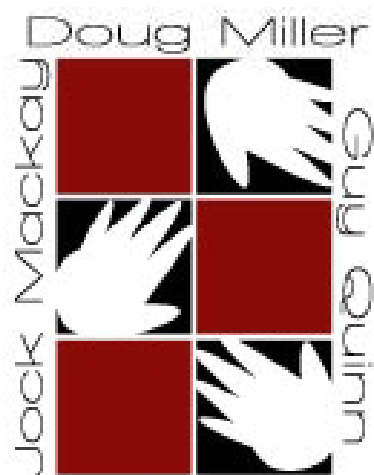


# complicated Lives



A Student Life History Project  
Cegep Vanier College

# Complicated Lives

Research Report

A Student Life History Project

Jock Mackay

Doug Miller

Guy Quinn

Cegep Vanier College

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**Complicated Lives:  
A Student Life History Project**

**Preface**

**What got us going?**

This research project grew out of our experience working at Vanier College, particularly with students whose academic record rendered them at-risk upon arrival at Cegep. The three of us collectively have eighty-five years of experience at Vanier, and we have each devoted our best energies over the past ten years to working with weaker, incoming students in the Explorations program. We have approximately another twenty years of collective experience in other educational milieu; this is our life work.

During these recent years, working with underachieving students in Explorations 2, we have found ourselves at times frustrated and exhausted when student progress seemed slow, yet elated when a star burst out of the 'at risk' firmament; excited by curricular initiatives which offered promise, yet downcast when students did not appear to benefit from them, or worse yet, misbehaved or 'acted out' as well; proud of our many colleagues who have joined the team devoted to 'underdog' education, yet ashamed of some others in our midst who thought we were wasting our time or 'prostituting' the college; sure in our knowledge that what we were doing was important, yet unsure of the knowledge we employed in what we were doing. We were also sure that the students with whom we were working were not so much at risk as underachieving, i.e. rather than thinking of these students as at risk of failing, we preferred to think of them as performing under their potential.

A group of us who had worked in Explorations began to examine ways of deepening our impact. We were reading about underachieving students and examining patterns of success, failure and dropout at Vanier College. We investigated the techniques of experiential education and made some brave forays into pedagogical experimentation. We proposed a number of other initiatives aimed at having a more exact and profound impact on the population with which we were working,

including a new first semester orientation program called Odyssey in 1999, and a course in College 101 in 2000, both of which were rejected by the college.

All this while, we also observed, as did many of our colleagues, that the needs of many students were changing dramatically while we delivered special programs to only a minority of incoming students. Teachers of General Studies, Mathematics and Social Science in particular, increasingly reported that students were simply not ready for the courses which had traditionally been taught at the college. The level of academic skill, including basic literacy and numeracy, appeared to have declined. Study skills, ability with texts, conceptual adeptness, logical capabilities, and capacity to follow and understand assignment instructions and the content of lectures, had all appeared to decline. In addition, student commitment to their studies and to the educational process as a whole appeared to have vaporized for many. Classroom behaviour and discipline began to become the topic of cafeteria chatter among teachers and the subject of workshops at the college. Something was happening here, and we didn't know what it was.

It had become clear that many students arrive at college with a different educational culture, if it could be called that, than that which had been taken for granted by teachers and other college personnel a generation earlier. The formal contours of the student population, such as mother tongue, age, and 'feeder' high school, were well documented, as were patterns of performance such as grades, pass rates, and graduation rates. But those who work in the system continued to throw up their hands, asking: "What can they be thinking? Why do they act like this? What do they think they are doing? What can be going on in their heads?" Many students no longer seemed to share the cultural universe of teachers and staff with respect to education. We have come to understand that this is a societal issue which is coming to the attention of educators throughout North America.

From our 'deep organic connection' in the college (see Ch. 2.2), we surmised that the proportion of incoming students who needed extra orientation to college studies was perhaps as high as one third, but that definitely one fifth

of those arriving as new students needed it. Recent figures on student failures in the college, especially in first semester, confirm that, in fact, the entire bottom fifth is severely 'at risk.' So we decided to take a direct approach to the issue and ask these students what they had to say about it all. We knew that the study had to be as non-intrusive as possible, yet needed to have the students' view of their experience stated in their own words and through their own world view as much as possible.

#### Sample48

The students who form the basis of this study have been taken to represent the incoming cohort of bottom quintile students in A02, and the process by which they became our sample is explained in Chapter 2.3. Our absurdly ambitious aims about the size of our sample and our unwarranted optimism about gaining their cooperation for interviews were of necessity scaled back until we managed to conduct at least one interview with each of 48 individuals. This array of individual students has no common conscious identity and they have never systematically met each other. They therefore did not truly form a group, but were merely a sample. This is the somewhat complicated reasoning behind our calling the collectivity of our informants the Sample48.

#### The Research Team

Despite our good intentions and extensive experience in the educational system, none of us has been an educational researcher in training or in practice. Our backgrounds are quite varied. Guy Quinn is a career pedagogue and is the only one of the researchers to have actually studied education. Having earned his B.Ed., Guy has taught Physical Education at Vanier since 1976. During those years, he acquired a Diploma in College Teaching from McGill University, developed an outdoor education component in his department, and has repeatedly forged innovative and experimental approaches to college programs using experiential learning, particularly for the underachieving student. He is the educational philosopher and our intuition. Doug Miller took his B.A. in History and spent 11 years in development work in southern Africa before coming to Vanier's Registrar's office as an administrative technician in 1980. Since then, he completed a Master's

Degree in Sociology and works as a learning specialist in The Learning Centre. He is both the central energy and the organizer who has kept our project on track. Jock Mackay holds an M.A. in Sociology and has mostly taught Sociology as a career, doing so at Vanier College since 1976. His special interest in country and folk music led to a doctorate in Folklore in mid-career. He is our token intellectual and wordsmith. From the outset, we have developed a permanent commitment to qualitative research as a common methodology and our team has worked remarkably well, we think, given the diversity of our backgrounds. Nonetheless, this report undoubtedly suffers from some of the flaws which writing by committee inevitably brings upon itself.

One caveat flows from the above. Although we have read widely throughout the period of research, have attended several conferences on college pedagogy and research, and are now acquainted with many key issues in the field, we did so without a broad or deep foundation. As a team, we have been working within paradigms which are often quite different from any recognized tradition in educational research, but we also began from individual perspectives which were quite different one from the other. At times, we did not even share a common vocabulary, and we found ourselves humbled by the recognition of the different knowledges that we had, learning something quite basic from another field in which one team member was competent. But our eye was always on the final objective: to let the students speak through us. The message from these students and from others in their sphere of experience is the foreground for everything we have done. Hence, although we are confident that what we say is duly cognizant of current knowledge in the field, our explicit use of and reference to the literature is limited. On occasion, we have developed a unique terminology which has parallels or closely related concepts in the current body of literature. For now, so be it. Our priority was to give voice to all those views which were so generously shared with us, and that, in itself, was a huge task.

#### Readiness

One unique term, and a key one, which developed in our work with these students is the Readiness Factor (see Ch. 5.6). This term

had been used loosely by our program team for several years to refer to that special state of consciousness which a youth needs to have acquired in order to deal with post-secondary studies in a 'mature' fashion. Our delineation of the elements of the Readiness Factor in this report does put flesh onto the concept. However, it remains a conglomeration of loosely defined notions. The common sense idea that one needs to be ready for college study before one is likely to do it effectively is important enough to be investigated more carefully. Insofar as the essential nature of 'readiness' pertains to an individual state of mind, a quotient of readiness could be a valuable diagnostic tool when dealing with individual needs in a transitional program. Such a quotient could undoubtedly be quantified into a reliable ordinal scale using measures of factors such as those listed here, giving it comparable epistemological status to indicators for religiosity, authoritarianism or intelligence. Such in-depth and detailed work goes well beyond the scope of this report but could serve as a rich field of inquiry for future study.

## The Student Life History Project

The SLHP is deeply committed to the democratization of educational institutions and therefore the enhancement of educational opportunities for the 'underdog' student whose chances of educational achievement are below average. The Student Life History Project is conceived as an umbrella covering a group of initiatives which delineate the conditions and needs of students in the public education system with a view to having that system respond to their needs, integrating education with other elements of everyday life so as to maximize equity and access to education. We are very much inspired by the Parent Report and the seminal work of John Dewey.

## Ethics

The methods employed in this study and the uses of personal information in the presentation of results were approved by the Vanier College Ethics Review Committee on September 24, 2002.

Jock Mackay

Doug Miller

Guy Quinn

January 2006

## Acknowledgements

During the 2000-2001 college year, a group of us began to gather to discuss the possibility of doing research of this type. Doug Miller took much of the initiative, but in those early stages Doug, along with Guy Quinn and Jock Mackay, were joined by Shirley Pettifer, Mark Prentice and Ian MacArthur at our round table. Their ideas continue to shape our approach.

While this project was still a germ of an idea, several colleagues provided vital feedback on a draft of our proposal. Fran Davis, Judy Macdonald, Steve Rosenfield and Arlene Steiger each gave us detailed critiques which were suitably pointed, very helpful and much appreciated.

Shortly after we began this study, we discovered the Association pour la recherche au collégial (ARC), or rather ARC found us. Lynn Lapostolle, as the guiding hand of ARC, was invariably helpful and supportive. She arranged for conferences, workshops and mini-courses from which we have benefited immensely. She also led us into a circle of college researchers whose comradeship we continue to treasure.

When we were seeking out an ethnographer to conduct the high school component of our research, it was Prof. Steve Jordan of McGill University who led us to Christopher Stonebanks. Dr. Stonebanks' broad experience and profound knowledge of all levels of the educational system, as well as his innovative methodologies and insightful interpretation, inform the report from 'feeder schools': Chapter 3.1.2 The Stonebanks Report. A copy of his full report is in the Vanier College Library.

Both the Sir Wilfred Laurier School Board and the English Montreal School Board were invaluable in providing access to the two high schools in which Dr. Stonebanks conducted the high school research.

Our research headquarters during the first two years of the project was a buzzy space around Guy's office in the Physical Education Complex. Terry Nowostawsky genially made room for us there, and despite our slow adoption of short pants, running shoes, Gore-Tex® and fleece, our Phys. Ed. colleagues made us feel like long-lost cousins.

At the college, the Registrar's Office and staff made our collection of necessary data smooth and efficient. Fred Andrews made the working of mounds of that data for our needs appear effortless.

Our home areas at the college, namely The Learning Centre and the Departments of Physical Education, Sociology and Humanities have been consistently supportive and interested in our project. We hope it was warranted.

Our Academic Dean, Peter Ross, was true to his word that he would support new initiatives. He was there for us when we three came knocking at his door. Pit Lan-Chow-Wing was our link to the real world of our sponsorship. His easy efficiency as well as his genuine help and support was always combined with great humour. His request was always to "write it out and send it to me." Here you go, Pit – we wrote it out. Before he came on board, Hilda Schwartz and Fred Mayer provided invaluable backing.

Dagmar Fehring accurately, tirelessly and patiently transcribed hours and hours of long and sometimes badly recorded interviews. She deserves a medal. At times, she was aided by Sarah Schulman and Danielle Villemaire. Danielle and Myriam Mansour also translated many documents into French for us, often at the last minute. Thank you to them all.

This document would have been simply a 'brick' were it not for the creative inspiration of Meagan Robinson and Henry Wu, both graduates of Vanier's Document Design and Media Technology Programme. Their development of a logo for the Student Life History Project and a cover design has given this document whatever flair it may boast. Thank you to Liliane Bohbot and Joan Fee Taylor for letting us into the classroom to witness the amazing talent of the students in their program. For the Gutenberg magic in the reproduction of our brick, our thanks to Paul Fournier and our friends in the Vanier Printshop.

Crucially, this project would have remained but a good idea were it not for the generous support of PAREA and the sympathetic ear of Francois Hardy. From the outset, our relations with PAREA and anyone who represented that program have been fair, direct, cordial and helpful. We hope that support of this type will

continue for the foreseeable future.

Our families have seen us devoted to this project for over four years now. Long days, evenings, weekends and holidays seemed always to be devoted to tasks that never ended. Thank you Danielle, Nellie and Monica; your forbearance is stellar.

Finally, this study could not have occurred without the cooperation of those we interviewed. Without any compensation, about eighty persons agreed to recorded interviews with us - some in focus groups, but most as individuals. The Sample48 demonstrated a genuine desire to help us find some answers; we hope they have.



## Beyond the Myriad

Picture the well intended Economics teacher penetrating the surface of the otherwise flat screen of faces in his classroom. He really wants to engage his students in a meaningful discussion about world economics; he wants it to be relevant and have an impact that will stick and become useful in the way in which they view the world from here on. He walks the aisles between the rows of seats, glancing from one student to the other, pondering what the most appropriate question would be to initiate the discussion, to stir a response.

**Paula** is going to want him to stand on his head and put this question forward in his most passionate presentation. After all, she's the up and coming teacher, the girl who thrives off passionate teachers, even over subject matter. The subject matter hasn't necessarily been difficult for her; she's just socially oriented and looking to be excited by personalities and human dynamics. Get her excited mister, and count your first engaged student in your economics class.

His gaze moves to **Jean-Baptiste** and he wonders what he thinks of the difficulties his people are facing in Haiti. How sensitive will he be when they talk about the kinds of foundations on which solid economies are based? What about the near-sighted, money-grabbing government which allowed the hillsides to be stripped of the trees that hold back the flood waters and eroding soil? What would his thoughts be about the way his mother, after qualifying as a nurse in Haiti, had to recertify herself as a nurse when she arrived in Canada? What about the economic base of Jean-Baptiste's single parent family versus that of Paula's? How will the teacher delicately walk through the micro/macro spectrum?

Perhaps **Noel-Pierre** would be a better choice for someone with whom Jean-Batiste could have a meaningful discussion, as he is also from Haiti. Problem is Noel-Pierre doesn't think he should even be in this class. He just wants to get on with his computer science courses. He doesn't see the value in any courses which don't directly lead to and relate to his technology program. His older brother just graduated in Electrical Engineering from Concordia University and his other brother is currently enrolled in Computer Engineering. The three brothers and their

mother came to Canada to get an education and work here because they're aware of the limitations of education and careers back in their home land. Noel-Pierre says "I can't see myself in economics" as if this course was going to lead him to a career in the field. All he can think about is how he is two years behind in his educational path, after being held back one year each time he came to Canada from Haiti, and every 'extra' course he has to take is contributing to that delay. This delay is stressing him and holding him back from contributing to the economy of his family and the independence he longs for. How can the teacher help Noel-Pierre realize what a contribution he could make to the class by sharing the experiences he has had with the two economies, two education systems and the differences in opportunities for work and career? Maybe the exercise would help him appreciate the value of a well rounded education and the opportunity to put his life circumstances in perspective.

Keep **Moses** away from Noel-Pierre. Noel-Pierre will have a difficult time relating and certainly won't know how to empathize with the predicament in which Moses has put himself. So far Moses has squandered his chances for success. He took the short cut to cash; rather than put the effort required into school to succeed and open his chances for a career in a field that would provide the salary of a professional, he has been distracted away to the money he could make working as a projectionist/assistant manager at a cinema. Moses has the luxury of the support of both parents at home, who are willing to see him through his difficult 'growing' phase. They expect him to get through it eventually.

**Melissa** also has the support of her parents. They're on a different economic base, with one working parent and the other incapable of work. They don't have to encourage Melissa to continue her education; she has an insatiable appetite for high learning. This creates yet another challenge for this teacher; he must try to feed this bottomless vessel with everything he can while not overwhelming the others. Melissa is keeping him on his toes writing 'A' papers in her somewhat critical fashion and errorless tests on the subject. Mr. Economics feels the watchful and socially conscious eye of Melissa as he attempts to give **Audrey** a fighting chance at comprehending and succeeding in this class.

**Audrey** is accompanied by a “shadow” student to assist her in taking notes and following the discussion/lecture in class. Audrey battles a disability, and puts in twice the effort of the average student for marks which are barely enough to get by. The school environment for Audrey has never been comfortable, growing up with this disability and having the same social and educational performance expectations on her as the rest of the students. The ‘shadow’ she employs is a friend she has made through the Explorations 2 program (see chapter 6.4). **Shirley** (the shadow) experienced social marginalization growing up in a rural setting and being bullied at school and on the one hour bus rides each day. Not until she moved to Montreal and enrolled in the Adult Education program to complete high school did she escape that environment. They actually met in The Learning Centre where they both spend large blocks of spare time reviewing their school work and getting extra help. Both students are motivated to join the ‘higher education economy.’ It may take them longer than the prescribed two years and they may not know exactly where that will take them, but they persist in finding out. Their persistence has been honed during their primary and secondary years of schooling.

Picture the well intended Economics teacher penetrating the surface of the otherwise flat screen of faces in his classroom. He really wants to engage his students in a meaningful discussion about world economics; he wants it to be relevant and have an impact that will stick and become useful in the way in which they view the world from here on.

**COMPLICATED LIVES:  
THE STUDENT LIFE HISTORY PROJECT**

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## DES VIES COMPLEXES

### Groupe de recherche sur les

#### itinéraires scolaires des étudiants

Jock Mackay, Doug Miller et Guy Quinn

#### Résumé

Cette étude porte sur l'expérience éducative des élèves à faible rendement qui sont admis au Cégep et dépeint leur culture scolaire.

Cette recherche s'appuie principalement sur des entrevues ouvertes qui se sont tenues à l'automne 2002 auprès de 48 nouveaux élèves admis avec un dossier scolaire faible; des entrevues subséquentes ont eu lieu en 2003 et en 2004. Ces entrevues ont été complétées par d'autres menées auprès d'un groupe type constitué d'élèves détenteurs de bourses et de professionnels non-enseignants, ainsi qu'auprès d'un autre groupe type composé d'enseignants, tous du Cégep Vanier. De plus, nous présentons un portrait ethnographique de la perception qu'ont du cycle secondaire les élèves de deux des écoles qui nous envoient le plus de candidats.

Cette étude longitudinale, et principalement qualitative, s'appuie sur environ 2 500 pages de verbatim des entrevues durant lesquelles ces élèves qui performant minimalement, juste assez pour obtenir la note de passage, exprimaient leur point de vue sur la transition du cycle secondaire au cycle collégial. Les termes que nous utilisons proviennent d'un répertoire chargé de sens qui appartient en propre aux élèves rencontrés. Nous ajoutons à l'information obtenue des élèves nos commentaires sur l'arrimage entre les désirs et les attentes exprimés par les élèves et la réalité institutionnelle.

Un gouffre sépare ces deux notions, soit les besoins des élèves et les moyens offerts par l'institution pour les combler, mais elles se rejoignent autour d'un concept que nous identifions comme étant une série d'indices de maturité. Ces indices sont des caractéristiques clés qui nous permettent d'évaluer si l'élève continuera ses études avec succès au cégep.

Nous avons aussi examiné les différents programmes d'accueil et d'intégration offerts. Nous suggérons donc des stratégies de programmation qui pourraient permettre aux

cégeps de mieux adresser les besoins exprimés par les élèves à faible rendement.

