and their families was important and could be done by creating a welcoming environment, getting to know family history, developing cultural awareness, and engaging and maintain a home-school connection. One participant stated, “Making connections, establishing relationships so students know they have support, and are not alone.”

![Figure 4.5 Frequency Response by Primary Role to Likert Survey Statement: I know which programs are available at grades 10-12 that will lead to an Evergreen Certificate.](image)
The practice of differentiated instruction also emerged as a theme in answer to the first question. Examples of differentiating learning cited as effective for working with at-risk students included providing adapted and modified assignments, access to readers and scribes, and being flexible about how students show their learning. As well, creating IEP’s, Student Learning Plans and customizing time tables to individualize the learning experience came up as valuable ways to support at-risk students. A third theme, small group instruction, was apparent although not mentioned as often as the first two. Math and reading groups, small peer groupings, and one-to-one instruction were mentioned as effective strategies for at-risk students.

In response to being asked about their role in facilitating school completion for their grade seven, eight, and nine at-risk students, three strong themes were apparent. The first, providing emotional support, elicited responses such as building relationships and connecting with students to help them recognize their strengths, find their passion for learning and giving them something to look forward to in the future. Building self-esteem, self-regulation skills and connections with peers, and showing students how to seek support were also cited as ways of supporting students’ emotional well-being. One participant wrote,

“I believe my biggest role is to provide a safe environment for all my learners. It’s important for at-risk students to be able to make mistakes and know they will be supported. I try to move them forward from where they are and try to give opportunities for success.”

The second theme that arose, in answer to perceived roles in facilitating school completion, was acting as an advocate for at-risk students. Participants stated that this could be achieved by advocating for their students and facilitating liaisons between the school and
parents, outside agencies, Aboriginal support teams, counsellors, other teachers, and acting as case-managers.

Program and academic development emerged as the third theme in the participants’ responses regarding their role in school completion. Principals, vice principals, and counsellors noted supporting teachers and educational assistants in programming and appropriate staff allocation, supporting transitions between schools, increasing cultural awareness, and building inclusive and fun programs. Classroom and specialty teachers mentioned accessing resources to support learning, adapting programs, building critical and academic thinking, and increasing awareness and importance of graduating as ways to support students to stay in school through to school completion. One respondent, an administrator, retorted, “School completion? We are more concerned with grade level completion. We need to ensure that when they leave us they still have a passion for learning and school so that they can carry that with them to complete school.” Another administrator stated, “We need to help them feel like it is worthwhile staying in school and finding their own path to grad. It does not have to be a one-size-fits-all.”

The question about what additional supports were perceived to be needed for their at-risk learners produced responses that could be categorized into four themes, two major and two minor. The first major theme was more staffing, specifically specialty and support staff. Participants stated a need for more counsellors, learning assistance teachers, Aboriginal and general support staff, and educational assistants in order to better support the needs of their at-risk students. The second major theme to emerge was more targeted programs for students. These programs could further be divided into academic and non-academic options. Academic interventions mentioned were targeted programs to improve reading, math, writing, speech, and language. Opportunities for students to learn through hands-on experiences and vocational
programs were offered as ways to improve academic learning both in and outside of the classroom. In addition, smaller sized classes offering programs such as English Language Learning, PACE programs and TLC academics were named. Non-academic programs were also thought to have the potential to provide additional supports to at-risk students. Ideas proposed included breakfast and lunch programs, intramurals, after-school activities, and opportunities for students to discover their passions.

The need for more time emerged as one of two minor themes. Participants stated that extra time should be provided to set up and implement new programs, and to write IEP’s and Student Learning Plans. More time, they thought, could increase teacher collaboration and facilitate speaking to students’ previous, concurrent, and future teachers. An example from one of the teachers who responded was, “time to adequately differentiate lesson/unit plans to more fully meet the diversity of learner needs.” The second minor theme that surfaced was a need for interagency involvement. They stated a need to have more access to medical and mental health care providers, drug and alcohol counsellors, and Ministry of Family Development representatives as additional supports for their at-risk students.

The fourth short-answer question on the survey asked participants what factors they perceived were preventing additional supports or programs from being implemented in their schools aside from lack of adequate funding. Two strong themes were apparent: school structure and school culture. The barriers perceived to be related to school structure included inflexible block schedules, physical space constraints within the school building, lack of time for collaboration, and class size and composition. Funding formulas and hiring practices set out by unions and collective agreements were stated as structural barriers to providing additional supports for at-risk students. An example of the type of barrier that union hiring practices can
produce was stated by a classroom teacher, “Support teachers are often in part-time positions and can be relatively new and inexperienced (eg: a .4 literacy teacher funded by the Ed Fund will be a newer teacher almost certainly).” Another respondent, an administrator, specified, “Collective agreements restrict our ability to try different options of time, size of group, days/blocks, outside the bookends etc. At-risk learners do not always fit the four block schedule.”