## COMPLICATED LIVES:

### THE STUDENT LIFE HISTORY PROJECT

Jock Mackay, Doug Miller and Guy Quinn

#### ABSTRACT

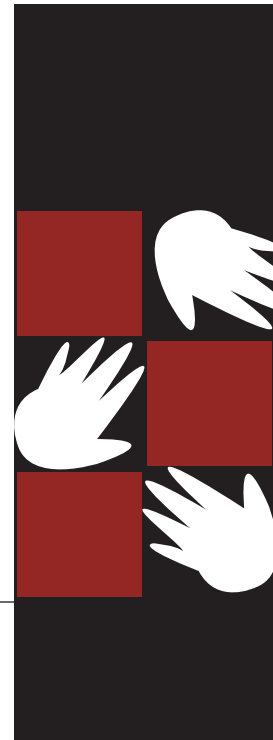
This study examines the educational experience of at-risk students as they arrive at Cegep and presents a portrait of their educational culture. The research was primarily based on open-ended interviews conducted with 48 'weak' incoming students during the Fall semester of 2002 and continued with follow-up interviews with those same students in 2003 and 2004. These interviews were supplemented by focus group sessions with scholarship students and with non-teaching professionals, as well as interviews with a sample of teachers, all at Vanier College. In addition, we present an ethnographic 'snapshot' of students' views of high school, conducted at two major 'feeder' schools for Vanier.

The study is primarily qualitative and longitudinal, evoking from approximately 2500 pages of transcript a narrative of the transition from high school to college, expressing the point of view of the student who was 'just scraping by'. We present this narrative in their own words through a network of meaning which is derived directly from the students' stories as told to us. Their story is augmented by our commentary on the 'fit' between student desires and expectations on the one hand and institutional responses on the other. The model of the interface between these two patterns, what we have called 'the gulf' between students' needs and institutional offerings, revolves around the notion of the Readiness Factor, i.e. an account of key elements in a student's approach which indicate whether he or she is likely to continue and to succeed in college studies. Based on a perusal of existing transition programs, suggestions are made about programmatic strategies in colleges which might respond more directly to the expressed needs of at-risk students.

# Chapter One

## The Crisis of Underachievement

1



### 1.1 The Question/Problem

Conversations among teachers, professionals and administrators express frustration with a qualitative decline in overall student performance, attitude and behaviour in recent years. The focus usually centres on those students who enter the college with the lowest marks. Such 'at-risk' students are often not registered in their program of first choice, often face college 'review boards' for probationary re-entry having failed to pass the minimum requirements, take significantly longer to acquire a diploma than the stipulated norms provide, or drop out of college without finishing (Terril, Ducharme et Plante, 1994). These students originate from a variety of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds (Bureau 1991; Bertrand, 1996; Potvin, 1999 & 2000), are in large proportion male (Lamarre & Ouellet, 1999; Bouchard et al., 1994 & 1996), and sometimes present special challenges in their classroom behaviour. Despite clearly demonstrated talents in other areas and invaluable life experience in so many of their cases, they are blocked by the admission prerequisites from the programs where they could put these talents to best advantage. This has an impact on the self-image of low achievers, who must always deal with the stigma of just scraping through (Robertson, 1996). Many simply try to blend into the background

and not draw attention to themselves; in this way, they form an 'adrift' or 'anonymous' cohort. Others 'act out' in defiance as their self-image is denigrated by the demand to produce in an academic arena which remains alien and may even appear to be hostile.

This study looked primarily at the weakest fifth of our student population, the quintile comprising over 1000 students at Vanier College. The students in this bottom quintile at college are only the tip of an iceberg, since as many as 40% of their cohort has dropped out before completing high school (Gouvernement du Québec, 1992). For many, Cegep is the last chance to continue in the formal academic education system and escape social and economic marginality. Though there are immediate financial costs to support the weaker students throughout the formal educational process, the benefits to society in the form of a more educated and hence productive citizenry are immeasurable. Lower educational attainment is directly correlated to long term costs for society in the form of unemployment, underemployment, welfare costs and criminality (Himmelfarb and Richardson, 1991; Murphy, 1979).

Vanier has a large multiethnic population with first and second generation immigrant experience forming a complex backdrop to

their experiences with educational institutions (Bureau, 1991; Potvin 1999 & 2000). Approximately 65% of Vanier's students are functioning in their second or third language and many have come through three or more different educational jurisdictions on their way to Cegep. Each jurisdictional transfer is accompanied by an institutional appraisal, which in many cases leads to a downgrading of student accomplishments. When amplified by a change in language, highly intelligent and capable students may be relegated to non-academic streams or away from courses which may serve as pre-requisites, or in more negative terms, barriers to university study or professional futures. Institutions that dealt with the students prior to their arriving at Cegep have often failed to engage the learners in the academic discussion, so they arrive at Vanier unable, unprepared or unwilling to succeed within the institution's parameters for success. By itself, the move from high school to Cegep can be a shocking experience, complicating the life of many students as they cross the threshold into adulthood and another phase in their life. When this advancement is complicated by a life of repeated dislocation, the adjustment can be overwhelming.

Existing studies have explored gender (Davis & Nemiroff 1993; Davis & Steiger, 1996), ethnicity (Bertrand, 1994; Potvin, 1999 & 2000), and socioeconomic factors (Curtis, Livingstone & Smaller, 1992) contributing to the poor educational performance of the students in the bottom quintile. The Government of Quebec has reflected this concern and sponsored studies that focus on the at-risk students and the elements that seem readily identifiable as part of the problem (Terril, Ducharme et Plante, 1994). Working class boys, in particular, often score low marks throughout their educational career, are prone to dropping out of school prematurely, and are more resistant to the traditional approach for integrating students into the educational system. Girls more often seem prepared to accept the norms of the institutional process and work to succeed within the system (Badoux et Noircent, 1998; Bouchard et al., 1994 and 1996, Lamarre et Ouellet, 1999; Coulombe, 1993; Crépeau & Gagnon, 1997).

These students often have excellent "street smarts" and abundant talent in fields as varied as sports, music and other entertainments, many aspects of the new information technology, as well as organizational and business skills as practiced in jobs and family businesses. In addition, many are carrying heavy family responsibilities and are extremely preoccupied developing real life survival skills outside of the academy and find it difficult to find the time to attend all their classes, let alone commit themselves to study outside class hours. Regrettably, these capacities are apparently not transferable to academic success and they receive little or no recognition for non-academic skills. Rather than having school validate their life experience, survival skills, and linguistic aptitudes, these students find themselves classed with slow learners and troubled students. The difficulty facing many such students is that the transfer between real life and the classroom is distant and obscure. Their learned and lived experiences do not find validation in the classroom where what they know might be translated into an academic context. There is a gulf between their life experiences and learning styles, on the one hand, and the institutions that are the gate-keepers to their chances of success within Quebec society, on the other.

In recent years there have been a number of college initiatives and special grants from the Ministry of Education to try to reduce the rate at which students discontinue their studies at the end of high school, to encourage the integration of low achieving high school graduates into Cegep, and to induce students to finish their Cegep programs within the prescribed two or three year limits (Cooper, 1998; O'Laighin, 1990 & 1993). Various named packages of courses or programs have been created for the academically weak population. These have typically assumed that the students have poor study skills and lack career motivation, so the institutional response has been various combinations of courses and support mechanisms meant to fill these gaps and bring the students into the "academic conversation" during their first semester.

However, outside of the one-semester remediation in special programs created to deal with them, our institutions have not readily adapted to the disparate learning needs of the bottom quintile. The further the students proceed along their educational career path, the more likely they are to face a teaching style based primarily on classroom lectures so that many special transition programs merely delay failure rather than overcoming it. The dominant learning style in the academic courses is theoretical and oriented to traditional classroom dynamics. This reflects the background of the majority of the faculty, who have succeeded to a very high level within the formal system. Teachers increasingly report that they feel as though they need to choose between the “good” students who respond well to classroom learning and those others who, through a veil of frustration and resentment, succeed only when they are pushed or pulled through course requirements.

The Cegep system should be an ideal environment for a young adult to discover and develop his or her talents by exploring the diverse disciplines and courses available. Too often, however, the institution falls short in its response to diverse learning styles; the needs and interests of those who do not respond to the predominant ‘chalk and talk’ or magisterial pedagogy characteristically are not well served. Educators can develop ways to effectively reach more students by seeking to understand the diversity of learning styles. But beyond the technical definitions of learning styles as such, there remain the issues of how students in the bottom quintile might encounter ways in which their experience is validated in college education on the one hand, and how college programs might provide appropriate support for those whose attachment to the formal educational process is tenuous on the other.

## 1.2 The framework: key issues

The report which follows details the cultural matrix which forms the meaning system of 48 students who began their college studies in the fall of 2002. The culture which emerges from the study is a combination of several subcultures in the teenage universe. The ethnic

and linguistic culture of origin which is instilled by family and community is fundamental to their being; they have lived and breathed it throughout their early years. The general culture of the society around them in Quebec and North America is their daily reality and most are very comfortable in it. As with each generation of youth, they share values, style and lifestyle, gestures, music, pass-times and even an argot - a coded slang bordering on a dialect - with other youth. Finally, they have spent more waking time in school than in any other activity except perhaps watching television, and they have learned assumptions, values and norms, as well as a daily modus operandi, in their educational socialization over 11 or more years. These four cultural sources – the family/ethnic, the societal, the youth and the educational – underlie the social self of our informants, and it is the last of these with which we are primarily concerned.

Yet their educational culture is but one part of educational culture as a whole. The gulf between student realities in school and institutional definitions of education is a yawning chasm. We have found, for instance, that for students in the bottom quintile, the curriculum of a given course is generally incidental. What goes on in the classroom of importance to them derives from other factors altogether: what one’s friends are doing/saying/wearing/thinking/planning is vital, what is funny or entertaining in the room gains attention, and the teachers will have the focus of students only if they can manage to be meaningful and break through the institutional barrier which separates the teachers’ lessons from the students’ lives. The institutional fabric and the pedagogical strategy of teachers must meet the learning style of students.

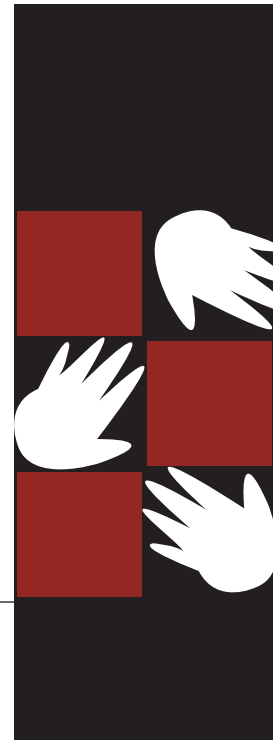




# Chapter Two

## Methodology: The Facts vs. the Story

2



### 2.1 Quantitative and Qualitative Study: Hard Data / Soft Contours

#### Methodology

Educational institutions and their administrations have always dealt by their very nature with a certain tension flowing from the professional and bureaucratic imperatives of operating a mass organization in the context of surrounding societal complexities. In the case of state-sponsored education, funding and budgets, programs and courses, employees and contracts, not to mention the presentation of the evaluation of student performance, must all occur in a publicly transparent fashion and be subject ultimately to political scrutiny. This context has normally demanded a defensible paper trail and without exception, hard information (facts) on which to base administrative decisions, plan institutional action and commit program funding. This has meant that schools and colleges in the public domain have measured their performance with hard facts, i.e. quantitatively, especially through summary statistics.

Beginning with a student's attendance records, final grades and R-scores, pass rates and class averages for courses and programs, statistics derived from OPSCAN respondent sheets for evaluations (and occasionally for opinions),

success rates and key performance indicators for programs and institutions, and continuing through pages of tables for program evaluation, the educational realm is one in which 'objective' data holds such a privileged place as a basis for the direction of institutional resources that it might seem to a casual observer that there could be no other. But as a secondary school student explained to La Presse reporter Marie Allard: "Entrer en relation avec les jeunes, c'est long et ardu, il faut arrêter de faire rentrer ça dans des colonnes comptables alors que ça n'a rien à voir".

Qualitative, longitudinal research is time-consuming, expensive and usually unnerving for researchers. The first answer to the first question asked usually offers up nothing of significance by way of findings, hence if the objective is to find out what participants themselves understand about what they are doing, there needs to be a dogged tailing of the respondent by the researcher until the flow of meaning is uttered directly; it never comes from the answer to the first question and rarely even from the first interview. Documentary filmmakers quite commonly spend a year or more getting to know their subjects before they engage a cameraperson and begin collecting the footage. When asked about this, filmmakers' answers refer not only to sensitivity and comfort levels, hence an aesthetically better

final product, but also typically comment that if the process is too rushed they quite literally do not get the same story. Trust, confidence, truth, change, patience are all elements of the process when the research engagement occurs over an extended period of time. By definition a longitudinal study follows real lives in real time and takes at least ‘snapshots’ at different points in time. The purpose of such research is to achieve depth in ‘real lives’ and to understand change and stasis. Only longitudinal research is true to life history (except when you rely on respondents’ memories). ‘Tracking’ lives in progress takes time and, as Benjamin Franklin would have been quick to remind us, time is money. In fact, longitudinal analysis is relatively rare not only because it is time-consuming and patience-wearing but also because it is expensive. Longitudinal studies often become personal projects after the funding has run out and the publication prospects have dried up.

## 2.2 Deep Organic Connection

For us, this study was technically conducted over three years, but in less direct ways we have been conducting the Student Life History Project for some ten or fifteen years through our ‘deep organic connection.’

Our research process was largely driven by standard techniques which one would expect in a study of this type. However, the study has also benefited from what we have come to call our ‘deep organic connection.’ We on the research team have a multiplicity of connections to the college, its staff and students, as well as to the surrounding community. These connections have often served the ends of our research in regular but highly unpredictable ways. When an informant was registered in a course taught by one of the researchers, it became less difficult to arrange interview 3; several of the informants came for extra help at the Learning Centre where one of us works; one among us met the parents of another interviewee at an athletic event; several of the names of project participants came up in the files for one of us who was coordinating a program; one among us had worked in the registrar’s office, hence was familiar with codes, filing systems and employees whose expertise was extremely valuable; one

informant was the son of a former student, another later studied in a university class with a friend. And so it went, our 85 collective years of active involvement at Vanier College spilling into a network of connections which often added a richness and personal precision to the more ‘formal’ information rendered by our official research design.

## 2.3 Getting to the Interviews

We have defined at-risk students as those whose academic performance falls in the bottom fifth or quintile as measured by their high school leaving average. As it happened, the bottom quintile in Autumn 2002, when we began the study, was almost exactly the 409 new students whose average was under 70% as they left secondary school and arrived at Vanier College. These 409 students are the population on whom the study is based. Using a table of random numbers, a sample of 120 students was selected, of whom we intended to interview 60. And so began the preparatory mail out with a pamphlet explaining the project and an appeal to participate. Then came phone calls, messages and call-backs, followed by the scheduling of interviews. Many of the students in the sample refused to be interviewed. More frustrating yet, students agreed on the telephone to be interviewed, but did not arrive at the appointed time and place (this was disproportionately the case for boys). One of the clues to this possibility was a cheery “See you then” when the researcher had not arranged for a meeting place at which the interview could occur.

An interview schedule was developed which asked students in an open-ended fashion about the various aspects of their lives: school, home, community, work, boyfriend or girlfriend. Always the grounding questions were about school. By Christmas vacation of 2002 we had conducted 37 interviews and exhausted the list of 120 names. In January we convinced 11 students who had come for their Review Board hearing (because they had not passed the minimum number of courses to remain in good standing) to cooperate with our study. A total of 48 interviews were conducted with students from the bottom quintile in the first year, 25 were again interviewed in the second year, and

20 of those were interviewed a third time in 2004-05. Each of the students we interviewed was given a pseudonym for purposes of this report, one which reflected the same cultural origin as our real informant.

These students, the Sample48 selected from the bottom quintile, provided the essential information for this study. Other sources also provided key perspectives, and these perspectives are detailed in the chapters which follow: high school students from two large feeder schools in the northern Metropolitan area (Ch. 3.1); four focus groups of scholarship students (Ch. 6.1); individual interviews with fourteen teachers (Ch. 6.2); and one focus group with three non-teaching professionals at Vanier (Ch. 6.3). The manner in which each was selected and the format of the interviews is explained in the appropriate section of these chapters.

## 2.4 Performance Indicators for the Sample48 and the Population

This section reports the academic status of the Sample48 as of August, 2005, and contrasts their performance with the cohort which they represent, i.e. the 409 students in the bottom quintile who arrived at the college in A02.

First, we present tables showing the progress of the Sample48 through their programs. As noted at the end of this section, the number of graduates, dropouts and continuations is about what one would expect for the cohort, as is the graduation rate and the average grade.

We then look more specifically at the progress of the sample48 in the bell-wether courses of English and Mathematics and contrast their records with those of the cohort.

### Current Status of Sample48

	Number	Percentage
Still at Cegep	17	35
Graduates	12	25
Drop Outs	19	40

Still at Cegep: This group includes 4 students who are currently registered in Continuing Education and 5 in the technology programs where the average amount of time needed to graduate is 4 years.

### Members of the Sample48 who have graduated.

<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Program</u>	<u>DEC completed</u>	<u># semesters</u>
Melanie	Social Science	A04	5
Felicité	Social Science	A04	5
Stephane	Communications	H05	6
Ahmed	Social Science	H05	6
Melissa	Social Science	----	No EEE
Didian	Social Science	H05	6
Paula	Social Science	E05	7
Manon	Communications	A04	5
Ludmila	Communications	H04	4
Jennifer	Communications	H05	6
Raffi	Social Science	H05	6
Vishek	Social Science	A04	5

7 women      5 men

Melissa completed her course requirements for her Cegep diploma in 4 semesters and has started university as a mature student, so we have counted her as having completed her DEC. However, she is a very intelligent and thoughtful person who doesn't believe in exams as a measurement of student learning or growth and so, on principle, she does not plan to write the English Exit Exam even though she could easily pass this final requirement. This means that technically she has not completed a Cegep diploma.

### English

All students are required to complete 4 English courses as part of their diploma requirements. In the sample, 42 of 48 students took a remedial course in their first semester, including 2 who needed pre-college English (603-001). Ironically, one of these claimed English as his main language, but acknowledged that he was bad at languages in school.

- 603-101-30 is the English for competent writers.
- 603-101-31 is meant for people who are competent in English but are weak writers.
- 603-101-33 is designed for English second language (ESL) students whose basic skills need upgrading.

On the whole, the figures for the Sample 48 reflect a great deal of similarity to the group from which they were drawn.

Course	Sample 48		Quintile 409	
603-001	2	4%	20	5%
603-101-30	7	15%	74*	18%
failed once	2	29%	18	24%
failed twice	--	--	4	5%
failed three times	--	--	1	1%
603-101-31	31	65%	260*	64%
failed once	6	19%	79	30%
failed twice	5	16%	21	8%
failed three times	3	10%	8	3%
failed four times	2	10%	2	1%
603-101-33	11	23%	88*	22%
failed once	3	27%	23	26%
failed twice	--		11	13%

\*Totals add up to more than 409 in the total because a number of students would fail one level and retake the course in another level the following semester

### Mathematics

Many students enter Cegep wishing to take Mathematics prerequisites that they did not acquire in high school. Some need them to enter Science or technology programs, but many more take the Mathematics because they feel left behind or are missing opportunities to which Mathematics opens

the door. The year-long high school Mathematics 536 is covered in two parts by Functions I and Functions II in Cegep, and students take whichever they need, or both, depending on their plans.

Many students take the Physical Science and Physics remedial courses for the same reasons as they do the Mathematics.

Course	Sample48		Quintile 409	
Functions I (201-007)	18	38%	87	21%
Failed once	7	39%	28	32%
Failed twice	1	2%	4	5%
Failed three	1	2%	1	1%
Functions II (201-009)	15	31%	90	22%
Failed once	7	47%	36	40%
Failed twice	1	7%	6	7%
Failed three or more	--	--	2	2%
Physical Science 982-021 (H.S. Physics 203-006)	16	33%	69	17%
Failed once	8	50%	26	38%
Failed twice	--	--	2	3%

### Overall Average

As a measure of how representative the sample was of the population they were drawn from, we present below the overall averages by semester. This covers all courses and all grades.

Once again, the sample48 closely paralleled the performance of the population they came from.

	Sample48	Quintile 409
A02	55.3%	53.5%
H03	55.2%	53.5%
A03	55.2%	53.5%
H04	55.5%	53.5%
A04	55.4%	53.5%
Over five semesters	55.1%	53.5%

### Summary of Findings:

On the whole, the students who make up the Sample48 reflect the progress made by their peers in the larger population. The sole outstanding differences in their patterns appear to be that almost twice as high a percentage in the sample as in the cohort registered in Functions I and in Physical Science. Perhaps the self-selection of the sample, those who agreed to be interviewed, was a factor, perhaps the difference was anomalous. Their overall patterns conform to the highly consistent statistical conclusions, widely acknowledged, which correlate high school marks with success in Cegep studies.

Twelve have graduated (including Melissa) and of those students who are still in college, 4 are currently registered in Continuing Education and 5 in technology programs, where the mean time taken to graduate is 4 years. (Our study tracked them for 7 semesters.) This speaks to the persistence factor, that more than 3 years after the study began, this many are still striving 'to be somebody' through the education process.

Historically, English and particularly the first Cegep English course (603-101) serves as a bell-wether of student success. Since all the students who persist at their studies long enough to acquire a college diploma must pass four English courses and a final English Exit Exam, the English Department has made great efforts to accommodate the diverse needs of as many students as possible. A reflection of their dedication lies in the over 90% pass rate that Vanier's students achieve despite the enormous linguistic diversity and weaknesses they begin with. In addition, research undertaken by Marleigh Greaney at Vanier College shows a direct link between student success in college and their willingness to participate in English remedial courses either before or in their first semester.

The two high school level Mathematics courses and the Physical Science and Physics remedial courses are another historical bell-wether set of courses that are not obligatory, but which nonetheless serve as elimination courses for many students. They weed out a number of students who had planned to enter one of the technology programs, or Science or Commerce in the pre-university stream. A pass in one of these courses serves as a sign of student success.

Our students in the Sample48 are performing much as one would expect if one were to extrapolate from large data bases of students with similar records, and their results are similar to those of the cohort as a whole. Their overall average is consistently higher than the cohort by about 1.5%, though both are below a passing grade. Perhaps this slight difference can be attributed to the fact that the Sample48 agreed to participate in this study.

Their willingness to go that extra step might be paying off, though only by a very slight margin, also in their academic performance. We hope so.

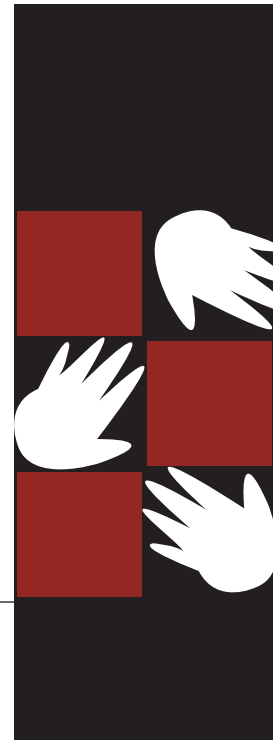




# Chapter Three

## High School Report

### 3



The high school segment of the research has two parts. One part is a study conducted in two regional high schools by an educational ethnographer who was hired by contract, and the second part is composed of the recollections from high school by our Sample48. The method used by the ethnographer was somewhat different from that used for our interviews (see 3.1 and 3.2 below). This report on high school experience, then, drew from approximately a dozen different high schools. Nonetheless, the consistency of the message was inescapable.

### 3.1 Report from the Feeder Schools

#### 3.1.1 A Note on Method

Once again, the tools of the research project proper were supplemented by our ‘deep organic connection,’ most especially through information gathered as parents of and volunteers for teen-aged children in the same system.

Gaining official access to the schools was a hurdle of considerable proportion. An unanticipated resistance to our doing research in schools took the form of repeated presentations of our project to several layers of committee structure, a non-refundable fee of \$500, and a careful specification of the limits of our ‘intrusion’ into the high school system.

We did come to understand why the EMSB, in particular, wanted to limit the amount and type of research which is conducted in its schools. Nonetheless, the formal mechanisms of approval led to a delay of several months.

The perceptions of the secondary five students were gathered using a number of different means to elicit response; they fall under the qualitative research ethnographic umbrellas of participant observation, interviews and, although not a hallmark of ethnography, even journal writing, student guided tours of the school and photographic journaling. It was hoped that the photographs, journal writing and student guided tours would lead to a greater depth in considering their views on school and possibly lead to some rich descriptions aside from the confines of an interview.

All were meant to create dialogue within a group that is often associated with such distancing terminology as “teenage angst”; in effect, to encourage the goal of ethnography, that is, to reconstruct the world of a cultural occurrence or group. The idea that the secondary five students were the experts allowed us as adults to gain insight into ‘what school is really all about’; in effect, what their world was really all about.

Two high schools that are considered “feeder” schools to Vanier were selected as locations for this study, one within the Sir Wilfred Laurier School Board and the other within the English Montreal School Board (EMSB). Secondary V participants were chosen by different techniques at each school. Within the Sir Wilfred Laurier school, the principal called an assembly of the general graduating class and requested voluntary participants. At the EMSB school, the vice-principal narrowed the participant population to those students who were already “coded” as at-risk. Each scenario made for distinctive dialogue and a point of interesting comparison. The differences between the two schools, however, were not seen to be significantly different enough to distinguish between the two. Therefore, for the purposes of this report the summaries and findings represent the sentiments of both groups combined. A diverse group of students were resolute about having their voices heard. Only nine can be considered academically at-risk and two are honour roll students, the other three lie in between.

### 3.1.2 The Stonebanks Report\*

This section is a much abridged version of Dr. Christopher Stonebanks’ report from the two Vanier ‘feeder’ high schools. It details the student comments on relationships with peers and the social life in schools, relationships with teachers and staff, attitudes toward the academic process, perceptions of school as a whole, and of the classroom in particular. He also drew out comments on how their future in Cegep appeared from the perspective of their location in the last year of secondary school. As an eyewitness reporter, he often uses the first person ‘I’ or ‘me’ in his writing.

The following comments are based on several meetings and general discussion with about a dozen students at each of the two schools, and a wide-ranging interview with 14 of them after they had been asked to keep a journal and take photos on a disposable camera which was provided. Each interview was preceded by a tour of the school for Dr. Stonebanks which

was conducted by the student. The photos were used exclusively to stimulate discussion during the interview.

The overwhelming message from the high school students is that high school is all about social life. Markers of style and identity, intentional communities (often in the form of cliques) such as skaters or smokers, belonging or being snubbed, bullying or being bullied, seeing friends, making friends, and avoiding others are all part of a dynamic pattern of very active social interaction at school. The curriculum and what is said and done by teachers or the school administration is only of passing interest unless it is very intrusive, in which case it is often the object of discussion, gossip, or verbal abuse. The big exception to this last statement is the not uncommon phenomenon of the impact of one very committed teacher. The teacher’s passion for a subject, willingness to go to great lengths to make the subject relevant, or genuine interest in individual students as persons is usually what enables the institutional barrier to be broken.

### Themes Generated from Interviews

Six themes were generated from the student responses in the sixteen interviews carried out. For purposes of brevity they have been collapsed into three.

#### Relationships with Peers and Social Life in School

This is an often overlooked and often trivialized part of teenage North American life. Within the responses of the students, for better or worse, they felt that positive peer relationships had a direct correlation with their desire to attend school and in reverse, negative relationships created stressors that brought about not wanting to attend school. All participants had strong opinions about the effect one’s social life had on their life in school.

The students were asked what motivated them to come to school everyday. Friends and family were the key reasons.

\*The full report (60 pages) is available at the Vanier College Library

After describing the “mechanics” of his school day, Rory was asked what motivated him to get out of bed every morning to come to school. His response centered around “friends” as the main reason.

**Rory** *Friends and the fact I know who's going to be there... Yeah, good friends and like that... and if you have a boyfriend or a girlfriend that always helps, I guess... I don't (have a girlfriend). But there's always like that girl in your mind... It's who's gonna be there is what motivates me to get to school.*

According to Rory, friends or one's peers also play a role in not wanting to go to school:

**Rory** *Totally, there is (students who don't want to come to school because of their peers). Like there's always the people who have fights with their friends and... it's like you don't feel like going to school when like you're in a fight with your friends, especially if it's a close friend.*

Annie and Ramesh echoed Rory's perspective of ‘friends’ being the motivator for going to school and also felt that class itself was the ‘low point’ of the school day.

**Annie** *Every morning I think to myself, “what I'm gonna think”... like because, to talk with my friends is like a new adventure every day, you know? Cause we're just... we're so funny, we're so like original, I guess, imaginative and like... Going to class, I definitely don't look forward to doing that... (The high point of my day is) (s)eeing everyone, seeing people, just socializing and having fun... Low point is having to drag myself to class, yeah, definitely. Like economics, today I don't have economics. (puts her hands together to thank God)*

**Ramesh** *Friends (motivate me to come to school)... If they don't come to school, the school week is boring. Cause of them it's like... most of the friends I have, they always force me to do school work. If I come to school, I know they'll like push me and this and that. Push me into going to classes. If they don't come to school, I don't really feel like coming to school, cause I know it would be boring after that.*

More than one student cited family and social upward mobility as primary motivators for continuing their schooling.

**Anthony** *My parents (are my motivation for going to school)... My dad, he wants me to be good in life, he's the one that inspires me to go to school... 'Cause he has a good job and he makes a lot of money and I want to become like him when I grow up.*

**Sima** *What motivates me to get up and go to school is the fact that, you know what, I might actually be somebody when I grow up, that's what motivates me. Like I don't owe it to the work, I owe it to myself. I owe it to the people that brought me up. I owe it to the people that pay my school fee. I owe it to the woman that makes my lunch every morning. I owe it to the sister that buys me whatever it is I want for Christmas and my brother that always protects me and my dad that always gives me lunch money. I owe it to those people to come to school. I owe it to those two 50 year old parents that I have that came off of another country to an unknown other country with one suitcase, a job that, you know, they like doing now, but they had to start off with not liking. I owe it to them to come to school every day.*

The division, or cliques, that have been a part of high school and teenage life are still evident and powerful influences in the minds of these students. All participants had what they perceived as a strong understanding of the social ordering that made up their school life.

Of all the participants, no one had a more elaborate vision of these social cliques than Rory. After a brief tour of the school he gave his assessment of the ‘pecking order’ that makes up this micro-society. After further explanation of terms, ‘smokers’ for those who want to appear cool, and ‘rejects’ for the lowest on the social rung, Rory assured me that other students would understand this terminology.

**Rory** *I put down that the school is basically separated into groups, which are the smokers... that's one of the groups. I basically... it's three separate groups; the smokers, the casualties and the rejects... The three major groups... The smokers, they're the major groups, okay. Then they kind of branch off into other groups, kind of thing. So, then, there's the smokers who do this and then there's the smokers who do that and it's kind of the same thing for each group. The smokers basically hang out and they all bum cigarettes off each other. The casualties... there's people who... we all know each other and we then get to know... like we even know the smokers and we even know the rejects.*

*We...we're right in the middle, which I find is the best place to be in high school... Like no one hates you and no one loves you, but like you're liked by everybody.*

Rory was asked to elaborate on what he called the clique named 'casualties'.

**Rory** *Casualties...I can't give a description (laughs)...for me, I don't know, it's a word I use to as my own group, they're like the group that everybody knows...Well, we're not victims, we're just...well, we're victims to the smokers, but we're not... 'cause like they're higher than us...Well, not cooler, but... Yeah, in their minds they're cooler than us. And then, everybody in high school thinks they're better than everybody else.*

Nancy began with a description of social group choices that had little to do with race and ethnicity. However, when challenged that this had nothing to do with choices for who "you hung out with" she blushed and laughed

**Nancy** (laughs) *There's a lot people that are friends with me! In my circle, it's 'cause we talk about the same movies, like our culture movies, our cultural programs, all that kind of stuff.*

At the beginning, she stated that ethnicity, culture and race had little to do with choices for peers.

**Nancy** *All sorts of multicultural groups. There's like...Everyone goes with different kinds, it's not like you stick to your colour or you stick to your race. So, it's like a multicultural kind of group...They're like mixed, you know? Like white people could show up with black people...It's just the people who I'm going to meet, if they're nice and they're my type, then I'm going to hang around with them...Like, not the type of people that smoke, I wouldn't chill with those kind of people. I like people who are more like me. I don't know. I like to tend to just hang out, go to the mall and stuff, that's the kind of friends I like. I don't like the types that just stand outside and smoke, I don't like that.*

She continued her description touching upon the common interests she felt unified groups.

**Nancy** *Yeah, there's a smokers gang. Like, smokers. A group of gangs, like game players...Yeah, like we have a room for the game "dungeons", with a teacher,*

*so there's a group that's always there...That game, you know, "Dungeons and Dragons"?...Well, my friends and I, we're like totally, are like all my race; we're all Sri-Lankan. But, like.*

As I asked her if her own Sri-Lankan origins had anything to do with her choice of friends, she then made an effort to show there was indeed ethnic diversity in her peer group by stating:

**Nancy** *Yeah, we have Indian girls, we have...*

As she realized that her own social clique was perhaps not the exemplar multicultural model she had been describing, she acknowledged that social groupings could indeed be influenced by one's race or ethnicity.

**Nancy** *...I don't know how to say this...you should walk around at lunch time, you'll see everything!... Okay, there's the "Black group", which they always play music, hip-hop music and just like, chill there. There's the "weird girls" that are always in the dance room and sit in council and grad committee, there the ones that are really active and sit in activities, those kind of girls...just about that, yeah...Okay, the first floor, it's all brown. They're all, like, if you want to look for them all then you'll find them all on the first floor. The second floor, is all the grade ten, yeah, the grade tens at one point, and like the front and at the side there's grade eleven and then basically all grade elevens.*

Mary Anne, an above average student, notes that, even for her, the relationships you have with your peers in the school has a profound influence on your studies:

**Mary Anne** *Let's just say like, I don't know, let's just say you're in a fight with your friends. Let's say you're doing a test and you're always thinking about like wow, what the hell just happened, you know, like...and how are you supposed to concentrate on that one test and you're always like, oh my god, more pressure is on you and then you think about the, wow, about that situation and your friend, you know, like. And then the teachers are looking at you, "you have to do well, you have to do well", you know. And they're writing the time on the board. Twenty minutes left on the board and you're not even finished like, half of it.*

Chris describes the difficulty students feel trying to fit in, especially if they already feel like an outsider.

**Chris** *Mostly...other people react kind of strange, like somebody just comes up and says "hello" and stuff and they wonder who is this person and stuff and start talking...I think it's kind of hard to like get into a group, like you want to join them and, you know, hang around with them. I find that kind of hard. Sometimes they don't know you and they judge you by the way you are, who you are, what you look like. Some people are like that though.*

It should be noted that Nancy still felt it was the common interests that created a peer group and that being ethnically similar simply increased the chances of sharing values, pastimes and pursuits. As she described the other groups in the school, she did tend to focus on the interests and actions of the groups as opposed to their ethnicity. Continuing her appraisal of the different cliques she described those she felt were unfavourable.

Unlike Nancy, Ramesh, a laid-back and reserved young man dressed in a pseudo hip-hop style, made no pretension of what separates groups in his school. He begins by describing where kids hang out.

**Ramesh** *And then the first floor first. 'Cause like we have three floors and they're all separated. Like first floor is all like, all the Sri Lankans. Second floor is like the gee...like, the Italians and the Greeks and upstairs...*

Although Anthony noted that other students may be more inclined to hang out with their own ethnicity, he added that he does move between other ethnic groups.

Karen, a young woman who described herself as being value conscious, began her description of the peers in her school by first focussing on common interests, but as she continued, once again ethnicity and race came into the equation.

**Karen** *I put down you have the different groups, you have the more sporty ones, then you have...I think in school we're all pretty much connected. Like we'll hang around with the same people but, we won't stay away*

*from others, like we're really just all together. Like I have a group of friends but I still hang out with other people too in groups...Yeah, you have the ones, like the dancers, they really stick together. Then you have the guys...not really the ethnic groups cause we really pretty much are together, but it's just, most of the Black people stick together and something like that.*

Describing her own social circle, she pointed out that although her peers may determine social circles based on race or ethnicity, her group of friends were multicultural and they hung out because they shared similar values.

Megan's mention of friends being an important reason for coming to school is a sentiment echoed by all of the participants. However, as Karen illustrates, relationships can also distract from academic pursuits.

**Karen** *Okay. Like, my best friend. Well, she's not really my best friend, like she is my best friend but we are more like family, because since my mom is out of town a lot, I really like stay at her house every weekend. So, her mom is like my aunt and she just lost her baby. And...it was really hard on everybody because she was about six months pregnant and she had to give birth to it...and I was there and it was hard to see them go through that because...she had just gotten married to this guy and she had her daughter and then there's the step-sister and they wanted to have one together. And they were trying and they actually, she actually got pregnant and then to lose that? And everybody was excited about it. So it really put me...I was really depressed for a while. And then, at the same time one of my other friends got pregnant and she got an abortion. Well, she's not really a close friend...well, we were close before. And.. I guess it's because...what, in less than two years, I lost two babies. So, it was hard.*

### Relations with Teachers and Staff

Although the relations between one's peers are a significant pressure on a high school student's life, they must also contend with the other major stakeholders in the school community: teachers and staff.

Teachers at the high school level tend to teach to the subject not the student.

It's a common observation gained from talking with the students. Of the classes and teachers

they did not like, the teachers were usually described as more focused on the content and subject of the class as opposed to being concerned with developing varied instructional approaches to assist varied learning skills and abilities. Of the classes these students appreciated, they always noted that the teacher was intent on teaching to the entire class: to foster a student-wide appreciation of the class, as opposed to seeing themselves as some sort of gate-keeper or academic ‘weeder’ of a subject area. Knowledge of the subject area was seen as important, but not at the expense of progressive teaching skills.

Without a doubt, even though the participants had positive examples of teachers they liked, their account of the relationship between students and teachers was adversarial and filled with adults’ misunderstanding of teenage life.

From a conversation with Megan, it was striking to note her ease at sharing this personal information with me, a stranger, as opposed to approaching a teacher or staff member at her school. It struck me as peculiar that the relationship this student had with her teachers and the staff was lacking in some essential element that made her reluctant to seek assistance from the available institutional resources.

From the participants’ responses it is clear that the relationship, specifically the negative relationship they have with their teachers, is perceived as having an impact on their academic pursuits.

From the physical space of the class to the actual teaching, the students were asked to explain why they did not like certain classes. Ramesh’s answer, for instance doesn’t focus on petty, personal dislikes, instead he criticizes his teacher’s classroom practices and skills.