The second clear theme related to perceived barriers preventing additional supports and program implementation was staff culture. Barriers suggested included a dominance of negative staff members, cultural differences, fear of streaming, fear of taking risks, fear of failure, resistance to change, fixed mindsets, and a sense of hopelessness. One of the administrators who responded included several of these perceived barriers in her answer, “Being overwhelmed by the day to day classroom challenges can leave little time to take initiative. Domination, at times, of naysayers who shut down open conversations. Knowledge that school is only five hours of a day, and the other 19 hours are not influences by educators. Leadership capacity of self to implement change.” Another respondent, also an administrator, eluded to school culture, “The feeling that we are doing a good job, we can’t possibly do better and why should we mentality.”

Additional qualitative data were gathered by means of seven individual interviews. Survey participants indicated, on a separate form (Appendix B), their interest in volunteering to participate in an individual interview with the researcher. Out of the fifteen who responded, seven were chosen: three classroom teachers, one specialist teacher, one counsellor and two administrators. Twenty open-ended questions (Appendix C) were posed to each of the participants. The questions were designed to gain a deeper understanding of the practices used by educators when working with students who they deemed as at risk, additional programs or supports they thought could be helpful, and the barriers preventing access to those supports. At
the beginning of each interview, participants were asked to think about their at-risk students who were in grade seven, eight, and nine only. At-risk was defined as those students who were struggling to meet learning outcomes at grade level due to academic, social, or emotional challenges. It was emphasized that the students need not have a British Columbia Ministry of Education designation as a student with special needs and to think about, in particular, those often informally described as “grey area” students.

The first six questions served as warm-up questions and ascertained information about participants’ current role and caseload, years in the role, years of experience in the field of education, service in other school districts, and course work and training for working with at-risk students. As previously stated, three classroom teachers, one specialist teacher, one counsellor and two administrators participated. The range in years in their current role was between two and 25 years, while the number of years they had been in the field of education ranged from 12 to 31 years. Six of the participants had worked in one to four other school districts, and one participant had only worked in School District #79 (Cowichan Valley). Caseloads for the classroom teachers ranged from 120 to 432 students over the course of the 2015-2016 school year. The specialist teacher had 23 students on her caseload and the counsellor 110. One principal had 280 students in his school and the other principal had approximately 1500. All, except one, participant had had some kind of in-service, course work, or training in working with at-risk students.

Six interview questions centered on current practices that the participants felt were most effective for their at-risk students. Specifically, they were asked what programs were most successful, how they interacted with their at-risk students and their parents, and how those interactions might be different from the way they interact with their other students. Participants
were also asked about what they perceived to be their main responsibilities in working with the students and what their main role was in facilitating school completion. Two themes emerged in the responses to this set of questions. Every participant mentioned building relationships with students and their families in at least one of their responses to the five questions, in terms of practice and responsibility. They described building and maintaining these relationships by treating at-risk students in the same manner as other students and not singling them out in a way that was obviously different. Six of the seven participants mentioned regular, but informal check-ins such as reading body language, greeting students individually each day, and scanning and reacting to the tone of the classroom or school as ways of enhancing their relationships with their at-risk student. Building relationships was perceived as creating a positive dynamic between the school, families, and the community. The second theme that surfaced was providing an environment that reduced stress for their students and their families. They mentioned trying to keep interactions informal with parents and pointing out the positive things about their children as often as possible as well as making sure parents were adequately informed about what to expect as their children entered into the Graduation Program. For students, participants spoke of starting the school year with low-risk activities and providing a safe classroom and school environment as ways of managing potentially stressful situations.

Two interview questions were designed to elicit responses regarding identifying and monitoring the progress of participants’ at-risk students. Answers identified practices that could be categorized as formal and informal. The formal practices stated were making referrals to and attending weekly Learning Services or School Based Team meetings, IEP reviews and reports, and formal report cards with anecdotal comments. Informal methods of identifying and
monitoring progress included daily and incidental observations of students and unscheduled conversations between colleagues and with parents regarding their students.

Five questions were included to prompt participants to reveal their perceptions about the availability of resources. Lack of funds and influences outside of school were the two main themes in this category of interview questions. With one exception, all of the participants stated that they did not have access to enough resources for supporting their at-risk learners, citing lack of funding for staffing of specialists as the main barrier to attaining adequate resources. Although not a resource, factors such as poverty and social issues outside of the school were also cited by all participants as a major, negative influence on students, thus providing significant barriers to their ability to complete school.

Participants were asked what their hopes were for their at-risk students as the final question of the interview. No clear themes were apparent but common answers included that they wanted the students to stay in school, have a sense of accomplishment, and have hope for themselves and their future. It was clear to the researcher that this question provoked strong emotions from the participants indicating a deep investment in the well-being of their students.