**Ramesh** *The way the French teacher could improve the class is to be more organized...She doesn't even tell you when you have a test or nothing. Like we had an oral exam for our French. We just walked in class and she's like, "okay, you're having your exams"...The exam is very important this year, but she didn't really tell us that we were going to have it.*

Karen complains that her teacher isn’t adequately prepared for the different learning skills that are present in her class:

**Karen** *'Cause she would give us something I had already done in elementary so I felt kind of...like I would...I told her. I had a meeting with her too and I was like I need better material. I need to do something more and she's like, "no"...She's like because the class isn't ready for that...So she wouldn't give me any extra work or something like that...Personally, (I thought she wouldn't give me extra work) because she was lazy. But, cause I came and I saw her many times to tell her can I have extra work or I'll tell her I don't know what to say about this like she'll give me an oral and I'll be like this is too easy for me. Like talk about your weekend. In Grade 10 when you've been in French Immersion your whole life. I start losing my French.*

Nancy objects to a teacher that seems to have little concern with actual teaching:

**Nancy** *I don't (cope in that classroom)! I would like ask a question and she'd be like, "Well, don't you know the answer by now?!" and I'd be like, you're the teacher, you're supposed to help me! Like last time I told her! (...) Yeah! I told her, "you're a teacher, you're supposed to help me!", like, you're telling me I'm supposed to know it. Maybe if I don't know something you're supposed to tell me. And, she was just like, "get out of the classroom!"...Like, we had an exam and I just asked her beforehand, like, what exactly are we supposed to do? Because she doesn't explain, she just gives us the paper and she tells us, "just do it". And I was like, really angry and I was like, "okay, what are we doing?" and she was like, "no", she won't explain it. And then I got really mad and I went to the teacher and said, "aren't you supposed to help me?!" And there was another time where I...she told me...it was a response to a question, and I did but I didn't say it right. But, she went to the next person and just because she said it right she was like, okay with it. And that got me really mad because it cost me...so I really don't want to go, but I'm forced to go to that class.*

Moreover, Nancy also feels that effort in this case is useless as the teacher has already established a self-fulfilling prophesy with her students:

**Nancy** *Yeah, French, I don't put any effort into (the class) because there's no point. Even if I do she will just say it's wrong.*

It's important to remember that these students do not usually complain about the subject matter, rather it's the manner in which the teacher approaches their profession that seems to be the determinant of frustration.

**Sheila** *Well, yeah, I enjoy some classes. There's other classes that I wish I could enjoy more, it's just there's teachers that don't make it interesting.*

Anthony reveals his respect for his History teacher who demonstrates perseverance in a subject area he finds boring. Anthony also expresses his admiration for the way in which this teacher tries to make his class more engaging.

**Anthony** *It just doesn't get through my head a lot. There's a lot of stuff to remember from the 1989 to like going back to 1650's. There's a lot of stuff...No, I like to learn history, but it's hard to memorize every single category that's there. Yeah, (the teacher) tells us to memorize everything for the tests...It's just like the pressure he's giving us every single time. He's like scaring us with a... Like the January exam is coming up, he's scaring that class, like, "you guys have to pass this, you have to pass this, or else you guys have to come in August", you know. He's like giving us pressure on what we have to do. And I understand we got to pass this, but he's like always mentioning it every class and everything. He's the teacher, so he's got to do his job.*

Ramesh also speaks highly of the same history teacher and commends him for making teaching relevant to the students' present lives.

**Ramesh** *My history teacher (is the best teacher I can think of)...He's pretty funny! He makes fun of a lot of teachers...He talks about the history, he's like, 'cause you know how we have uniforms, he's like, I was one of the teachers that disagreed with having uniforms. He's like, all the other teachers wanted to have uniforms and I don't like them, and...He's a pretty good teacher...For History, when he goes back in time, he always uses himself. He's like, you know the Algonquians and Iroquois and all them? He uses himself as a reference, example...He'll be like, if I was an Iroquois, like I used to make tee-pees and go farming and all that stuff. And if you guys were farmers you would be Algonquins and you would be doing this now. I wouldn't like you guys and he starts making fun of us. It's pretty fun...Like sometimes*

*when you go in (to other classes), it's just dead. When you go in with him, he'll make you alive.*

When asked, each student had a positive and negative response to their relationship with the employees of their school.

All of the participants continued the theme of making classrooms relevant, engaging and fun. These were all valued classroom teaching assets.

In spite of being the interviewee who used the Sesame Street example of good teaching, Sima also noted that commitment to genuine and dedicated educating was the hallmark of an excellent teacher.

Sima points out that she now really dislikes Mathematics class and wonders what happened to her early childhood when she loved the subject.

**Sima** *(The class I really dislike) has to be Math... You know what, I think honestly it has to be, it has to be the way the class is being taught, because I remember being in elementary and my sister would be in high school and she used to teach me algebra and I used to be able to do it. And I used to be like, oh that's why, oh yeah, okay. And when it got to high school, I'm like, oh yeah, I'm gonna do good, Math my sister already taught me. I got to class, oh I'm just waiting for the bell to ring, I'm just waiting for the bell to ring. I don't know, I think it's the way the class is taught. I pretty much think that you can learn anything, it depends on how it's taught to you.*

Responses from the participants revealed that they have multiple viewpoints on the staff of their school. Their perspectives were not based on generalisations; rather they had specific examples of positive and negative encounters with staff members.

**Sheila** *Well, some teachers are...there's teachers that I could talk with and there's teachers that I find that I can't, but...not all teachers are the same...Well, if I'm having a bad day, I'll say...like teachers will notice I'm having a bad day and they'll say "are you okay", I'm like yeah, just stuff at home or something. Like they'll ask me, do you want to talk about it and I'll say no, it's okay.*



**Nancy** *Teachers? There are some teachers that I really, really like and I always joke around with and some that I really hate, that, I admit, sometimes I give attitude to. Like, for example, I won't give names, but my French teacher, she has a problem. Like, every time someone would ask her a question she would get aggravated! Like, since I was in grade seven, eight and nine, I used to get 70s and 80s in French and like, when I had her in grade ten and eleven I ended up failing...it was like, really dumb. 'Cause, we had a like, writing exam and she's like, she'll just pick one through the year and we didn't try, and we might not have tried in the other ones and she wouldn't give us a second chance to do another writing exam, which really got me mad and the fact that I had her this year again and they wouldn't let me switch out of her class got me really mad! Because I ended up failing with a 59, in the first term. And French is something I've always passed. Like, if you look at my records, you will see that I was always in the 80s and 90s with French. And there was this girl that switched out of my French class and she went from 50s, now to 80s! So, she was like also, you know, her parents even came and talked to them about it because they knew it wasn't her fault... (My relationship with her is) (n)ot good at all! Like, most teachers that come in I say "good morning miss" or "good morning sir"... I don't even look at her.*

**Ramesh** *It depends on the teacher. Some teachers, my Math teacher, I could talk to about some stuff, like she always asks me questions, like how are you doing with your girlfriend and this and that. She always sees me and her, we're always in front of her locker. She always laughs at us, like jokes around with us. Like I can be open with her. The French teacher too. She's kind of mean... Well, French teacher, I'm okay with, medium. I can talk to her about some stuff... Well, like there's this one guy, Mr. (teacher), he's one person you could be open with and he'll always joke around with you. If you're with my French, you can't joke around with her. If you like make a joke, she'll probably give you a detention or something... You could talk to her, but not about everything. You can't really be open with her.*

**Karen** *Yeah (my relationship with different teachers is different)! Some teachers, I'm just in their class to learn. I'll do my work and then get over it. Other teachers I'll stick around and talk. The teachers who are more open and will talk and make the class more fun, you'll have a tendency to actually talk with them and to interact and tell them what's going on.*

*Other teachers who just sit there, and you can see that they're only there to teach you, that they don't really care about everything else, you know? I can't say names, right?... Okay, well, my English teacher, he's really cool and he's open and he's like, he'll sit there and he'll talk to us about anything. And he makes the class fun, like we really look forward to coming to that class, we don't want to leave it. And last year, we had a French teacher and she was there and she said, "if you fail, it's your problem". So, it's like, she really didn't even want to be there. She didn't care if you had problems (learning differences) or you didn't understand. She was just there to give you marks... Let's say, my friend one day, she didn't understand the homework and the teacher would turn to her and say, "are you stupid?" yeah, yeah! Like, "how could you not understand?" And, like, I get upset because I complain to the school and they still don't do anything about it.*

Going into greater depth to their opening responses, I asked the participants to describe a good teacher or staff member.

**Nancy** *Okay, my English teacher, he's like the best teacher ever! I mean like, you go in class and he'll be like, "Hello Nancy!" He'll be like, (uses happy voice) "Sit down". Everything we do in that class he'll make interesting. Like, let's say we're reading a novel, he'll make a game out of the novel! Like, he'll ask us questions and he'll put us in groups and we'll be watching movies based on it. Like, interesting stuff, you know? He won't just sit there and go, "Okay, read this, read that". He makes it interesting for us to learn more. And you see, in that class I get like, 85s and 90s.*

In elaboration of why this teacher is viewed as positive, Nancy noted that it was because he interacted with them as peers; more as a teenager and less like an adult, a point that Karen and Anthony also endorsed.

**Nancy** *Like last week I had a fight with that girl that I was telling you, and he was like, "Oh, what happened?" right after and he acted like he was just like a student; you know, and he was a typical (name of school) student. So, like you know, you can really interact with him because he's more like a student, type of thing. And he's more of a teenager, you know? He has the brain of a teenager! So, he knows what goes around and comes around, like he knows about the parents' rules and everything. He's just an amazing teacher!*

**Karen** *The best teacher for me is someone who doesn't treat you like a student, who doesn't treat you like some stupid little person; you're someone to teach something to. I want someone who gets involved and wants to know a little bit more about you, to get to know what's going on... Yeah (they can be that way)!*

**Anthony** *Yeah, my English teacher, he's a nice guy... Yeah, exactly, I can talk to him about anything I want and I he's going to tell me to take it easy... Yeah, well, like once he made us write an essay and I wrote to him about my life and I felt comfortable about writing my life to him, you know. So, yeah, I could talk to him about anything.*

On the other hand, Ramesh and Sima point out that a good teacher is someone that takes the time to explain the subject and other students, like Karen, expand on Nancy's point that making the class interactive and relevant to the student's daily life is also important. It is also noteworthy that Sima points out that classroom management is also an asset.

In elaborating on the specifics of what she didn't like about the teacher Karen focused on her methods of teaching.

**Karen** *(The teacher I didn't like) didn't even teach the material... she just laid it out... I mean, that's one example of a bad teacher. I mean, they're not all like that. But her, she'd just lay it all out there and you do it and you don't understand it then it's your problem... and she'll give us thirty pages at a time for tomorrow. Or she'll give us an oral and she'll be like, "yeah, you have an oral on this and it's due tomorrow."... You know, and she won't explain it. And because... I had switched in from French immersion to English, so I understood. But you had other people in the class who didn't know how to conjugate a verb. So... it was bad for them... I was getting in the 60s. Changed teachers, and I'm getting 80s now.*

Nancy brought clarity to the possibility that perhaps students simply did not like teachers who taught subjects they had difficulty with. She expressed that she could like a teacher, but still not do well in their class. When asked if she only disliked a teacher based on the difficulty she was having with the subject she responded:

**Nancy** *Oh no! No, never. No, it's based on the teacher. Like in my Math class, it's boring too, but I mean, I communicate good with the teacher, 'cause she's really nice. You see, it depends on the teacher's attitude towards us. You see, if they have a bad attitude towards you then you're going to have a bad attitude towards them. That's how it is, you know? Just because you're a student they think they can take advantage of that, I don't work that way!*

Mary Anne's opinion that teachers can create a negative attitude towards schooling is universally shared by all participants.

Oddly enough it was Louis, the student who received the most negative attention from his peers that had the most pragmatic view of school.

**Louis** *I'm trying really hard to improve myself. It's not easy to, because I have to handle a lot of stuff, especially since you're a teenager, you must find work, responsibilities given to you. A lot of things start to add in around life. What I've learned about school so far is, some people say that it's boring and stuff, but intentionally I find that we need this, 'cause without school you wouldn't be prepared for life, you wouldn't even have a starting point, you wouldn't know how things work. What I think is, I find school like a journey... you go through this and you only need to go through it once, but if you fall back, you might fail a grade or two, you can still continue on, it doesn't mean you have to go back all the way. There's always like detours, how to fix your grades, how to improve them. I find that school's a necessity for everyone.*

In clarifying her perspective, Natasha describes how the instructional practices of the teacher make the difference in the quality of the class. Very few students complained about the content, rather it was the style of disseminating the information that they found problematic. Natasha, for instance, has a clear opinion on what a good teacher is like and what a bad teacher is like.

**Natasha** *A good teacher's like when I understand right away... It's just the way they teach it, like, usually teachers they like interpret things by using other things, like using examples of Math by cars. Like last year, my Math 436 teacher, she used to interpret a car pouring down a hill as to a problem, like, when it just falls. And also, even on Math exams, they do*

*the same thing; they do a problem with a tank full of water and a dolphin jumping out of the air. So it's like, it depends how a teacher teaches. Like, if you just read out of a book you really don't understand much, 'cause he's not really teaching it to you. Like my teacher, he takes everything, saying we should be thinking analytically. But, it's kind of like, hard, you know. 'Cause you can't think analytically unless you know what you know what you're doing. Like if you don't know what you're doing, you don't know what's happening, you can't really think.*

Rory gave a detailed description of his train of thought through the day; for instance, which classes he would have to make excuses to visit the washroom to get a chance to see friends in the hallway or what classes signified an end to the school day. In clarifying why he thought some classes were so boring he explained what he thought teachers should do to make it more interesting for students of his age.

**Rory** (Teachers should) *try to relate things to what's going on in life right now that teenagers know about. Like...and teenagers want to know about. Like teenagers won't watch the news, but we're curious in knowing about what's going on in the world. But they make it boring facts about what's going on in Iraq...like the way they keep tuned and attentive is by being fun...and by talking about like sports or like anything's that big like in pop culture, I guess.*

During my time with Annie she showed me a picture of her friends sleeping in economics class, explaining that most of her peers fall asleep not because of the content but because of the way it is taught.

Mary Anne also discussed how she recognized that teaching time spent showing movies did not engage her as a student. She openly admitted that she found nothing challenging in the academic ambitions set forth by her teachers.

Nancy, an honour student, gives the opposite account of the staff within the school, recounting the continuously negative experience her friend goes through:

**Nancy** *I know a girl that comes in every morning and the administration is always like on her case, you know. Like she just comes into class and she's already*

*mad...her day is ruined, you know, she tries to explain why and she tries to make up excuses, she tries to avoid the administration, but they find her the minute she just comes in, like she doesn't want to talk, she doesn't want to have anything to do with them, you know, 'cause they're always on her case.*

Although Natasha is quick to say that a person like her teacher makes her feel wanted, she also criticizes how some teachers can do the opposite. She too is quick to explain how teachers impact her test results through their inability to control the class.

**Natasha** *When I do really bad on a test, it doesn't happen really that often, but like my Math teacher, I can't stand him. He's like the worst teacher I've ever had. Like sometimes, he's like a really good teacher, but other times he just complains a lot to the class, saying that we don't pay attention and this and that. Well, after listening to him and like, and he's telling us that we're wasting time in the class and he's wasting two classes just complaining about us.*

The theme of teenager versus adult becomes evident as students discuss the problematic relationship that ensues between students and teachers. If the students perceive a problem, most of their rationale for why it exists centers around teachers not comprehending today's youth.

**Annie** (The relationship like between students and the teachers) *depends which teacher...I seem to notice that the younger, the newer teachers, they just started teaching, they're young so I guess the students could kind of interact with them more, kind of understand them. Like, I feel that the other teachers could understand me more. The other ones are just like...you know, they've been teaching for so long, so they've done it all, they've seen it all, you know, kind of like they're sick of kids, so they don't try, they just like...this is the subject, this is what you have to learn, that's it, learn it. The other teachers are, you know, they go through everything, you can ask them a million questions and they'll...they just don't get annoyed. They won't get tired, they'll just...they understand, you know, that you might not catch on right away.*

### Stress

For the participants of these schools, it was primarily stressors, such as problematic

teachers or social problems that accounted for academic difficulty and sometimes, general ennui that could not be described. Mary Anne remarked that it was the teachers' stress in the workplace that created stress in her own academic life and pursuits:

**Mary Anne** *I find, yeah (teachers do stress me out). Cause they're stressed themselves, cause they can't handle the pressure...I would say completing their course outline. Like in math, we did not finish my course outline. And he...he wasn't stressed a lot, he didn't care, but...I mean he is stressed because he didn't care that we did not finish our topic. I mean, Math is everything in this world, you can't go...you can't graduate without Math and he wasn't that stressed out, but like, I was stressed out more than the whole class was stressed, cause two days before school (ends), he said "I forgot to teach you a topic". (laughs nervously) I mean like...and that wasn't even two questions on the exam that I blew 'cause he did not teach it and he did not care. And, I mean, when a teacher does not care...like I understand in college, we're told they don't care about you, but like in high school, right now they know that you're not able to deal with that kind of stress. That's why you're in high school for a reason, because you have people who actually care about you and for them not to do anything about it.*

According to Louis and Chris, gender did not play a part in the cruelty that can sometimes be associated with high school life and is a strong determinant for perceptions of belonging and comfort within. Louis made it evident that not belonging to the right social group made life in high school quite difficult and brought about that feeling of "insecurity". Louis commenced the interview with a harsh description of his life in school, trying the entire time not to drop the façade that he can 'take it':

**Louis** *How would I explain my life in high school is? I find it not pretty bad, I find it okay. But it's hard, because everyone has an opinion on other people, you know, everyone, I find. Well, I get to tell you a bit of my experience about... 'Cause sometimes in gym, I just want to play basketball. Just 'cause I'm not good at the game, doesn't mean I completely suck or people make fun of me or whatever, I just ignore that. Still it hurts my feelings and I don't like it. Usually I get the ball thrown at me purposely, on my back, you know? Okay, I could take a few shots or so, but still,*

*sometimes school, I find it insecure sometimes. You got a lot of crazy people around here. It's not simple.*

This is a perspective that most of the participants had and as Chris noted, can make a difference in your whole approach to school. Chris recounts that a good day at school is a day that is incident - free:

**Chris** *You know, it's just if you had a good day with them, you know, if nothing went wrong, if there weren't any fights or anything like that. Not that I generally get into fights with my friends, you know, just...*

Chris then added that this type of behaviour wasn't gender specific and said "There's (even) a bunch of girls" that participated in the bullying. Louis quickly concurred.

**Louis** *Yeah, there's girls and guys, it's an even amount. It doesn't matter if you're male or female, it works the same way. Some girls could actually be pretty...uh...pretty mean, you wouldn't imagine sometimes.*

However, when I reminded Annie about what she had said earlier about her last semester's difficulty in attending and succeeding in school because of the personal problems she was going through she added:

**Annie** *Last semester? I don't know if I was happy. Something went wrong with my brain...I don't even know. I mean, my parents thought that I was depressed and I don't even know why I would have been depressed. I don't really have a reason.*

Annie saw a mysterious, almost minor depression as being the cause for her academic problems. She had no concrete reason for her attitude, only that she couldn't explain its cause.

**Annie** *Last year I just went through this problem in my life, so I got like my term average was 60. At one point I had 85, 84, like around there...I don't even know what it was...I don't know, I just became lazy and didn't want to go...like I didn't want to go to school, I didn't want to work.*

Mary Anne's perspectives are also in accord with Annie and Rory's opinion and she brings up the stresses that are part her school life. For

Mary Anne, class, teachers and peers lead to her feeling stressed.

**Mary Anne** *I wrote like school life, my opinion on school life, like there's stress and pressure involved...I'm a very stressful person, a lot of people say I'm stressed, like I'm known for stress and I make a lot of people around me stressed. A lot of my teachers told me that, "oh wow, you're a stressful case" and...they told me to my face, you know. I know this from last year, cause last year I went through like a big turmoil and everything, with like school and friends and everything. I got like really stressed.*

In regard to teachers, Mary Anne complained that undue stress is placed on students' shoulders to perform now, or risk career and academic failure in their future.

**Mary Anne** *Oh well, I find there's a lot of stress, I mean to do well. I mean, like, teachers are always saying, (in a deep voice) "You have to do well to get in college, you have to, you know, like...it's not a game in college, you know, and they take it very seriously if you fool around, you know. Once you fool around you can't get back to being serious and that's it for your year, first of all and...and, you know, you're not going to be allowed to take your time anymore..." Like, they compare a lot of...they compare kids like a lot.*

Often trivialized and overlooked, most of us within the field of education do not realize how students can and will perceive these events as overwhelming and academically debilitating. Perhaps Megan best represents this. During the interview she began by describing a passage to a song she felt was particularly meaningful.

**Megan** *In the book I wrote about a song that I like...It's called "Walk into my life" by Super Pumped...Well, it basically...like the artist is writing about how his life is...And so he tells like, like people that listen to his song, like about how like he feels, like how people treat him and he wishes that people can understand him.*

I asked Megan how her life impacted her schooling and she made no uncertainties that she felt drained.

**Megan** *Well, I find that this year I, to be honest, I have no like motivations. Like I used to be like, "come on, let's go to school!" Now everything's just like...*

*there's no spark. So I don't have really any motivation. Yeah, I want to get an education, but it's just really hard to want to be able to go to school.*

### 3.1.3 Summary of Findings from the Report from Feeder Schools

#### Relations with Peers

Positive peer relations have a direct impact on the desire to attend school and academic performance. Peers and family are primary motivators for coming to school. Classes are rated low as a motivator in comparison to peers and family. Students formed social groupings by common interests and ethnicity.

#### Relations with Teachers

Students prefer teachers who focus on process and delivery, as well as teachers who teach to the whole class. Students feel the teachers' knowledge of their subject is very important. Positive personal relations with teachers are central to encouraging students to join the academic conversation.

#### Stress

Stress is ever present in a high school student's life and therefore conditions everything they do. Stress is a primary influence on academic performance. The threat of Cegep is used as leverage by teachers as an attempt to modify the behaviour of students. Bullying is present at the high school level for both males and females. However, some conditions of turmoil cannot be explained by the students. Student stress is heightened by the paradox of responsibility / autonomy – wanting more, but not wanting it and being prevented from attaining it.

### 3.2 What the Sample48 said about High School

The first set of interviews with our sample was conducted after only a few weeks of college experience, and as one of our chief concerns was the transition from high school to Cegep, that interview in the fall of 2002 was primarily devoted to a description of their high school days. In what follows, their

perceptions are presented through four general categories: psychological dimensions, social/cultural dimensions, structural dimensions and individual patterns of accommodation. These dimensions will be further elaborated when the students' perceptions of Cegep are presented in Chapter Four.

### 3.2.1 Psychological Factors

As with the report (presented above) from those still in their secondary school studies, a constant message from our sample's recollections of high school was that it was a time in their lives when multiple pressures seemed to conspire to make their lives more complicated. Many students painted a picture that left an impression of a stressful existence. Whether this was cause or effect of an adolescent ennui is difficult to determine.

*No, I didn't really enjoy much at all in that period of my life. No, at that particular time in my life I was depressed and I didn't find much joy or interest in anything really that was going on around me.*

*Some of the students can't really take it. Take all this pressure. Even sometimes people are suicidal. I remember like one time my friends and I were talking, right. It was a discussion one time. The teacher actually asked us what makes us think about suicide. Most of us said it was stress, being bullied, many things. 'Cause I'm seein' right now, some of those students, you don't know what to expect from them.*

*We'd hang out, go to class and we'd hang out and we'd go to more class.*

*Standing around being bored in school.*

*Well, recently, right now, it's been pretty stressed out with my friend Jenny, as I mentioned before. Right now she's...well she graduated except that right now she's doing adult ed., 'cause she has a course she's missing. Once she's finished, she'd like to go straight into the program she'd like to do. But she said lately it's been very tough, with all the studying, she hopes she could pass her course, because she recently failed two tests and she, if she fails this one, she automatically fails the course. I know every day she's calling me.*

*...How come people are just dropping out of school? Actually besides bullying – it's actually stress. Some of them are not interested in school, you know.*

Sometimes it was caused by the interaction with the teacher:

*So this teacher insults me, she said, you're never going to be a writer, as if this is the way you're gonna write and this is the way it's going. So I took it to heart.*

Even the way in which other students treated teachers caused stress for the 'observers.'

*There was another classroom setting where the students were really rough on the teacher and they would pick on the teacher a lot and it was total chaos sometimes in class, because the students had no respect for the teacher and they were just there to disrupt and to pick on this guy and I really felt bad, because it wasn't fair, the things that they were picking on him for. It wasn't his fault, it was just the way he was and that was a pretty bad scene.*

Often it was caused by the interaction with the other students.

*It was the same people that were bullying me. Apparently, unfortunately they took the same bus that I did and sometimes it would be alright, but other times it was very stressful.*

Many students had stories to tell about how their marks and general performance were good until high school and then they "hit the wall". The sources of turmoil were mostly referred to in the interviews as distractions. These distractions came in many forms and from varied corners of their world. Often grade nine was cited as the turning point.

*...I got in there with no problems and my grades started off in grade 7 and grade 8 very high and then Grade 9, where you don't really feel like, you know you're right in the middle... And it just starts there. It's not bad, it just starts there. And grades go down maybe a little and then Grade 10, it's just downhill from there.*

*So you don't have any like motivation or anything, so you start having friends, and maybe you don't feel like doing homework or anything like that...more distractions. And it just starts there. It's not bad, it*

*just starts there. And grades go down maybe a little and then Grade 10, it's just down hill from there. And distractions really start there and Grade 11, really the grades went down dramatically. Where I don't know. Just a lot of distractions and then you start going out at night and I played hockey. And you then you need money, so you start to work. So you want to keep school a priority. It still is a priority, but there's other priorities too.*

*Yeah, I had a difficult time going to the classes where I couldn't find any value in what they were talking about, what the subject was.*

Many of them had very little to look forward to each day.

**Interviewer** *...in a school day that you would have looked forward to.*

**Student** *Lunch time...Phys. Ed., lunch...But, just 'cause we got to hang out and not do any school work, that's all.*

They developed coping mechanisms enough to sustain them until they attained their high school diploma, but many of them had very little to look forward to each day. Yet numerous students felt that in order to “be someone” in this world, they had to get a higher education:

*Well school, for me, I decided that I really don't like school that much. But, education is the most important thing for us to achieve in life.*

*I wouldn't exactly put it in the first...well, actually I should put it in first, because without education you won't make it nowhere in life.*

Alcohol and drugs were easily accessible and a convenient bit of excitement and stimulus when other things seemed boring and pointless.

**Interviewer** *Okay. So it's a familiar story, okay. From right after school you'd get together and have a toke and you'd go to a bar.*

**Student** *It started more or less on the weekends. 'Cause I was always very scared of getting caught during school. If I get expelled my parents are going to find out. The more I was drawn into it, the more I realized I was doing this in school to a point that they did inform my parents about it. Then my parents found out about it. That's when things got really out*

*of hand. I was never rehabilitized or anything, I never had to go to any form of counselling or therapy. It never got to that extreme. I tell people my story, they're like oh, you must have been in counselling for something. But it never got that serious.*

### 3.2.2 Social/Cultural Factors

Family and friends formed the fundamental bases of their social life. Their number one motivation for going to school on a day to day basis was to see their friends. Over and over, as we reminded them that they did not seem to enjoy the classroom part of school and asked what it was that motivated them to go to school, the answer was almost always the same:

*Seeing my friends.*

*Friends, socializing. Some teachers, only the classes I liked. I looked forward to going to those classes. Basically I think it was the social part of high school. That's what really kept me such a long time in high school. Like the social part. Socializing, friends, groups, all the stuff I was involved with.*

They had their ways of deciding who they would best associate with, but the permutations of one's possible adaptations to the social life of high school would boggle most adult minds. Sounding like an identity in process of developing during the conversation, one student remarked:

*But then in high school, it's more like if you know how to dress. And then, if you're the clown of the class, then you have a lot of friends too... It's more the kids that are just, I don't know, don't talk a lot and are always in their corner. They do their homework too you know, and they're really like concentrated on school and you can be concentrated on school and still be a cool kid, but you need to like, you know, do the other stuff too. You can't be shy or anything.*

*I think that if people understood what I was going through at that time, it would have helped. I would have felt better. I wouldn't have felt so ostracized by everybody. I would feel that people understand me.*

Peer identity during adolescence is typically in some large measure a reaction to family roles, but it can also be a way of finding others who share a family situation.

*We were all going through sort of similar situations... family situations, most of us came from single parent families.*

And though the following example is extreme, the burden of a child whose single parent has problems could be profound:

*I know that there were different times in my life when I witnessed my mother become a complete different person. For example, she would think that CIA agents were out to capture her. She wouldn't let me watch cartoons when I was a kid, because she thought that there was cocaine flowing through the cables. It's not what you call rational thinking.*

Sometimes students would find themselves grouped or socially classified by default, which was mostly unwelcome and discomforting.

*Ya, I used to wear glasses since I was in grade 1...I had these thick lenses and that made things worse... Probably there were cool people by the way they dressed, or those fancy jackets. I wasn't able to afford those expensive clothes. And also like you had to have the same things in common. You had to have things in common with them in order to be ranked as cool. I had different interests. Like the music I liked, some of the sports I played. Everything.*

Friendships outside of school would often develop over common interests and sub-cultures would arise. Rarely did these associations reinforce good study habits.

*Actually these guys, one is in my band, he's a drummer and he's like a really good drummer. And the other two I just know from school. And not all play football. The drummer also plays hockey. Like he's a lot like me, he has a lot of goals and he's really smart and he wants to have fun in life and he feels that by having fun, he's going to make a lot of money. Kind of like how I think too.*

*...I found the kids at hockey cooler. I found that I had more fun with those kids. The kids at my school were, "I have school on Monday, I'm not going to go out on Saturday". "I got a big exam on Monday, I'm going to study on Sunday", which I never understood, you know, I wasn't like that at all. I'd get to the exam maybe study on Sunday night or something like that.*

Students would go out of their way to avoid being separated from their friends.

*I moved to Laval like the summer after Grade 7 going into Grade 8. But it wasn't because of that. My mom decided to change, move, so I just kept going to Royal Vale. I had a choice to go to school in Laval, but I just stayed there.*

The influence of parents, siblings and extended family members were a close second to 'seeing my friends' as a good reason to go to school. Parents want their children to get a higher education than they themselves had obtained so that their children don't have to work as hard as they did. The parents provided a wide range of motivating strategies. Many times the interviewer could feel the pressure that was being put on the students.

*For me, I grew up, my father was always pressuring me to study, study hard, study hard. So for me it was just, I have to go there and study, you know. It was just another day of school.*

*Well, they wish they had a higher education cause back then a Secondary V could get you a lot of places, but today it decreased. So most adults and my parents, included, they wish they should have continued. So that's why they tell me that you should go on.*

And the bottom line for a parent who presumably does not have a great deal to boast about in her own life.

*...please make me proud.*

The actual family obligations which parents place on their children are sometimes contradictory to what they are asking the student to do in the realm of formal education. Parents with very little education who have done well in the business world may insist that their children get a higher education. This can be very confusing.

*That's how it really is in my family. A lot of it, the majority of my cousins and uncles, go to work for their dads after high school. So that's why my dad doesn't want to...just get your high school diploma and come work for me. He wants me to go get a career, then if you're stuck for a job, you could come work for me as a higher position, you know what I mean. So, that's it.*



### 3.2.3 Structural Factors

Structural factors in the lives of these former high school students revolve largely around the formal educational process. Whereas the psychological, social and cultural factors noted above are a kind of student-based 'hidden curriculum,' the actual educational experience was a mixed bag. Once the students arrived at school, there was a marked absence of influence from the teachers at large. Most students could remember only one or two teachers over the span of high school whom they could say had an impact on their lives; most had at least one, however.

*In high school I really liked gym. I also liked math, I had a very good Math teacher.*

*What are the things that did motivate me? I do remember one of my teachers. My Math teacher. Every teacher did a different class – a different course. She's the one that actually motivated us. I don't know exactly her words, but all I remember is after listening to it, I understood that there is a chance for myself.*

But the general reaction to teachers was much more passive:

*But then high school, they didn't give me a negative attitude or a positive attitude. Never thought of going to see a teacher. Never went to see a teacher for help. Never even thought of it, to tell you the truth. Just like they were there in class and that's it. They were there to teach me and that's it. Never even went to talk to them or anything. Maybe that's just the vibes they gave me, they're there for that and that's it. I don't know. Maybe it was the environment I was in at that school too. It was more like sterile, just go to school and leave.*

Or active:

*Well there are some funner classes than others, but in every class there are days when like nobody was awake in class. There were a couple of people throwing like paper balls or whatever, but sometimes when we'd do a fun activity, like in teams or whatever, people would be more into it, but still they would hardly...they'd give us like 75 minutes to do like 5 minutes worth of work. We'd do it in teams and then just talk the rest of the class.*

The students were fairly consistent in what they saw in a "good teacher".

*The more strict teachers are, like, the better teacher because they were more to the point, they didn't waste our time as much. Like usually the Math teachers or the Science. But like English teachers, they were like, they just talked about nothing for a long time, boring.*

A student from private school really resented the way they were treated by the nuns.

*The most negative, probably was the fact that the nuns were a little too much in your business, like. They like knew everything about you and they were telling stuff to teachers so they were like watching you. And they knew stuff about you like...if you missed a day, they would call your house, even if you were sick and you would tell them I'm sick, they were like, are you sure. And then the next day, they would be like, oh you feel better and then the teacher would come and say, were you sick and then you know, everybody knows everything about you, so it was kind of like weird.*

They were occasionally reflective about the secondary impact of the classroom experience.

*I guess where she really helped was, she encouraged us to seek help for the problems we were having and that's probably what I got the most out of from that experience. There was something about the environment that that teacher created for all of us in that class that became very, very important, especially to me.*

Students were not engaged in much of the academic conversation while still getting by with passing marks, a practice which does not deliver the same goods at the college level.

*You could get away with it, that's what I was trying to say. You could probably get away with it and still get a 70, you know, but in college it's different. I realized that the first semester, when you try to do it, you don't get the same mark, you know. It's a big change.*

Very few were involved with extracurricular activities at school, but for those who were, it proved to be valuable.

*My mom always told me, why don't you get into these clubs? Why don't you do these things, get involved with the school?*

*[In] Chateauguay we have a lot of bad coaches, but we have some good ones and those good ones you're always going to remember. They're the ones who gave you the chances and they actually taught you something good and that's like lessons that, they go beyond football, they're like into life.*

*I wrote a lot. I like to dance now, but in high school I was too shy to dance. I guess, really, there wasn't much going on, but what I ended up doing mostly in high school was to take drugs. That was my favourite pastime.*

*...Later on in high school, I got involved with softball and a lot of the things the other girls did and I enjoyed that. Like I always liked to watch baseball being played. That was the end of my extra-curricular activities; I never got involved with anything else - like one of my friends would say, "they're gay" [those who choose to be involved].*

In some cases, the lack of involvement in school related extra-curricular activities was not for lack of trying.

*Well I tried to do the year book. That was already full. It's always girls that get that. I tried to do the student Grade 7 orientation, like how to get them some help and stuff like that. I did that. That was okay and I did some like open school, like open nights...like the school is open for Grade 6 students that come and check it out. I did that. There was the school paper for a week, but that didn't really work out. So it was okay. I tried, but all in vain.*

For most of the informants, extracurricular activities were too connected to the much disliked institution, to want to remain after hours and participate.

*There were other activities, but I never really participated in. In a way I just wanted to go to school and get out by 2:30. I just wanted to go home. I didn't want nothing to do with the school, cause I was already bored. Like I wasn't bored, but I was already...it was enough with the homework and everything. I just wanted to do what I had to do and that's it. I never really paid much attention to activities or other stuff. I was in a talent show, variety show, but that was only for one or two years.*

Most of the sample attended schools with diverse ethnic and linguistic mixes, which

often provided rich and varied interests and friendships.

*In my elementary school, I had a lot of Spanish people there. I used to hear them speaking it and I was like so amazed by it, you know. It didn't seem that hard, it sounded like French kind of. So then, to get them to teach me, I got everyone to buy me like a Spanish/English dictionary to help me and I took it in school and now I'm taking it here again. And I'm going to take it until like, every semester I'm taking Spanish.*

*Well I didn't really have enemies, but I like I usually hung out like with my friends from French Immersion and like I was English but they were in French. They were cool and fun and really wild so it was okay. And we used to hang out and goof off all the time, but they're really smart so we helped each other.*

Students had suggestions for how the system could better serve the student.

*...I think if they would add an hour of class. Every high school just add an hour of class, and send the kids home with less homework, it would help a lot. Because I know a lot of kids that just come home and they just don't do it.*

*At that time the parents aren't home either. Ya, I did my homework, they tell them at 6:00, so. If the kid is really mature, it's great, but if he isn't - for most of the kids it's a problem.*

*I'd make the terms, the year, shorter, so they can teach us what we need to know in a shorter period of time, so we don't get bored of the class like half way through.*

By later high school, work begins to fill a larger space in their lives and often with the encouragement of parents.

*They don't object to me getting a job, so that's ok. They're not like, I'll pay for everything. You just stay home and goof off.*

### 3.2.4 Individual Patterns of Accommodation

Students were not excited about what the school curriculum had to offer and on a day to day basis were fundamentally accommodating the system by attending every day and "going through the motions". Sounding all too much like a mock characterization of adolescence

such as is presented in the cartoon strip Zits, one student summed it up:

*It was just boring.*

Skipping classes becomes a method for dealing with the boredom and alienation and when school did not seem to be fun.

*Ya, because whenever someone like...they knew if they wanted to skip all they had to do was ask me. Because, I had fun in school, but I would obviously rather not be in school. So, they would say they didn't want to be in school, so I'd say let's go to your house.*

There were numerous stories of confrontations with teachers that often went unsatisfactorily resolved.

*Well I had one teacher who marked people on if they liked them or not. 'Cause I remember my first term with him, I got like...he didn't really know us yet and it was...like first term we drew like shapes and stuff, but it was for like an electronics class kind of thing, where we had to make modules and...So the first term I got like 85 in it, the second term, he got to know me or something and I wasn't getting him enough respect or something, because I didn't like suck ass. So even though I should have got like another 85 because I did all my work and I got like super good, he still failed me and then I complained, so he passed me that term. And then I sucked ass the next two terms and then I ended up with like a 90.*

They learned how to do just enough to get by (what we have come to call 'efficiency') without having to sacrifice the activities they enjoy outside of school.

*...I knew what I had to do and what was just useless and I knew what I was good in, where I didn't have to.... And he [a friend] says, 'no I can't play hockey today, I have too much homework'. That I never understood.*

Laziness and the refusal to do homework became the excuse for low marks rather than a lack of talent or ability.

*In high school I didn't really work at anything. Like when I didn't work, I failed. If I ever tried, like I tried, I wouldn't really go home and do homework. When I liked the course like History, Economics,*

*English I'd do the homework, but like if it was Math, I would like, oh I'll do it tomorrow. I'm lazy, I find, I'm real lazy, but if I work I can get good marks. It's a downer, but it's ok.*

Students were continuing their schooling under the impression that higher education meant higher wages, employment opportunities and stability of career.

*I've always let's say wanted...cause I see people out there, you know what I mean, that don't have school, working odd jobs, going from job to job, you know what I mean. That's one thing I'm never going to do. I want to keep, stick to a job, get a career and stick there, you know. Something like yourself, you know, you're a teacher and you know you're going to be a teacher for years, you know. I would like to have a career, that's why I'll stay here...With no education, I don't think you're going to go very far, you know.*

In some cases, attendance at school was just a routine, with no real commitment or interest. It appears like a job one has to do whether one likes it or not. We saw a number of instances of this and began using the term 'flatliner' for this approach.