The quantitative and qualitative data derived from the survey and the individual interviews provided information to the researcher that will be utilized to answer the research questions posed. Participants’ responses emerged and were categorized thematically to examine current practices that educators perceived as most valuable for their at-risk students and their role in school completion while working with students in grades seven, eight, and nine. Also revealed were the perceived barriers to implementing new strategies and programs for those students. Further discussion of these findings and their implications will occur in Chapter Five.
Chapter Five: Summary, Discussion, and Conclusions

Brief Summary of Research

The purpose of the current study was to investigate intervention strategies for improving school completion rates. Two goals were set to guide the data collecting process: Explore practices and programs that would best serve at-risk students in grades seven to nine, and investigate teacher, counsellor, and administrator perceptions regarding their role in facilitating school completion for their at-risk students in the intermediate grades. The intent was to gain a better understanding of the practices and perceptions of the researcher’s colleagues, thus providing a local context from which to guide change.

A survey (Appendix A), informed letters of consent (Appendix E), and invitations to participate in an interview with the researcher (Appendix B) were delivered, through teacher contacts, in October of 2015. In total, 63 packages were distributed to teachers, counsellors, and administrators who work in a family of schools that includes six elementary schools and one secondary school in School District #79 (Cowichan Valley) on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. Only educators who worked with grade six, seven, and eight students were invited to participate. The response rate to the survey was 49.2%, yielding 31 surveys returned by mid-December 2015. The response rate to the invitation to interview was 51.6% as 16 participants replied. Seven of those who volunteered were chosen by the researcher to interview. Participants who were chosen, included teachers, counsellors, and administrators from the elementary and secondary level. Interviews took place throughout January and February of 2016.
A mixed-methods approach was used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. The survey contained fourteen statements, accompanied by a five-point Likert scale, and four open-ended questions. The interview participants were all asked the same twenty questions (Appendix C). The term at-risk students was defined on the survey and to the interview participants as those students who struggle to meet grade level learning outcomes due to academic, social, or emotional challenges but do not necessarily hold a British Columbia Ministry of Education designation as a student with special needs. School completion was also defined as students attaining a British Columbia Dogwood or Evergreen Certificate.

Discussion of Findings

Current practices. When analyzed, both the quantitative and qualitative data collected suggests that the majority of the participants had a positive perception of their current practices, confidence level, and role in facilitating school completion for their at-risk students. The survey results indicated that 93% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that they had strategies to use for working with their at-risk students. As well, all of the survey participants listed at least one strategy that they felt was effective for their at-risk students. Seventy-three percent of the interview participants indicated that their confidence level when working with their at-risk students was good or very good and 93.6% agreed or strongly agreed that they had an important role in facilitating school completion. As leaders of the schools included in this study continue to work towards increasing the school completion rate, new strategies will need to be introduced to change the status quo. Avey, Wernsing and Luthans, (2008), found that employees with positive emotions and psychological capital are an important factor in organizational change. They went on to specify that the qualities of positive employees can help to “combat the negative
School leaders may wish to seek out positive teachers to pilot new strategies and programs.

Six interview questions, one short-answer question, and ten statements on the survey, elicited responses related to the participants’ current practices. The qualitative data collected from these tools clearly implies that the participants felt that their most effective strategy or practice for working with at-risk students was building and maintaining relationships with students and their families. Participants thought that good relationships could forge a positive dynamic between the school, students’ families and the community.

Managing and reducing stress emerged as a second practice that participants perceived as effective. These two themes appear to be related to responses given to questions asked, both in the short-answer portion of the survey and the interviews, about participants’ perceived role in facilitating school completion for their grade seven, eight, and nine students. Participants described practices and strategies that provide emotional support to reduce stress as part of their relationships with at-risk students. Another theme that was apparent was advocating for students and acting as a liaison to build relationships with parents, other adults within the school system, and outside agencies. When asked about communicating concerns to parents that their child might not complete school, 61.2% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that it is important, leaving 39.9% unsure, disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. Furthermore, 83.9% of the survey participants indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed that they can predict which of their students are at risk of not completing school. These results imply that, while the majority of teachers, counsellors, and administrators believe they can predict which students are likely to drop out, there is some disagreement about the benefits of informing parents of their concerns.
The practice of building relationships is supported by the work of Martin and Halperin (2006). Their list of elements observed to be part of effective programs for preventing dropout included relationship-based learning communities among others. As well, Christenson et al. (2001) stress the importance of developing connections with others in the school community as an important component of student engagement. When discussing emotional support, participants spoke of working with students to increase their self-esteem. As a practice, enhancing self-esteem is considered to build confidence and the ability to form relationships which can contribute to the type of resiliency needed to complete school (Zimmerman, 2013).

It is important to note that, although there is much support in the literature about the importance of building relationships within the school context, this practice alone may not be enough to reduce dropout rates completely as was shown by Wirth-Bond et al. (1991) in their research. They hypothesized that students would be less likely to drop out if they could identify a significant other among the school staff, however, their findings did not support their suggestion. They found that students who dropped out of the program studied could identify a positive relationship with at least one adult and they reported that they had a sense of belonging at their school. They put forth that factors outside of school superseded the positive connections that the students had at school. The Wirth-Bond et al., (1991) study substantiates the interview participants’ responses when asked how much influences outside of school affected their students’ ability to stay in school. One hundred percent of the participants stated that they believed outside factors to be a major influence on their students’ school completion potential. Hargreaves (2000) also notes that educators must pay attention to the emotional components of their students by building healthy relationships. However, he cautions that “excessive emphasis on emotional caring for poor and marginalized students can also condemn them to a warm yet
'welfarist' culture where immediate comfort that makes school a haven for children can easily occlude the long-term achievement goals (p. 813)”.

Current practices stated by survey and interview participants also fell into a second theme of differentiating instruction. This was evident in the survey where 96.5% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that it is important to adapt or modify their programs for their at-risk students regardless of whether they had an IEP. The qualitative data from the short-answer portion of the survey and the interviews supported the practice of adapting and modifying programs and assignments for at-risk students and also included providing opportunities for hands-on, multi-sensory, project-based learning, and small group instruction. Providing adapted and modified work was thought to improve students’ attitude toward learning by 86.6% of the respondents on the survey, however, 33.3% were unsure if it might embarrass their at-risk students.

The current research suggests that there are some formal practices in place for identifying, referring, and reporting on the progress of at-risk students. In response to the survey statement, 96.8% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that they knew how to refer students to their schools’ Learning Services or School-based team. All of the interview participants also described working with their teams at regularly scheduled meetings, usually on a weekly basis. The majority, 93.5%, of the survey participants agreed or strongly agreed that it is important for them to be aware of which students are at risk before they enter their class or school, however, fewer participants, 76.7%, found that the students’ files gave them important information about those students. Anecdotal comments on formal report cards and regular reviews of IEP and behavior plan goals were mentioned by the interview participants as formalized methods of tracking progress of their at-risk students.
**Additional supports.** Participants identified a number of additional supports thought to be useful in supporting their at-risk students, although, there was some contrast in the survey answers to the question regarding the adequacy of resources currently available. When asked if there were adequate resources in their school, it was apparent that the educators’ primary role influenced their perception. At 66.7%, administrators were the only group that identified that they agreed or strongly agreed there were adequate resources for at-risk students in their schools. Only twenty percent of classroom teachers, 14.3% of specialist teachers, and 0% of the counsellors agreed or strongly agreed to the same question.

The quantitative data collected regarding additional supports pointed to two main themes: more specialized staffing and additional targeted programs. Two minor themes were also indicated: more time for collaboration and more interagency involvement. These four themes are supported in the literature as ways to improve school completion rates. Common components of successful early interventions for preventing dropout have multiple strategies that include personalized supports and services, connections with community services, smaller class sizes, and interventions to address low academic skills (Jereld, 2007; Kilma et al., 2009).

Collaboration with colleagues about students’ needs, programs, and progress is seen as a preventive mindset in teachers who assume responsibility for altering the school environment to address the needs of their at-risk students (Jordan, Kircaali-iftar, & Diamond, 1993).

**Barriers.** Data were collected regarding perceived barriers preventing additional supports or programs from being implemented for at-risk students during interview and on the survey. The interview question was open-ended and all except one participant stated lack of funds as the main barrier. The short-answer question was also open-ended but asked participants to state factors preventing additional supports or programs aside from lack of adequate funding.
When posed in this manner, the responses were more diverse making it clear that participants believed both school structure and culture provided significant obstacles. They cited inflexible block schedules, class size and composition, union restrictions regarding hiring practices, funding structures, and lack of time as examples of structural barriers to implementing further strategies and programs. Flexibility is thought to be a key component of effective interventions for at-risk students (Martin & Halperin, 2006).

The current study revealed that participants also perceive school culture as an impediment to implementing new strategies and programs for at-risk students. Participants insinuated that negative attitudes of colleagues, a sense of being “good enough,” and romanticizing past successes were standing in the way of moving forward with new initiatives. They stated that there might be a fear of potential failure as an obstruction to taking the risk of trying new strategies. Furthermore, there was a sense of being overwhelmed with current workloads and that strategies designed to increase graduation rates may be unrealistic given the strength of the outside influences on students that negatively affect school success. As confirmed by Zimmerman (2006), this type of resistance is common and a critical factor in implementing changes in the school setting.

Limitations to the Study

While the current study provides some valuable information about the current practices and perceptions of grade seven, eight, and nine teachers concerning their at-risk students, there are some limitations. The study was designed to examine the practices and perceptions in the researchers own context so it does not lend itself to generalization to other schools or districts. There are three additional family of schools within School District #79 (Cowichan Valley), each
with its own unique demographic makeup of students and staff, hence, even within the same
school district, generalization would be limited.

Survey packages were sent out to all teachers, counsellors, and administrators who
worked with grade seven, eight, and nine students within the sample. Nonetheless, participation
was voluntary so it is not possible to ascertain if the respondents gave a true representative
sample of the practices and perceptions of all who were invited to contribute to the study. This
may be especially true with the interview component of the study. The lack of anonymity could
have prevented some people from agreeing to share their perspectives with the researcher in a
face-to-face situation. The potential of being identified may well have been a consideration in
the survey as well, given the relatively small sample size and that the researcher was known to
most of those invited to take part.