*I really didn't think much of it, I mean, I didn't hate it, I didn't like it, it was like neutral to me. I was like, I have to go to high school, that was just in my brain.*

The transition to Cegep, in itself, is such a significant experience that students can begin to turn around the negative habits developed to survive high school.

*Hopefully in a positive direction, cause I realize like what exactly I was doing in school from the past year. I need more focus I think and I see now since I've been more focused it's drawing a more positive path. I'm having a more optimistic attitude, ever since I've been doing well in school, since I've wanted to do well in school, rather than in the past I was really de-motivated in school, couldn't really find a reason for it.*

### 3.2.5 Teaching and the Classroom

Regardless of the subject in high school, a highly motivated and caring teacher could win the praise of their students. One student was willing to try Cegep Science after a well liked

high school Mathematics teacher encouraged him and the rest of his class.

*Yes, the teacher would motivate us a lot. It was a big influence on all of us.*

Another became a life-long learner and changed his whole approach to school because of one teacher.

*Oh, I love History...he was always History and talked about all these things I found so interesting. He was a communist, I liked that too. He made me a communist. So I liked that, it was fun. It's just like, it was really interesting. Class was never boring. He was always talking about something different, like referring back to the Spartans, and the Trojans and all that stuff. It was always fun.*

One of the earliest to drop out of Cegep, liked the way his high school teacher made Science interesting by making it fun.

*...A fun subject, Science, I liked it. The teacher made it interesting...just doing stuff on the board and stuff, like you would actually get into like showing the details and everything, demonstrating stuff and stuff like that...*

Everyone preferred the teachers who worked to make the courses interesting and fun.

*What did I like? Well at Father MacDonald I liked my classes 'cause the teachers were fun—they did many different things to make the classes fun. Like my English teacher, he would play grammar games with us, like, it would be kind of like, you know, Pictionary, but we'd have this word and we'd have to say related to it to try and get our friends to think of the same word. That was one. Uh, I had a Geography teacher who I had for two years in a row who brought in many examples of stuff, like different rocks and stuff, she's also brought in many videos and I liked that. When I went to Marymount, not many teachers had that. Some teachers tried to do stuff, but many just teach the course straight for what it is.*

It was also easier to learn things when they appeared relevant to real life.

*If they could find ways to make the material, that was taught through high school, more relevant to the real world. It's like if we could take information given to*

*us in high school and use it in the real world, that's one thing I would be really interested in. (garbled) I'd be learning about stuff and I'm like but how am I going to use this later on in life. How is this going help me? Even the teachers they mention, like it's not, you just have to do it, you have to do all of it. You can't change the system, there's nothing you can do about it, you know.*

Many of the students told stories of the dysfunctional class and the impact of a breakdown in classroom discipline.

*Some classes the teachers were very interesting, but others they couldn't control the class, so that was bad. Like the students actually had to work in some classes, cause they couldn't get any work done in class, so you had to take it upon yourself to do it at home or with other friends, so that wasn't very fun.*

*...students used to anger the teacher a lot, he used to bring in the principal, no work was done basically the whole year and I remember in my Economics class, no work was done, so that wasn't very...that class sucked. I didn't like it at all (both laugh). I still passed.*

*It was just like, people just jumping off the wall and everything...They would be like always shooting spit balls and everything...I remember one class the teacher, in 50 minutes, only drew a triangle on the board. That's how bad it was.*

*Bad relationships with teachers. We would be trying to...we would be doing whatever we wanted to. Causing trouble, having fun, throwing stuff around. Very violent...Ya (laughs). There were certain classes where there were teachers we were scared of, 'cause we knew we would be kicked out of that school so fast. But, most of the teachers were more scared of us than we were of them. We were a bad class.*

**Interviewer** *The teachers that you were scared of, did you actually learn more in their classes?*

**Informant** *Ya, we got a lot better grades, but most of the time those teachers ended up getting sick and we needed substitute teachers and you know how it is with substitute teachers.*

A young man of Haitian extraction was not a success in private school where the teacher taught to the front of the class and ignored the

others at the back as long as they didn't disturb the peace too much.

*...at school we weren't, like, focussed on what we were doing, 'cause the teachers weren't giving us any attention—if we weren't doing anything, they wouldn't say anything, so...by the fact that they weren't saying anything, we weren't doing anything so...We didn't skip class, we would stay in class but we wouldn't do anything, we'd like be in class, like talk, play cards, say jokes...*

And if, in a small school, the student was unlucky enough to have the same teacher for several classes the results could be disastrous.

*...well 'cause I had the same teacher three times in three different courses, in French, in Moral and then, uh, a class that we call, 'Méthodes et techniques de travail'.*

On the other hand, the same student found the teachers in public school much more interested in helping the students get into the subject and enjoy learning and not so focused on “work” or absorbing great quantities of content.

*Well, the things that, it was pretty cool at that school 'cause the teachers really liked to get us into the course that they were teaching. Really trying to make us understand, like uh, not always having to work all the time. Like, my English teacher, he really was focussed on that, it's not, it's not right away, it's not because you're working hard that you're gonna learn better, it's by the teacher making you realize how to learn it that's gonna make you learn better.*

This teacher's technique included all the students in the class in the activities and making learning fun.

*Yeah, we'd be working in our book, well, sometimes we'd be doing activities in teams, trying to make us learn about, like um, like um, some people in my, in that other school didn't really speak that well of English, so you would mix up the people that are strong in English with the people that are not so good in English. Even makes like activities and games to make them understand like, like play, we play like, word matches and stuff.*

Many students spoke of the teachers favouring some students and not others.

*Um, the teachers were very biased, they looked at some students more fondly than others. They picked their favourites a lot of the teachers, in my opinion, from what I saw. If they liked you, they'd tell you okay. They'd motivate you. They'd pull strings for you. They'd try to whatever fits your needs and if you're one of the students that, not so much a trouble-maker, but if you...weren't really on their good side, you were last on the list for everything. They wouldn't care so much about you. They wouldn't help you out.*

One student reflected articulately about the difference between a regular public high school and the alternative school in which he finished his Secondary V.

*My low point was when I was at my first high school [a large comprehensive]. Teachers there weren't helpful. I guess they were stressed, because they have a lot of students to take care of. They don't have time for individual, to take care of individual students. So I found that it was pretty rushed and I wasn't able to focus and work hard. I didn't get the support that I needed there. I pretty much did bad.*

After a disastrous middle school period he got into an alternative high school.

*The teachers I would say. They would encourage me, this is at the Options II. They were very encouraging. They helped me with my problems, they made sure that you worked hard, which you did. I got really good marks because of them, because I was able to focus on my school, on my work.*

A female student from Laval felt very much the same way about her large comprehensive high school and alternative school. Being considered as an individual and shown respect were key elements of the difference.

*Umm...well, the thing about Laval Catholic is it's a very judgemental school. Like, if you don't basically dress like them, act like them or socialize with them, you're basically considered a loser and you get picked on. And that's what ended up happening to me. But the thing is I didn't just run away, like I ended up finding friends. I was doing O.K., but it was basically the educational system that wasn't working for me. Like, I could just skip classes—they wouldn't care, I could fail—they wouldn't care, I could pass—they wouldn't care. Like I didn't really like it, so when I went to Phoenix Alternative, like I realized it's like, it's a one-*

*on-one thing—it 's like the teacher and student and you call them by their first names. They're interested in what you're doing—If you're having problems. If you're doing good, they praise you. Like, it's really, it's a one-on-one thing, you know, that's what I thought. Like at Laval Catholic it's just, you're a number, you know, I didn't really like that...*

*Laval Catholic, I'd say, lots of students, between 30 and 40 students to a class, which is why a teacher can't really work one-on-one. It's rare that, either you have a too lenient teacher that doesn't care so the class is all rowdy, or you have a too strict teacher that if you make one sound you're kicked out.*

*At Phoenix, it's about between five and ten students to a class, so it's all one-on-one, like small, little tables like this, you know, we're all crowded around the same table. The teacher sits right in the middle and it's more of like, the teacher doesn't even have to say, "Be quiet." You just know. Like, you just pay attention, you respect the teacher, the teacher respects you.*

Some courses at high school traditionally prove a block to students. These include French and Mathematics.

*Well, it worked out pretty good, except for French. The French course was hard in Sec. IV, I don't know why—for everybody it was pretty hard.*

Tefanny was very selective with her friends and after leaving her first neighbourhood school never really had school friends and never liked remaining at school any longer than she had to.

*...It didn't really matter which schools that I was in and what it was like, but I just didn't...really want to be there and I didn't like most of the people that were there...*

*...So it's like, clubs and stuff like that [extracurricular], like, oh yeah it might seem O.K., but I dunno, I just didn't like staying after school. Like I didn't wanna be in the building any longer than I actually had to...I went home...*

In addition, by Tefanny's description, the high school in Verdun was not a nice place to spend time.

*...It was O.K. until people, like just threw all their stuff on the ground 'cause they were pigs like that. And*

*then there was a point where, because for some reason, the people in our school liked to light things on fire, so... (laughs)...so, at some point they had to, like they locked off the first part, like the bottom floor, so that no one could go there, that way, you know, everyone only had one bathroom to go to. And then, like people, the boys would pick on like some boy in the boys' bathroom, whatever, so the principal took the door off, so they didn't have a door. And so it was just like getting worse and worse and then... Yeah, and at lunchtime... we'd go outside, like we couldn't walk around the halls or anything, you know, and so it was pretty crappy, people weren't too pleased with it.*

Tefanny was really unhappy with the secondary teachers who teach to those who appreciate the subject at the teachers' level. As far as she was concerned he gave short shrift to her and others having difficulty with the subject.

*...I had a teacher like that, like similar yeah, because, um, I had to do Math, well, I got Math 436 in Grade 10, until the teacher, like, he knew what he was talking about and everything, he was really good at what he was doing, but he couldn't teach properly. He only taught properly to those who were already advanced, like really advanced or whatever. But like sometimes when you asked him questions he didn't feel like explaining or whatever. Or, like he didn't explain it clearly enough for me to understand what, 'cause...um...436 like is not traditional math—fractions and stuff like that—it's like all graphs and stuff like that, that you don't know why you need it for, why things should work that way, why certain formulas like whatever, and like he didn't make that clear why it was, you know...*

Tefanny simply turned off on subjects that bored her.

*...Economics. I realize that that goes hand in hand with the Gym. Like I rarely made it to class, and it was so boring. Even if I tried to study I couldn't keep my eyes open at the book, I could be wide awake but it was so boring 'cause I don't care about money and government and stuff like that so...*

From a very early point in high school, Gino faced problems with the teachers.

*...[French teacher] she thought like, I was one of those guys that influence people and like do all bad things. She thought I was a bad kid and everything... Like you know, like half the things I did wasn't even my*

*fault sometimes and she would just, if something happened, she would blame me... Ya, let's say something would happen in the class, she would pick on the certain students who she thought in her head would do something, you know... But it only happened in the beginning, but after like the years went by, like they saw like after the next year came, they saw what kind really type of person you are, they let you be more, you know...*

Many students remember an outstanding teacher, but most of them also remember the teacher that hurt them in some way. Melissa used journal writing as a way of dealing with a particularly difficult home situation. At Cegep, Melissa proved to be an exceptional writer.

*Some teachers had better ways of dealing with and controlling the class than others. I've had some excellent teachers that I can remember. I do want to mention one other incident that I had with another teacher and... it was a little bit devastating and I wished it hadn't happened and I hope not too many other teachers are dealing with things like this one did. Writing has been very important in my life, not proper writing per se, but reflective type writing. I've always done this kind of writing. This was a good way for me to express myself.*

*...In a diary form, but it was like poetry, short stories, just sort of spitting my reflections out on to the page, insights about my day, things that would happen, the facts that would happen in a particular day. So this teacher insults me, she said, you're never going to be a writer if this is the way you're gonna write and this is the way it's going. So I took it to heart. She's a teacher and she's gone to a higher education and she's published books and stuff like that. At the time I tried not to place that much importance on what she said to me, but I really didn't think she was entitled to make those kinds of judgments. Maybe my writing wasn't that good, but I felt that she didn't have the right to tell me that I was never going to be a good writer. I already felt like a writer, I never thought of myself in any other way but a writer, because I did so much of it. Maybe it wasn't the way that she wanted it, but it caused me to think and wonder about the idea of being a writer. I did take it very personally.*

One very articulate student objected to the way the administration treated the students and was frustrated enough by their attitude to leave the school.

*More in Grade 11, I think it was the Administration. The way they looked at the students, the way they treated us. They didn't treat us with a lot of respect and in return they wanted lots and lots of respect. That's one thing they looked forward to. It's like they... it was understood that they didn't have to respect you, but you had to respect them. And that was something I was very against. I couldn't understand it. That's the reason I left.*

### 3.2.6 Summary of Findings

#### Psychological Factors

High school is a time when multiple pressures seemed to conspire to make their lives more complicated. Many students painted a picture that left an impression of a very stressful existence. Stress was caused by the interaction with the teacher or other students. Many students had stories to tell about how their marks and general performance were good until high school and then they "hit the wall". They developed coping mechanisms enough to sustain them until they attained their high school diploma. Many of them had very little to look forward to each day. Still, numerous students felt that in order to 'be someone' in this world, they had to get a higher education.

#### Social/Cultural Factors

Family and friends formed the fundamental basis of their social life. Their number one motivation for going to school on a day to day basis was to see their friends. Peer identity during adolescence is typically, in some large measure, a reaction to family roles. It can also be a way of finding others who share a similar life situation. The burden of a child whose single parent has problems could be profound. Friendships outside of school would often develop over common interests. Students would go out of their way to avoid separation from their friends. The influence of parents, siblings and extended family members were a close second to "seeing my friends" as a good reason to go to school.

#### Structural Factors

There was a marked absence of influence from the teachers at large. Most students could

remember only one or two teachers over the span of high school whom they could say had an impact on their lives. The students were fairly consistent in what they saw in a 'good teacher'. Students were not engaged in much of the academic conversation.

Very few were involved with extracurricular activities at school. Most of the sample attended schools with diverse ethnic and linguistic mixes.

### Individual Patterns of Accommodation

On a day to day basis they were fundamentally accommodating the system by attending every day and 'going through the motions'. There were numerous stories of confrontations with teachers that often went unsatisfactorily resolved. They learned how to do just enough to get by (what we have come to call 'efficiency') without having to sacrifice the activities they enjoy outside of school.

### 3.3 High School Educational Culture

All students, weak or strong, motivated or not, respond favourably to a motivated caring teacher. Most of the Sample48 and the high school informants had one teacher they really admired, but not many had more than one. It really did not matter what subject the teacher taught or the content of the course being taught. The students respond to the quality of the teacher in any subject that this teacher taught. A good teacher treated the students as individuals and showed them respect. This teacher is enthusiastic and makes learning fun. He or she is process oriented and tries to help them learn to learn rather than obliging them to pack in piles of facts simply because that is what is required. This teacher is competent with the material and works to make it relevant to the students. He or she is firm and controls their classroom, and at the same time is fair and inclusive.

On the contrary, many informants told horror stories of problem teachers, chaotic classrooms and about being picked on. These teachers just explain once and then tell the students to learn it themselves. They tell them to learn the material because they have to and that

is what is required and they have no choice. They teach to the teachers' pets at the front of the class and ignore the riff-raff at the back. Often the student at the back will pass without doing homework and even after skipping many classes. Visible minority students, especially from groups like the young people of Haitian extraction feel they are excluded from the process by these teachers even if there were no outwardly racist acts or speech.

Some of the schools were painted as very unfriendly buildings. Vice-principals patrol the corridors and enforce picayune rules like small tyrants, demanding respect, but not showing any to their charges. In some schools the environment is so tough that there are no doors on the boys' washrooms, and there is no privacy. Cliques and social exclusion make it difficult for many students and this becomes worse when bullying occurs as well. The larger schools with large class sizes make students feel like they are just a number and that they will get no individual attention. The only things they look forward to in a day are the friends, the lunch breaks and Gym.

The students deal with a constant stress coming at them from many sides. Socially, they are working through their own personal identity issues as they come close to the age of majority and supposed maturity. Their peer group takes on a great deal of importance and they struggle to fit in and find a niche, doing whatever it takes to be accepted and still remain an individual. The family which has been the basis of their social world till then is still of critical importance, but even life there can be complicated by conflicts and misunderstanding. At school they see themselves stuck in a nowhere land. They are not really on career paths with the subjects they are studying, and yet they start to see their options grow limited as their weak marks shut them out of further educational possibilities they had once dreamed of. Middle school is the most difficult, where the years ahead can seem eternal and a continuation of the same old boring thing. Many face depression to varying degrees and are easily tempted when peers offer the easy route out through drugs and alcohol.



The school has not excited them about learning or got them involved in the academic conversation. It is still just a matter of hoops to jump through and they want to know why they should bother. They realise that they are about to be flushed out of the learning game as they lack the academic strengths to continue. They take the path of least resistance and move into downgraded Mathematics courses just so they can get out of high school. They develop a minimalist efficiency which allows them to put out only the bare minimum to get through. It just is not worth the effort to put any extra energy into their studies. They find other things in life which give them more satisfaction and are more rewarding. Their non-school skills gain them respect not provided by the institution. As a result they are not willing to sacrifice their sports, music or social life to put more effort into school. They have also begun to join the work force where, once again, their non-academic skills are recognised and appreciated. It does not make sense to commit more time and energy to school work, when it has always been boring and unrewarding by comparison. Ideologically, they have accepted the mantra of getting an education as critical to building a good future, but school is so alienating that the satisfaction they get elsewhere over-rides the knowledge that school is where they should focus their energies. The same ideological trap points them towards Cegep and higher studies and denigrates the students who have gone into DSP courses to get a trade or technical skill.

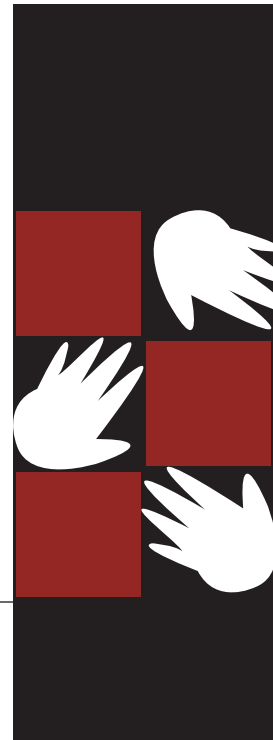
If they have managed, despite everything, to get the marks to enter Cegep, they carry all this baggage with them.

# Chapter Four

## Informant summaries of the Sample48: Profiles of the individuals

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4



The presentation of personal information from individuals as well as some form of collective “student” presented a challenge for us. Wanting to fall into neither an individualist nor a collectivist trap, we had initially intended to present a small number of composite portraits, which we referred to as profiles, despite the negative political currency of the term in other contexts. As we waded into the complexity of the individual lives of the students we interviewed, it became more and more clear that such profiles would be extremely difficult to construct with any validity. Hence each individual’s story is told briefly here under a pseudonym that reflects the gender and culture of the person. Each profile includes a few quotes which reflect the unique point of view or experience of that individual. Access to their academic records was attained through a Letter of Consent and a final reference to the Ministry database allowed us to know who had continued in Cegep and what courses they had taken. The informants are numbered here for ease of reference.