The small sample size is also a factor in the results of the data gathered. Participants
were informed that they were not required to answer all of the questions in an effort to ensure a
good return rate of the surveys and to make interview participants comfortable with the process.
As a result, one or more participants did not respond to nine of the 14 Likert statements and two
respondents chose not to answer all of the short-answer questions on the survey. With only 31
total respondents, each participant represented 3.2% of the total sample, thus affecting the
results.

**Suggestions for Further Research**

The current study points to the potential for further research. Most participants indicated
that differentiating instruction was an effective practice for their at-risk students. It would be
worthwhile to gather some baseline data and then track students’ progress to see if the types of
differentiation that teachers and schools are using have a measureable difference on school
completion rates. Further review of current and past literature would be a critical step in designing this type of research.

Taking a closer look at how students’ attitudes and level of self-consciousness is affected by the way adaptations and modifications to the learning outcomes and environment are presented to them may be valuable in determining how they are used. Comparing congruent perceptions of the participants in the current study with their students’ perceptions may show that students’ feelings are quite different than perceived by their teachers particularly in early adolescence. One third of the participants were unsure if providing adapted or modified work might embarrass their at-risk students. This notion could show that further research on appropriate methods of adapting and modifying in ways that protect students’ self-esteem is necessary.

One method of tracking school completion and graduation rates by the British Columbia Ministry of Education looks at students over a six-year period beginning when students enter grade eight for the first time. The results are calculated by district and provincial levels only. It may be useful to track this data at the school level and include a more broad range of grades. The Ministry of Education’s current practice does not report on students who may have stopped attending school prior to grade eight. Tracking students starting in grade five for a nine-year period may provide additional and critical data within the researcher’s context.

Additional data regarding why some participants indicated that parents should not be informed about concerns that their child may be at risk of dropping out could provide more insight into the diversity of responses in the current study. This, too, may warrant a look at the congruent perceptions of all stakeholders. Given that the majority of participants indicated that they could predict which students were at risk of dropping out, it could be important to research
what the benefits or adverse effects are of withholding such critical information from parents of students in the intermediate grades.

**Implications for Practice**

This researcher intended for the current study to be used as action research to inform her own practice as a school counsellor and Learning Services Team leader. It is anticipated that there will be interest in the findings from the schools’ formal leaders as well, which may lead to changes in practices at the administrative level.

Solidifying a more systematic method, such as a Response to Intervention model, for reacting to students needs could prevent the gradual trickle-out effect that occurs for at-risk students by providing a consistent framework for identifying students at risk of not completing school and appropriate allocation of interventions. It would be beneficial to have all partners within the family of schools work together on this type of plan to provide continuity of interventions and to create a more thorough and methodical flow of information about students’ needs as they transition out of elementary school and into the secondary school setting. Better awareness of the practices and programs at the elementary and secondary level could prove to be an additional benefit of meeting and collaborating between schools by providing an overview of options as students move through the intermediate grades and into the Graduation Program.

The participants of this study clearly indicated that there are frustrations with the lack of flexibility within the structure of the school. School leaders could use this information to look closely at how resources are allocated to see if there are ways to make time for the collaboration that participants indicated would be so valuable for responding to the needs of their at-risk students. School District #79 (Cowichan Valley) currently has time within the school calendar for teacher collaboration; a review of effective use of this time may uncover avenues for
discussions about the needs of specific at-risk students during these early dismissal days. Additionally, school leaders could look for ways to provide time for collaboration within the school day by looking at how school-wide activities are supervised. There may be sufficient adult to student ratios to provide time for small teams of teachers and specialists to meet.

Adjusting the rigid structure of the current block schedule or how students are timetabled into the structure could provide ways to incorporate more targeted interventions that were suggested by the participants of the present study. For example, at the grade eight and nine level, pairs or triads of teachers could be responsible for determining how to deliver differentiated instruction to a group of 30 to 60 students within the school day based on the diverse needs of their learners. This would allow for continuous fluidity throughout the day and school year of how students are grouped and could build on the strengths of each teachers’ skills or areas of expertise.

Other methods of responding to the needs of at-risk students may require cooperation between the school district and local union if it is determined that learning may need to occur outside the current timeframe of the school day. In School District #79 (Cowichan Valley), there is already precedence set for this with some music and band teachers. The new British Columbia Education Plan currently being implemented highlights flexibility in time and place of delivery as one of the main considerations of the design. It may be that school district and union leaders across the province have already begun discussions of this nature.

**Conclusion**

The information gained from this action research project has provided valuable information for answering the research questions posed. The review of literature uncovered common elements of successful programs and interventions for increasing graduations rates.
also pointed to the need for starting interventions long before students enter any graduation program and iterated that the intermediate years are a critical time for at-risk students in their decisions about remaining in school. Data collection from the study confirmed that teachers, counsellors, and administrators at the grade seven to nine level are using many of the practices and strategies that are common to successful programs for increasing graduation rates. There is a strong indication that more opportunities for meeting the needs of at-risk learners in the intermediate years are needed and that there are some critical barriers preventing their attainment and usage.

It is the researcher’s desire to make lasting and systematic changes in her current practices as a school counsellor and Learning Services Team leader that will positively influence the school completion rates within the context of her own school. Acquiring insights about the practices and perceptions of colleagues has provided a platform that will guide these changes in a way that is sensitive to the needs of the students as well as to the culture of the school. Positive gains have already been noticed as the study itself has sparked meaningful conversations among the participants and with the researcher about how to best care for our at-risk students while keeping the goal of school completion at the forefront.
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Appendix A

Perceptions and Practices of Teachers, Principals and Counsellors Regarding School Completion

Please answer the following questions before answering the survey questions on the back. This is an anonymous survey; therefore, it is important that you do not identify yourself, your school, your students or colleagues. Please allow 15 to 25 minutes to complete.

Thank you for your time.

Indicate your primary role:

- I am a classroom teacher
- I am a specialist teacher (LA, Resource, IBIT)
- I am a counsellor
- I am an administrator

Indicate your years of experience in the field of education

- 0 – 10 years
- 11-20 years
- More than 20 years

Indicate where you have spent the majority of your career:

- At my present school
- At a variety of school within this school district
- In one or more other school districts

How many students are you teaching/on your caseload for the 2015/16 school year? ________

Please read the following definitions prior to completing the survey:

School Completion is a reference to students receiving either a BC Dogwood Certificate of Graduation or an Evergreen Certificate of School Completion.

At-Risk Learners and Students are those students who struggle to or are unable to meet the learning outcomes in one or more core subjects at grade level. Students may also have risk factors outside of school such as poverty, inadequate parental support or problems related to substance use. These students may or may not have a special needs designation or IEP.
**Interventions** are strategies, lessons or programs that are designed to assist students with their learning that are different from what would be needed for average learners. Please rate the statements on the survey in relation to your at-risk learners. Circle the number that best represents your opinion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is important to me to be aware of which students are at risk before they enter my class/school.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can predict which students in my class/school are at risk of not completing school.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>I find that the students’ files give me important information about my at-risk students’ needs.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have strategies to use for my at-risk students.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think it is important that all at-risk students have an IEP.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think it is important to adapt and/or modify my program for my at-risk students even if they don’t have an IEP.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing adapted or modified assignments will embarrass my at-risk students</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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students.

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<tr>
<th>Providing adapted or modified assignments can improve my at-risk students’ attitudes toward learning.</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
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<th>5</th>
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<tr>
<th>It is important to inform the parents of my at-risk students of my concerns that they will not complete school.</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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<tr>
<th>There are adequate resources in my school for my at-risk students.</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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<tr>
<th>I know how to refer students to the school’s Learning Services Team/School Based Team.</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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<tr>
<th>I know which programs are available at grades 10-12 that will lead to an Evergreen Certificate.</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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<tr>
<th>I am aware of the criteria for obtaining an Evergreen and Dogwood Certificate.</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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<tr>
<th>Teachers, counsellors, and administrators have an important role in facilitating school completion for at-risk students.</th>
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<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
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</table>
What current practices do you use in your classroom/school that are most effective for at-risk students?

Briefly describe what additional supports, programs or training would be useful in supporting the at-risk students in your class/school?

What do you think are factors that may be preventing additional supports or programs from being implemented in your school aside from lack of adequate funding?

As a teacher, counsellor or administrator working with students in grades 7–9, what role do you play in facilitating school completion for your at-risk students?
Appendix B

Invitation to Participate in an Individual Interview

Perceptions and Practices of Teachers, principals and Counsellors Regarding School Completion

You are invited to participate in an individual interview about your perceptions regarding practices and roles in facilitating school completion for your at-risk students in grade seven, eight, and/or nine. You may choose to participate in addition to or instead of completing the attached survey. Participating in an interview is voluntary and confidential. Interviews will be conducted at a time and place that is convenient for you. It is expected that it will take approximately 30 minutes to complete.

For more information and/or to volunteer to participate, please provide your name and contact information below. Volunteers will be provided with a consent form.

- Yes, please contact me about participating in an individual interview

Name

Phone #

Email

Thank you for considering this invitation. Please return this form to the envelope in the mailbox of the teacher contact at your school.

Kind Regards,

Susan Baker, sbaker@sd79.bc.ca
Appendix C

Perceptions Regarding Practices and Roles in Facilitating School Completion for At-Risk Students in Grades Seven, Eight, and Nine

Warm Up Questions
1. What is your primary role in your school?
2. How long have you had that role?
3. How many students are you currently teaching/counselling/in your school?
4. How many years have you been working in the field of education?
5. Have you worked in other school districts?
6. Do you have any coursework or training specifically in working with at-risk students?