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## 4.2 Informant Summaries

### 4.2.1 Nasir

Nasir, his mother and a younger sister live in an apartment in Cote St. Luc. His mother does not work and is estranged from his father, so finances have been a perennial problem since their arrival in Canada from Iran when he was 17 years old. Despite the difficulties, schooling for himself and his sister is very much a family project. His educational progress was disrupted by the change of systems. Immigration and French really ‘screwed up’ his educational ‘timing’. He had always been at private school and was good at Mathematics and had started learning English in preparation for the move to Canada. Once in Quebec he was obliged to enter a French classe d’accueil. After one year, when he had only reached Secondary II level, they told him he had to leave high school because he was 18. He moved to the English Adult Education Centre at James Lyng then later to Woodlands Centre in Verdun. He really felt the adult sector retarded his education. His sister, two years younger, did not suffer any of the same negative effects of dislocation and went through high school with excellent results. His girl-friend at the time of the first interview, who is Hungarian, is a high achiever in her second year of Pure and Applied Science and helps him with his Mathematics homework. He has a few selected friends of mixed ethnicity chosen mostly because they are passionate about computers, as he is.

Current Status: After starting in Computer and Digital Systems, Nasir is now in his last year of Industrial Electronics, and as with the majority of his classmates, he has not completed a large number of the General Studies requirements (English, Humanities, French, Complementaries). He will likely graduate in 2006.

In addition to the dislocation due to immigration, Nasir really felt let down by the educational system when he came to Quebec and particularly disadvantaged by the requirement to convert to the French system:

*...So they put me on Sec. III to continue to get the regular diploma, like for under 18. I supposed to*

*continue the post-accueil, but they didn't let me to go to the post-accueil because they said I'm over 18. You cannot stay here anymore. But if I was like in Sec. V, they would let me, but they said because of my French, it wasn't perfect, and I supposed to pass two years something to get better...*

*...That's why I'm late for college, you know. Because I was study two years. One year and a half for the French. Basically they waste my time for French and I was so mad at it, because I didn't get anything. I'm not good in French, I'm not good in English...*

*...Because as you can see, I waste two years here to study language, so I was getting down in Mathematics. I didn't practice any Mathematics. I didn't practice... you know if you don't practice for the Mathematics, you're getting down...*

### 4.2.2 Paula

Paula is the first of two children and went to a French school in Montreal before coming to Vanier College. She is of Portuguese descent, speaks French at home and English socially. The family has maintained good contacts with relatives in Portugal and they have returned frequently for visits. Her cousins there are continuing their education beyond high school. Her mother has a university degree but her father does not. Her mother has always emphasized the importance of higher education, but her father appears indifferent, since he seems to have done well in the work force without very much formal education. Paula willingly admits to being socially oriented towards school and that the influence of her peers was not always positive (drugs and wasting time). She spent a lot of her time on the phone, at the park hanging out and generally not focusing on school even though her parents exercised strict control through curfews. She began a part-time job in Secondary V, working 10-12 hours a week for 'mad money' which also enhanced her social life. She entered Vanier College in Social Science, but failed her first semester. That experience had a profound and important effect on her. She realized she had to change the way she managed her time and the people with whom she spent her time. About the same time, she also found a boyfriend who shares her ambitions for a higher education. This motivated her to ensure that education was her principle goal. She readily acknowledges that she has matured a great deal and has made important choices to fulfil her ambition of becoming an elementary school teacher. Her academic performance reflects these changes.

Current status: Graduated from Social Science in E05.

When she first arrived at Cegep she was not really keen and was doing it mostly for her parents and even that reluctantly:

*But other than that, I was...I didn't have the urge to come. I didn't...first of all I didn't know what I wanted to do, so I was like, what's the point of doing a program that I don't even know if I'm gonna be interested in. It's just really...even in my marks. They*

*would show that I really didn't want to be there. That was really the reason I didn't succeed in any of my courses, to show them [her parents] that I don't want to be in the college.*

The peer group and social aspect of school was always a main priority for her, but after her first semester failure and a new, slightly older boyfriend she realizes that she has matured and is keen to make a success of her studies.

*As in high school, really it was my friends, I was always surrounded by them. Here it's really, I'm more independent. My first semester I was still with my friends, now I'm really like, this is for me, like I can't do it without...like if I don't pull myself into this, nobody else...none of my friends are gonna do it for me. I mean that's the attitude that I put, like in my head. I'm happy none of my friends are in any of my courses, and if I make friends that's fine, but if I have somebody I know, I know I'm gonna chit-chat and it's not gonna end well...*

### 4.2.3 Dimitri

A Canadian born, gregarious young man of Greek extraction, Dimitri was very keen to talk the first year. His mother has a university education and is a teacher while father had very little formal education but became an expert technician with video-game electronics. His early family life was in Park Extension and most of Dimitri's peer group consists of Greek men from there. Recently, the family moved to a new house in Laval. Over the two years prior to the first interview, both parents had faced serious medical situations which placed considerable stress on the family. He readily observed the differences between boys and girls with respect to school. He had spent a semester or two in an adult education centre and noted that of 32 people in his class only two were women. In addition, his own sister is a high achiever and he is very proud of her accomplishments, while he has only ever gone to school for the fun. In the classroom, he can't deal with boring course material and pedagogy. A good teacher must make it active and fun. He liked sports, and represented his high school in soccer; otherwise he mostly played at the level of pickup. His highest marks were in Physical Education, and he regularly failed language courses and just scraped through the 'boring' courses. He had one exciting French teacher in Sec IV and that was the only time he passed French and avoided going to summer school. He prided himself on never cracking a book after he got home, even though his sister would study late into the night. Now he is drawn by the siren money of a waitering job at a fancy restaurant where he serves the glitterati. The job pays for his car and social life with his peer group. Dimitri was the classic case of cognitive dissonance, knowing that he had to remain in school if he wanted to make something of himself.

Current Status: Dimitri passed 10 courses in the first three semesters and finally stopped coming to classes in the middle of the winter 2004 semester and therefore failed all the courses in that semester.

Dimitri knew what he didn't want better than what he did. This inverse motivation did not

prove enough to stimulate Dimitri to remain in school.

*Because actually I took a semester off. After my adult school, I took a semester off. You work...you work for minimum wage, \$8.00 an hour, whatever, \$7.00 an hour and you don't want to do this for the rest of your life; you don't want to work for minimum wage. It's not good. And that's what I think half the students at Vanier are here for, cause when you work you see that you don't want to do this and you go to school. And you go to school and you're trying to do something, you're trying to get something in your hands when you're at a college or university, so you could work for the amount of money and something you enjoy, not cleaning dishes, cleaning tables or I don't know, whatever...No, no, to any restaurant or minimum wage job. That's why I'm in college, because I want to do something in life.*

#### 4.2.4 Jean-Baptiste

Jean-Baptiste comes from a poor socio-economic situation. He lives with his mother, a single parent and with one sister in an apartment in the Cloverdale area of Dollard des Ormeaux and his mother is the sole provider. They are of Haitian background and speak Creole, French and English. His ambition or motivation to stay in school may be driven in part by fear of ‘ending up on the street’ like so many other kids he knows from his neighbourhood. Family pressure to stay on the right side of the tracks is another side of his persistent quest to remain a student. He has a history of weak academic skills and entered Vanier College through the Explorations 2 program. In his first interview, he spoke of dreaming about becoming a lawyer or journalist. In the second interview he was enrolled in adult education courses, still trying to get back into the day-time program in order to follow his dream of becoming a journalist. He complains of not having enough time to do the work at Vanier, but has no job, does not play sports, nor does he have many hobbies or pastimes other than TV and computer games.

Current Status: He failed 10 of 13 courses in the first two semesters and went on to attend correspondence classes (*Cégep à distance*) at André Laurendeau and Vieux Montréal. His overall record at the end of 2004, after five semesters, was seven courses successfully completed out of 25.

Almost all of the young men of Haitian extraction had to face racism in many forms.

*The first detention, the principal can like look at you, read your name, look at you, like to get a feeling like, okay this guy, this name. Sometimes maybe the colour... Maybe 'cause every time the principal is always on your back. Everywhere you're walking in the school, he's following you. Or let's say you're with a group of friends, he's following you, or us and always doing warning for nothing... "You're not allowed to hang out here." Yeah, but it's our school. Like the [white] kids that are all hanging out, why don't you go tell them to not hang out? "I got authority, you have to respect me." That's the thing that we didn't like... Maybe one incident happened... we didn't hang like all black, but... Sometimes we were friends with other people and*

*they warned the people, if you go with them, you're going to be in trouble, too...*

Jean-Baptiste recognised that he needed more help than the classroom teachers could afford to him.

*Some of them were supportive, not all of them. There were ones who were like... you ask some questions... sometimes there's some teachers who don't explain well. And you ask some questions and they explain you and if you didn't understand like a little bit of what he said, you ask the second time and okay, don't bother me, just try to understand by yourself... Because they think it's maybe easy for us. Some teachers they think like that... Like it's easy, cause I can do this, there's a lot of my students, they do it, they do it well, why not get you to do this... It's not because you find it easy that we're going to find that easy and we're going to succeed like, well the first time.*

#### 4.2.5 Gino

Gino is from a Laval based family of Italian descent. His father bought him his car at 16 years of age and it is his form of relaxation. He loves to play sports, especially hockey, soccer, and handball. His coach is a role model. He works in the family business with 9-10 employees. Most of his school peers were Italian, Greek and Portuguese. The high point of his school day was going to meet his friends. First thing in the morning they would go for a coffee and a smoke. In Secondary V they had cars, so they would skip classes together. Several of his peers dropped out at 16 or 17 and had to return to school through adult education at 19 years of age. He has had the same friends since childhood and much of their time together is spent hanging out at each others' houses. Now they club together on Crescent Street. His low year was Secondary III when he moved from middle school to high school. The contradiction here is that he claims to have been a good student before Secondary III but tells how his French teacher was always on his case as a trouble maker in Secondary I and after, since he had her for several years. His mother and two brothers (both university graduates) pressure him to stay in school. He wanted to do welding at trade school. In Cegep he was hoping to try a career program like Building Systems Technology before going back to trade school if Cegep did not work out. He was very passionate in denouncing Explorations II for making him take courses he did not want.

Current Status: He failed his first two semesters at Vanier and has not attended Cegep since Winter 2003.

Gino was very realistic about his future in the academy and was in school because of the pressure from his parents and two brothers.

*...Well, mostly I stayed because, I really, coming to college wasn't a really big thing for me, like I was thinking of going to a trade school or something...I was thinking of going in welding school...welding industrial buildings. I wanted to take that up, but then I don't know, I have two older brothers and everything, like they all went to college and everything, and like so it was mostly my brother that like pushed me. He goes*

*like, try college out. If you don't like it, just leave and then go to your trade, but try it out, you know.*

Gino has been helping in his father's shop in the textile trade since he was a small boy and knows the business very well. He knew he could fall back on the family business if school does not work out for him.

*...The way I thought of it right now, I figured I'm going to try to go to college, do, like I said, the Building Systems, as an Engineer. If that didn't work out, maybe I'll just think of taking it over. I have fun when I go work...*



#### 4.2.6 Michel-Henri

Michel-Henri comes from a stable, two parent family with Haitian roots, living in Montreal North. He feels his family is fairly middle class as compared to the families living in the poorer projects (he uses the American term) in the Langelier part of Montreal North and the well-to-do in the Gouin Boulevard area. Both his parents have college education and steady jobs, and by his estimate, his brother in Computer Science at Dawson was doing very well. He played soccer for the city league and was selected to the Quebec team until he was 14 years old when he left because of race problems between the Italian and Haitian coaches and players. He claims that his experience in primary and early secondary was fine, but that his academics began to decline after Secondary II. Early secondary was in a private school, but he and his group of friends did not cooperate with a teacher they did not like and he had to leave because of low marks. At Calixa Lavallé Polytechnique he felt that everything was going well at school, but he did not do any homework. He wants to stay in school, but as of the first interview he had just been re-accepted back into Vanier after failing his first semester. At the time he had no great drive, or compelling goals and as a result he felt he lacked motivation to work hard. He claims family relations are harmonious, but rates family last priority after sports, girlfriend, school, and work. He hangs out a lot with peers and still returns to his old secondary school to help with after-school basketball coaching. His peers are a lot like him. They club on Ste-Catherine Street once a month, play some pool and the video arcades, or just relax at friends' homes. His passion is sports. He loves basketball and football but does not work very hard even in these areas. In the interview, he figured he could go into sales and has some telemarketing experience. He has a steady girlfriend in Secondary V who pushes him to work hard and stay in school. According to him, his big distraction at school came from the girls who were always calling him at home and preventing him from getting to his homework.

Current Status: He failed his first semester in Explorations II and barely passed the minimum

for his second semester at Vanier. He spent two years in an intensive program at Marie Victorin in Marketing and Business Administration and has not been back to Cegep since the summer of 2004.

Michel-Henri claims to have gotten top marks up until Secondary III at which point he fell in with peers who ended up at the back of the class.

*...but at school we weren't, like, focused on what we were doing, 'cause the teachers weren't giving us any attention—if we weren't doing anything, they wouldn't say anything, so...by the fact that they weren't saying anything, we weren't doing anything so...We didn't skip class, we would stay in class but we wouldn't do anything. We'd like be in class, like talk, play cards, say jokes...*

### 4.2.7 Luigi

Luigi comes from an Italian immigrant family which over the years has built a comfortable living through a small family business. He has been involved in his family business since he was 12. He is close to his extended family and says that through continuing his education, he will be better off and that he needs the education “to be somebody.” Luigi’s motivation for continuing his education comes mostly from his parents and especially his father, who wants his son to have better possibilities than he had. Nonetheless, Luigi was caught in the family business dilemma and could make good money without having to go any further with his education. Luigi does not have a career in mind but knows he wants one with ‘stability’. He has never really applied himself to his studies, but got through high school being a ‘good kid’ and never being a problem at any level. This strategy proved inadequate for Vanier. He was admitted to Vanier into Explorations 2 because of his weak high school marks and was quite shaken up after failing three courses and ending up at Review Boards. Thereafter, he failed his second semester as well. He did Continuing Education courses to get re-admitted in the Winter of 2004 and failed that semester very badly. He tried the same preparatory Mathematics course three times. He has refused to participate in any more interviews and has not been at Cegep since then.

Current Status: He last took courses in Cegep in Fall 2004.

He spoke about the importance of school, but he never really was interested in school and his approach did not confirm the good intentions.

*I never had any problems in high school, it was always, it was good, you know. Maybe why I never got 80’s or 90’s, maybe ‘cause I was lazy a bit, I don’t know. I’ve always been like that, maybe that’s why...Leaving things to the last minute. Like you have an essay to be due next week, two nights or a night before, you’re working on it, you know... You could probably get away with it and still get a 70, you know, but in college it’s different. I realized that the first semester, when you try to do it, you don’t get the same mark, you know.*

*...There were a few courses that maybe I liked the topic, you know what I mean, that I would go home and read that topic, cause I was interested in it, but in general it was all...there was nothing really interesting.*

The family business was established by his grandfather and was always a fall-back position for Luigi, just as it also provided employment to his father, uncles and several cousins.

*It’s something they would love to have, want me to have, you know. Cause my family, education wasn’t really...a lot of my cousins, a lot of my uncles, never really graduated university, you know. They got their high school diploma and they went straight to work, you know, for their dads... That’s how it really is in my family. A lot of it, the majority of my cousins and uncles, go to work for their dads after high school.*

### 4.2.8 Sebastien

Sebastien comes from a West Island working class background. His father was an alcoholic and a divorcee. Both of his brothers were drop outs and there was no family incentive for him to stay in school. He saw his trouble with school as being closely related to the friends. In his first few years of school, he was in French immersion with what he called a smart cohort, but with the move to English immersion he fell in with a cohort of negative influences and that led eventually to his dropping out of school. He hung out with a group who skipped classes, smoked dope, and preferred to do anything other than attend school. After dropping out at 16 or 17 he went to work and was at the time of the interview in a paint-ball factory. When he finally returned to school, he was a very happy learner - even enthusiastic. Explorations 2 gave him the chance to restart his education after finishing Secondary V in adult education centres. Working full time while attending his first year at college left him no free time to socialise. By second year, he seemed to have worked out an arrangement with his father, who had cut down or stopped drinking and Sebastien had returned home so that he could reduce his work hours and concentrate on school. He was very motivated and committed to achieving the honour roll and his father and stepmother bragged of his academic success and contributed financially to helping him. He was very enthusiastic about school, had a record of high marks at the time of his second interview, and his personal life seemed to be settling into a comfortable pattern.

Current status: After achieving very good marks for three semesters, something seems to have gone tragically wrong and he failed every course in the Winter 2004 semester. He seems to have just stopped attending school. He has not registered in Cegep since then and we have not been able to communicate with him.

*...Not so much a revelation. It's just, I could see where I was going and I already have examples of what that's like. Like I know, I have brothers that dropped out of school, parents that are unhappy, my brothers are unhappy. So, and then I wasn't happy working in a factory...I kinda felt like a loser and I knew everybody*

*I went to school with, they are all in university and that kind of hurt, you know...But also not feeling good, like you don't wanna wake up and look at yourself and say you're a dropout. You know, you don't wanna be in that position.*

Much of the explanation for his abruptly leaving school probably resides in his family circumstances, but a lack of orientation also may have been a factor.

*...like I am interested in Psychology. I like Sociology and Psychology. Who knows, maybe I could be a doctor. I like a challenge, I like to have a challenge and then, I don't want to work in business, I don't want to be behind a desk, I don't want to be doing anything that I don't think is important. So, I want to be able to do something constructive. I want to do something that will make me happy, something where you would not necessarily want to get paid to do it, and that's why I want to try to go here. And then, I don't have any idea what I want to do.*

### 4.2.9 Yip

His family life and the dislocation of immigration have marked him deeply. His parents are from Cambodia and this is his mother's second marriage, after losing all her children from her first one to starvation and the war. She is consequently very protective of the children and especially the youngest, Yip. Yip claims he is continuing his education for his mother. She only speaks Cambodian to the children and does not speak English or French very well. Yip struggled with History in high school and took it five times before passing. While he claims that Mathematics is his strength, he nonetheless does not perform at a high level there, either. From what he says, it appears that he had a difficult social life through his early school days, which has left him with a serious self-image problem. He really wants to settle down and do well in Cegep but has difficulty applying himself. He is a self-proclaimed procrastinator and judging by his records, this has not changed much. When contacted for the follow up interviews, he would make appointments and not appear.

Current status: He is still currently enrolled in Social Science, but not yet ready to graduate.

The line between family project and family pressure can be very fine in the case of a student like Yip who lacks the motivation and discipline for the studies required to achieve minimally in school.

*...hopefully I'm doing all this for one reason and that's the reason why I'm inspired to do my work. That's the reason I even come, ... Well that's not the only reason, but that's one of the main reasons why I come. I'm like, I'm determined, cause my family is kind of like very...like everything is different there [Cambodia], so I'm like what you would call the last hope. So, if I stop now, it's over. My reasons...I'm doing all this for my mom you know. Like she's focused on me the most...That's why I do all this, for her. And I'm focused, I'm like going all the way...*

On the other hand, he admits that he really can not focus on school.

*...I'm a very disorganized person. If I don't write it down or if I don't have someone telling me. Like you*

*could just tell me, go buy me something right now, like tell me like strictly, but as soon as I would like leave the room, it would just like go off my head. So I'm like very disorganized. I have a short term memory, for things that I don't care about. I would only forget if it doesn't concern me...*

He has a lot of difficulties fitting in socially, which appears to be of more importance to him than school.