For the following questions, please answer in the context of your work with grade seven, eight, and nine students only.

Interview Questions
7. What current practices do you use in your classroom/school that are the most effective for at-risk students?
8. How do you interact with your at-risk students? Is it different from the way you work with your other students?
9. How do you monitor and report progress of your at-risk students?
10. Describe how you work with the parents of your at-risk students.
11. What is your confidence level in working with your at-risk students?
12. Describe how you work with the Learning Services Team in your school and District Support Staff.
13. Do you feel that you have access to enough resources for working with your at-risk students? If not, what is preventing access?
14. Which in-school programs are most helpful for your at-risk students?
15. Briefly, describe additional supports, interventions, or programs that could be useful in supporting the at-risk students in your class/school?
16. What are some barriers that prevent additional programs from being implemented in your school?
17. What do you see as your main responsibilities in working with your at-risk students?
18. What role do you play in your at-risk students’ school completion (getting through grade 12?)
19. How much affect do you think that influences outside of school have on a student’s ability to complete school?
20. What are your hopes for your at-risk students?
Appendix D

Phone script to School Principals

I am a counsellor in School district #79 and currently enrolled in the Masters of Educational Leadership Program at Vancouver Island University. I am working on a research project on facilitating school completion for at-risk students. The superintendent of School District #79 has granted approval for this research.

The purpose of this project is to investigate perceptions and practices of interventions used to assist at-risk students at grades seven, eight, and nine. This project will also explore perceived barriers to implementing new intervention strategies in the intermediate grades believed to facilitate school completion. Teachers, counsellors, and administrators will be asked to complete an anonymous survey that should take approximately 15 to 25 minutes to complete. A teacher in your school will be asked to distribute the survey by October 30, 2015. The survey consists of 14 statements accompanied by a five-point Likert scale and four open-ended questions. Included with the survey, there will be an invitation to participate in an individual interview with me at a later date.

I am hoping that you will agree to have this survey distributed in your school. Attached to this letter, please find a sample copy of the survey. If you are in agreement of participating in the research, I will deliver a survey package (containing the surveys, informed letters of consent, invitations to participate in an interview and an addressed, postage paid envelope) to a teacher in the school. You would not be involved in administering or collecting the surveys or invitations.

If you have any concerns regarding the ethical considerations of this study, please contact the Vancouver Island Ethics Officer via email at reb@viu.bc.ca or telephone at 250.753.3245, ext. 2665.

Thank you in advance for making this study possible.
Appendix E

Letter of Informed Consent (Survey)

Perceptions and Practices of Teachers, Principals and Counsellors Regarding School Completion

Susan Baker, Student
Masters in Educational Leadership
Vancouver Island University
sbaker@sd79.bc.ca

Dr. Rachel Moll, Supervisor
Faculty of Education
Vancouver Island University
250.753.3245 ext. 2161
Rachel.moll@viu.ca

I am a counsellor at Cowichan Secondary School and am currently enrolled in the Masters of Educational Leadership Program at Vancouver Island University. As partial fulfillment of program requirements, I have designed a research project to study perceptions regarding practices and roles in facilitating school completion for at-risk students in grades seven, eight, and nine.

You are being invited to participate in this research because you are a teacher, counsellor, or administrator that works with grade seven, eight, and/or nine students within the Cowichan Secondary family of schools. For your part in this study, you will be asked to complete an anonymous survey. It consists of 14 statements accompanied by a five-point Likert scale and 4 open-ended questions. It should take approximately 15 to 25 minutes to complete.

There is a small social risk to participating in the survey as the sample size is small and there is a chance that you will be recognized from your responses. However, any information or quote that may identify you will not be used in the presentation of the results. While efforts will be made to protect your anonymity by not using attributable quotes, there is still a possibility that you may be identified based on the information you provide. There are potential benefits from reading the survey and participating in the interview that could include reflecting on your current practices and initiating dialogue with colleagues about practices and perceived roles in facilitating school completion for your at-risk students.

Survey participation is anonymous and all records of participation will be kept confidential; only my supervisor, research assistant, and I will have access to your information. Data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in my supervisor’s office and will be destroyed in June 2019, after the completion of the project.
The results from this research will be shared in the form of an oral presentation at the Vancouver Island University Research Conference and will form the basis of my thesis paper as part of the requirements for the MEDL degree. Identities of individual participants will be anonymous.

Participation is completely voluntary. If you do not want to answer a question or questions on the survey, you are in no way required to do so. You may withdraw from participating at any time before submitting the survey, however, since the survey is anonymous, it will not be possible to separate your data from other participants’ after it has been submitted.

The return of your completed survey indicates your consent to participate in this study and for the information you provide to be used in the research. Please return your completed survey to the envelope in the mail box of your school’s teacher contact. Please retain this letter of consent for your records.

If you have any concerns regarding the ethical considerations of this study, please contact the Vancouver Island University Ethics Officer via email at reb@viu.bc.ca or telephone at 250.753.3245, ext.2665.

If you would like more information about this project, please contact me via email at sbaker@sd79.bc.ca.

Kind regards,

Susan Baker
Appendix F

Letter of Informed Consent (Interview)

Perceptions and Practices of Teachers, Principals and Counsellors Regarding School Completion

Susan Baker, Student
Masters in Educational Leadership
Vancouver Island University
sbaker@sd79.bc.ca

Dr. Rachel Moll, Supervisor
Faculty of Education
Vancouver Island University
250.753.3245 ext. 2161
Rachel.moll@viu.bc.ca

I am a counsellor at Cowichan Secondary School and am currently enrolled in the Masters of Educational Leadership Program at Vancouver Island University. As partial fulfillment of program requirements, I have designed a research project to study perceptions regarding practices and roles in facilitating school completion for at-risk students in grades seven, eight, and nine.

You are being invited to participate in this research because you are a teacher, counsellor, or administrator that works with grade seven, eight, and/or nine students within the Cowichan Secondary family of schools. For your part in the study, you will be asked to participate in an individual interview with me. It consists of six basic demographic questions about your current assignment and your history in the field of education. There are 14 open-ended interview questions. It should take approximately 30 minutes to take part in the interview. With your consent, the interview will be audio recorded to ensure accurate transcription.

Your participation in this study will not be anonymous to me, however, data will be stored and reported on confidentially. Only my supervisor and I will have access to your information. Data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in my supervisor’s office and will be destroyed in June 2019, after the completion of the project.

The results from this research will be shared in the form of an oral presentation at the Vancouver Island University Research Conference and will form the basis of my thesis paper as part of the requirements for the MEDL degree. Identities of individual participants will be anonymized. With your consent, your responses to the interview questions may be quoted directly leading to the possibility that you may be identified by how you have responded. You will be given the opportunity to review and have altered or deleted any potentially attributable quotations prior to the publication of the thesis. If, by chance, you
state your name, the name of your school, or names of any of your students or colleagues, your response
will not be directly quoted.

There are potential benefits from participating in the interview that could include reflecting on your
current practices and initiating dialogue about practices and perceived roles in facilitating school
completion for your at-risk students.

If you have any concerns regarding the ethical considerations of this study, please contact the Vancouver
Island University Ethics Officer via email at reb@viu.bc.ca or telephone at 250.753.3245, ext. 2665.

If you have any questions or would like further information about this project, please contact me via email
at sbaker@sd79.bc.ca.

Participation is completely voluntary. If you do not want to answer a question or questions during the
interview, you are not required to do so. You may withdraw from participating at any time before data
analysis is complete and for any reason. If you withdraw before data analysis occurs (approximately
February 2016), your responses to the interview questions will be removed from the data. Your data
cannot be removed after data analysis has been completed. If you want to withdraw from the study,
please contact me. Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for
you own records.

- I consent to participating in an interview and having it audio recorded
- I consent to participating in an interview but do not want it audio recorded
- I consent to allow Susan Baker to use direct quotations from my interview for her research

Name (please print)  ________________________________________________________________
Signature  ________________________________________________________________
Date  ________________________________________________________________
Appendix G

Interview Protocol

Perceptions Regarding Practices and Roles in Facilitating School Completion for At-Risk Students in Grades Seven, Eight, and Nine

1. I will meet with each interview participant individually after we have arranged a time and meeting place that is neutral and mutually agreed upon.
2. Before the interview commences, participants will be given two copies of the Informed Letter of Consent. They will be given time to read the letter and ask for clarification if needed.
3. Each participant will sign both copies of the Letter of Consent. They will retain one for their records and give the other to me.
4. I will say, “I will take no notes during the interview and, with your permission, I will audio record the interview to ensure accurate transcription.” If the participant consents and has checked off the appropriate boxes on the Letter of Consent, I will then proceed to begin recording the interview.
5. I will remind the participants that they do not have to answer all of the questions and that they can stop the interview at any time for any reason.
6. Participants will be asked to not identify their school, students or colleagues by name.
7. I will begin with six warm up questions to establish rapport with the participant, although it is likely that I will have already met each of the participants. These questions will also give basic demographic information about the participants’ current assignment and history in the field of education.
8. Before asking the remaining questions, I will say, “For the following questions, please answer in the context of your work with grade seven, eight, and nine students only.”
9. I will then define at-risk students as those who struggle to meet the learning outcomes in one or more core subjects at grade level and that they may or may not have a Ministry of Education designation and/or an IEP.
10. Throughout the interview, I will ask for clarification as needed by using phrases such as: “Can you tell me more about that?” “I’m not sure I understand fully, can you explain that in a different way.” “Is there anything else that you would like to add?”
11. All participants will be asked all of the same interview questions.
12. At the conclusion of the interview, I will remind the participants of the contact information on the consent form for my supervisor, the VIU Ethics Officer and me should they wish to contact any of us. I will thank them for their time.