*So usually I had a lot of issues with friends and stuff, but I never let, I usually tried to never let it affect me, cause I don't get that mad fast or anything. So, it never really affected me, it...during school I would always probably occasionally during my work just think about it and then I forgot what happened in that class...Friends like...of course I have my issues and everything...there were times they were there for me. Sometimes of course, not there for me, cause you kind of get confused with who's what, what they do for you and stuff.*

#### 4.2.10 Enid

Enid comes from a family of Nova Scotian Black ancestry. She almost spends more time living with her grandmother and aunt in Lasalle than with her mother and she sometimes visits her father. She grew up mostly in Cote des Neiges (...it seems like when I go there, I have more energy...), before recently moving to Laval with her mother. Her father, a mechanic, runs a towing service and mother is a nurse's aide, although she also has a Master's degree in Sociology. Enid attended Royal Vale High School which is known for its Mathematics and Science, but she did not do well in Science, History and especially Mathematics. Her mother, grandmother and aunt push her very hard to do well in school, to do her homework, etc. She admits repeatedly that she is very easily distracted: "(if) someone would laugh, then I just laugh with them, but then, you know, I wouldn't stop, it just takes me away." She has great trouble being attentive in class, and is easily disheartened by poor results in school. She claims to be shy and will therefore never ask questions in class. She was involved in sports and other activities in high school until the teachers went on a syndical 'work to rule.' She made quick friends at Cegep through Explorations 2. Her problems with college work were due to inattention, distraction, procrastination, because "I could do whatever I want." She loves to dance and wants to start a troupe and a school.

Current Status: Her marks show that she was really not doing very well in college. She failed out of full-time day studies in the Fall of 2003 and passed one course out of three in each of her two semesters in Continuing Education. She has not taken Cegep courses since the Fall of 2004.

Enid's family has high expectations of her but she doesn't have the academic strength or study skills required.

*I have a bad memory, so usually to study I have to write things down to remember it, rather than just read it and try to remember everything in my head. [My mother has] always told me I have really bad study and homework habits. I try...I'm not saying I wouldn't come to school, I'd still be in school, but I would go*

*home and really like...I just wouldn't do homework, if they didn't tell me to do it. I'd just go home, put the stereo on, the TV or start up the computer and just go to bed. Like I'd come to school...I'd just like never study or do homework or anything, if they didn't tell me to do it. Like those times like I could tell myself to do it, but I'll be like in five minutes I'm going to get up and do it, then I'll fall asleep on the couch. When I get up, I'll go to bed...*

*My real goal actually is to be a dancer. I've been dancing for a few years now and it's like my passion. I like dancing more than anything in this world. I have free time, you're going to see me dancing. You don't find me, I'm in my basement dancing. If there's music blasting, you're going to find Enid there dancing. Every chance I get, I dance. And as soon as I quit, I'm dying to go back again. I just quit because of high school, I was having trouble in school, so my mom told me I couldn't do it anymore. Starting now I can join it back. Actually I want to open my own dance school. Professional dance school. I'm trying to start like a dance troupe, me and my friends. It's our true passion.*

#### 4.2.11 Maria

Maria's strict, immigrant home life complicated her return to school. Her mother from Angola and father, a former Portuguese police officer, work in the cleaning business and depend on her as the only daughter to translate for them, take them to doctor appointments, look after the family concerns, such as house payments, and to help with housework, etc... She moved out of the family home with her boyfriend at 17, and is still with him, although she has moved back with her parents. He did not finish high school, but is proud of her and supportive of her return to school. As a youngster, she was active in the Plateau Portuguese community, dance groups, and Portuguese school on Saturdays. She has good memories of her high school days, although she was not really interested in school. As she got older, she associated with her school friends, a mixed group, and began to hang out further away from the Plateau in the East end where her friends were from. She became a party animal, clubbing, drinking and having fun. This led to problems with her family and the move out of the home. She never had a job she liked and always worked for minimum wage. In order to return to school, she cut her hours, but was having considerable difficulty balancing the combination of school, work, family, and boyfriend. Her two older brothers, who have both completed university degrees, are supportive of her efforts to finish her education. She had a very optimistic and positive perspective about returning to school after an absence of four years, and she was full of insights that she was ready to share.

Current Status: In her first semester (A02), she failed two of five courses. She started the H03 semester but left with "Incompletes" and has not registered in college courses since then.

*I saw my friends actually moving on and I saw those that haven't done anything with their lives. Not even work, nothing. Just stay home and just waste people's time. I got sick of it, I just got tired. I'm like, I have to do something. My brother did his university in Chemical Engineering, then he went to university again for Biology and he did his Master's in Biology. And then I have my other brother, he went to university,*

*got his Diploma in Administration, so I was the only one...*

*Ya, cause then, like I'm a family person. So when Sundays come along, it's my day with my family. I'm very... basically I take care of everything at home. My parents don't talk French or English. So if anything happens at home whatsoever, it's me that has to deal with it. I'm at school, I have a cell phone and they're calling me in class: "Maria this happened, I need your help, you need to call this person and that and take care of this." So it's hard, you know. It's like I have three jobs in a way... [family is] very important. I drop everything. I do it today. I drop everything for them. Like, I know my school is my priority, I know that, but I feel like they've done so much for me, like since I've been born. The least I can do, is do a little effort to be there for them...*

#### 4.2.12 Mickey

Mickey is from Saint-Laurent. His father is of English background and his mother is French. Mother has a baccalaureate and father did not complete Cegep. Nevertheless, his father has done well without the education and provides a role model of a strong work ethic, while the grandfather on the mother's side is well to do, and got to be so without formal education. He provides the grandchildren with memberships at a private golf club in Ste- Dorothée and apparently has helped them out financially whenever they needed it. He went to a private French elementary and high school. He claims he never did more than was asked of him throughout his schooling and succeeded efficiently with this work ethic. He could never understand why the other kids would spend so much time on their home work. Because the school had no sports facilities, he was reliant on the community hockey program for his sports outlet. This led to his peer network. Mickey has a lot of friends who have money and are not motivated to continue their education, counting on their parents' money and/or business to support them. In order to keep up to his peers with money, he has had to get part-time jobs. He felt that this was a source of distraction from his studies at Cegep. He corrected this, but too late. Another stumbling block to success at Cegep seemed to be his 'new found freedom'. After the rigour of a private school education, he was not able to discipline himself enough to get to his classes. His primary motivation for continuing his education is the sense that he will not be able to make the money he wants without it, but he cannot apply himself to it.

Mickey hit his wall at about the same stage as many of the other young men.

*...my grades started off in grade 7 and grade 8 very high and then grade 9, where you don't really feel like, you know you're right in the middle, you're not close to beginning anymore, where you know you really want to...and you're far from the end too. So you don't have any, like motivation or anything. So you start having friends, and maybe you don't feel like doing homework or anything like that.*

He has a clear idea of the milieu that he moves in and how that affects their motivation.

*...for some reason I hang out with people that have a lot of money...but it seems that they are not that worried about where they are going in life and stuff, like. They have enough money, their parents are making enough money that maybe, even if they don't have a great job, or even they'll take up the family business or whatever, you know, so.*

Despite a reality check in the real world of low-paid work he could not shake the lack of motivation and find the discipline required to succeed at Cegep.

*...now I've learned and I've seen a new meaning to school, you know, like. You're working there with 40 year old people that are making maybe \$10.00 an hour and I'm 18. I use my mom's car. I live at home. I have everything handed to me on a silver platter and I can't live off...I'm making \$600.00 now, every two weeks and I have trouble living off \$600.00 every two weeks. I'm telling myself, how am I going to bring up two kids, have a wife, a house and a car, you know, so. I need to make up somewhere, something needs to give, you know, so...*

#### 4.2.13 Manon

Manon is from a small, rural community in the Montérégie. Her family would be classed as 'working poor', facing occasional bouts of unemployment and struggling to make ends meet. Both her parents encouraged her to go to Cegep and get more education than they had, although she really credits her success in school to her father. She accepts this as a family project and that she is a role model for her younger brother and sister. Her first three or four years were in a small four room school which was close to home and comfortable. However, when she began busing to Ormstown for the higher grades of primary, she realised she was far behind the other students and therefore concluded that the small school education had been somewhat inadequate. The school bus was a big part of the day for a student in the rural areas and she told several stories about it. The transition to the big school was also traumatic because she felt inferior compared to the students from the 'big' town school. The change to high school also was stressful for her because she had heard about the fights at the school and was afraid of mixing with the big kids. She did not like to work very hard at high school and was a 'big time procrastinator.' As part of her rebellion against a teacher she did not like, she would refuse to do his English and Mathematics homework. As a result, she skidded along with 60s and often a 55% was bumped up to 60% just so she did not repeat. She was treated like a weak student and thought of herself as such. She also associated with peers who provided a negative influence. Finally, in her last year of high school, she made friends with a more intellectual crowd who inspired her to get better marks and think of going to Cegep.

Current status: Manon graduated from Communications in the Fall of 2004. She had good marks and has gone on to Concordia in their Fine Arts Program.

Through elementary and high school, she was treated as a slow learner and passed from one grade to the next as a charitable act. Until arriving at Cegep, she had never felt rewarded for her efforts at school.

*The greatest impact? I guess getting some kind of confirmation. Like my mother was just saying the other day, you know, I was saying, you know, two of my things are on display, one on one side of the hall and one on the other. Like my Painting I class and my Drawing II class, you know, and I was like, wow. And she's like, you know...she was happy that I was finally getting like recognition, that I was like really good in something, you know, type thing. Just before this school I never really stood out in anything, so now I'm getting more confidence, like the assurance that I do have talent in something...*

She is also impressed by how people in her home community are so supportive of her success and encouraging her to continue. Her schooling is not only a family project, but enjoys support from the wider community.

*I find that a lot of people are behind me, a lot of people are supporting, like me. Even my friends in Valleyfield, that I don't get to see as much, they're very, like supportive, they're very happy I'm going to school and everything...*



#### 4.2.14 Stephane

Stephane's family consists of himself, his mother and father and they live in the distant suburb of Boisbriand. His family, including his cousins, play an important role in encouraging him to continue with his education. School is a major priority and he displays a level of maturity about getting the job done. Since they speak French and Portuguese at home, his parents decided to send him to English school to allow him to be perfectly bilingual. Elementary school was a very comfortable environment. He felt high school was a big change but he did not seem to hit any walls. He loved sports at high school and was particularly influenced by his Mathematics teacher. He knew all along that he would eventually go to Cegep and does not feel that he struggled in any subject in particular, but was only partly committed to his studies. In spite of being in the "bottom quintile" of his cohort, he felt satisfied with his academic performance in high school. He felt it was a big change coming from high school to Cegep and in his first semester at Vanier in Explorations 5, aspiring to enter Science, he failed Mathematics (436 equivalent), remedial Physical Science and English. Recognizing that his strengths lay elsewhere, he transferred to Communications after his first semester and he seems to have made the necessary adjustments based on his good record since then. His one major pastime is his music and he also plays on his computer a fair amount. He agreed to the first interview after Review Board in A02, but would not come in for another interview.

Current Status: He graduated in the Winter semester of 2005. On last contact with him he had decided against a university career and was planning to take a high school *Diplome des études professionnel* (DEP) specialised in working high tech composite materials.

Stephane has a good sense of balance about the role of education in his life and where the priority lies.

*...Well it was half-half. I really cared, I wanted to get into college. I was enthusiastic to learn what was out there, 'cause today a Secondary V diploma is not very...it's a base...[but] I was satisfied with the*

*marks I got...Well [my parents] push me to do my homework to go on, but they don't need to. I'll do it myself. It's fun to have as a motivation.*

Despite his love of music he is realistic about the need for an education and a career.

*...cause I'm also really devoted to music, so I read some magazines on music...I play piano and guitar...I enrolled myself in a piano program at first. My parents, since they found out I liked music, they pushed me on, 'cause it's a big motivation when it comes to music and when it comes to life...Yes, I practice a lot... I was more concentrated on school. I really wanted to get like a stable job. Today the music industry is more revolved around rap and other styles instead of rock and roll and...*

#### 4.2.15 Roman

Roman's Romanian grandmother lives with the family in their home on the West Island. With his mother's Italian family background, he speaks four languages including English and French. Both parents are university graduates with successful careers and his elder brother was going to Concordia after a difficult start in Cegep. His priorities have always been friends, hockey and a good time. At school his teachers always commented that he was very social and talked too much. He has only ever worked at school just enough to get through courses and avoids homework as much as possible. His mother nags him about his school performance in an effort to get him to work harder. He came into Vanier College through Explorations 2. Studying at Vanier means he had to travel a long distance to get to school. He stopped going to his late afternoon English course because he found it boring and did not like getting home late in the evening. Most friends are from his neighbourhood and hockey circles. At one time, he hoped for an American university scholarship to allow him to continue to play hockey. He really admires his coach as a role model. Roman is a social animal and he works in sales to have money to party. He and his friends organise limousine trips to downtown Montreal for a night of clubbing. At first contact, his long term career goal was in law.

Current Status: At Vanier he failed three courses of six in A02, then five of seven in H03. He then had to attend Continuing Education to re-qualify for day school and passed three courses in H02. In the Fall of 2004 he returned to full-time studies, this time at Centennial Academy, a private Cegep.

*...Like I don't mean to sound cocky but, like I was always, I guess, popular in high school and I don't know, it's easy to make friends 'cause I'm sociable and stuff like that... Oh, I have friends of all kinds! I'm not one nationality or anything like that. I've mixed friends, French friends, all kinds of friends, you know, they're all different nationalities, I guess...*

*...like if there's a party, me and my buddies we like to film it. You know, see what happens, who's with who, who got sick or who did something funny, you know. We*

*like doing that but I find me and my buddies we like organizing stuff, like uh, I would love to do that when I'm older, like be a party person. Like um, I dunno, organize parties for different people. Like we went to Valleyfield a couple of weeks ago. It was my friend's birthday and we rented an Uncle Harry school bus so we could all be together. Like, I dunno. Who's gonna drive all the way to Valleyfield? And the thing was, it's like a dollar a drink. Like a dollar a drink. A dollar a shot. So obviously some people are gonna drink. No one's gonna wanna drive. So we rented a bus. Fifty people, we all went up there. We paid 20 bucks each, we got 10 bucks back, it was a deposit. We had a great time and then, you know, we all went home. You know, dropped us off at our houses and...*

#### 4.2.16 Vasilio

Nick and his younger sister are Canadian born, but lived all their lives in Greece where their youngest brother was born. His mother was educated to the Master's level at university in Montreal and now runs a flower shop in Greece. Father finished a basic primary education and is a car mechanic. Vasilio entered Vanier after a failed educational career in Greece. He was very critical of the Greek system and heaped plenty of blame on its inadequacies and his being caught in the middle of a change of curriculum. He found Greek teachers unhelpful and unavailable. He accused them of simply writing on the board and going home. He claims to have avoided trouble at school because he knows how to keep a low profile. He returned to Canada ostensibly to pick up his academic career by getting away from the negative influences that sideswiped him in Greece. He is very articulate in English and it was clear that his problems with school were very much related to being a party animal, bar-crawling and late nights hanging out with friends. He claimed to have turned over a new leaf. He was in Explorations 2 at the time of the interview and held two jobs to pay the rent.

Current status: He managed to scrape through one semester of Explorations 2 and spent three unsuccessful semesters in Continuing Education courses. Our last record of Cegep attendance is in A03. We were unable to contact him after the first interview.

Like many students trying to repair a weak academic start, he had many personal issues to overcome in addition to dealing with a very different educational system.

*...I'm not doing the minimum to get through, but what's wrong with me is that, I think that I'm a bit smart, okay and whatever I'm going to study or read or something, I'm gonna get from the first time. That's what usually happens. And I'm lazy. I'm lazy...So with the amount of hours I used to spend, I used to, spend to study, other people they were studying the same amount, they didn't pass, and I was passing. Because like, my parents were saying that all the time, not only my parents, my teachers and everybody like, that I don't need to think a lot about something. If I read*

*something, I'm gonna get it from the first time, that's it...*

*Ya. It was boring for me. Like, and...it used to be boring. And it wasn't like, just boring, it was killing. Like I was finishing school and I was like, oh my god...I wasn't that tired, like I used to be when I was doing five or six hours of school in Greece.*

*And it's really weird, cause now I have to think what I'm going to do in my life. What my job is going to be, you know. What I'm going to study. And it's really hard for me, cause I haven't decided yet. I'm not 100 percent sure.*

*It's a huge...there's a big difference. Big difference. It's a big change in my life and the things in how I used to know that school is and how the system works here and the teachers, everything. It's absolutely different...No it wasn't only purely economics, I believe that here I can be more concentrated. I see Greece like as a place just for vacation...It's not the right kind of place to study or work or whatever.*

#### 4.2.17 Gloria

Gloria was the senior student in the sample, coming back to school after a fifteen year absence. She is from a poor, working-class Chateauguay family. Neither her parents nor her two younger siblings ever finished high school. "I'm the only that finished high school and the first one going to college." Her mother was a factory worker and father drove a truck. She had her first baby at 19, right after high school graduation. She took a course in stenography and got a hairdressing diploma to be able to work and has held different jobs. She married a Mohawk iron worker and they moved to Windsor, Ontario, where she was a homemaker. They are now separated and she has the three children during the week. Her reflections on the high school years were dim, distant memories. There was no family pressure for her to stay in school. As a young girl, she was only motivated to finish her diploma, and did just enough to get through but little else. She was involved in Girl Guides and cheerleading until she turned sixteen. Then it was partying, fun, boys, etc... Many of her friends dropped out of high school before completing their diplomas. She is able to return to full-time school because on the weekends the children are with their father and so she is free to study. She now feels very focused, motivated and well organised. She wanted to go straight into Nursing, but in hindsight was glad to have the opportunity to enter Explorations 4 to re-learn academic skills and get used to Cegep. Life became more complicated in her first year, when she helped a friend going through marriage difficulties, by taking care of her four children for the better part of a semester in addition to her own three. It has been hard work to balance life as a mother of three and succeed as a full time student, but she has maintained a respectable record since she started.

Current Status: She is currently in her third year of Nursing and should complete her program requirements in May 2006.

She waited a long time to fulfill her dream of becoming a nurse.

*...now, last year, my youngest son started kindergarten and I just decided that this was my time now. My three kids were in school and this is my time to do my school.*

Returning to school entailed considerable sacrifice.

*I have...my youngest son is starting to come out now with a learning disability and so making the time... like, you know, they wanted him to be evaluated with a speech therapist or a speech pathologist and...you know, I kind of tell them, you know, unfortunately I had to go around my schedule, because, you know, my teacher doesn't care that my son has a speech problem, they want me in that class, you know. So unfortunately we have to do things around my schedule, which doesn't always tie in to that, I'm missing...my daughter plays hockey for her high school team, you know, 90% of the time, I can't get there, you know. And sometimes, unfortunately, on the weekend it's still school for me, you know. Cause those are the only two days where they can play and I can focus...but I keep telling them, in three years it's gonna benefit you, so, we need to...I went into this telling them that we all had to do it together. It's not just mommy going to school, this is all of us helping out, all of us.*

#### 4.2.18 Tefanny

Tefanny is from a poor Black family in Point St-Charles. She lives with her three brothers and three sisters. Her parents are separated. There is no money in the house although her mother makes a little by sewing clothes for sale. Neither parent has a degree or diploma although one older sister appears to be successfully pursuing a university degree. Her father, whom she rarely sees, presses her to succeed in school but her mother shows very little interest in her academic efforts. Her only real friends are from her early schools and community, otherwise she has few friends and is very selective about them. Boredom is a major theme in her interviews and television is her main activity, since she does not have the money to go out. Tefanny's philosophy is to do just enough to get what she wants. She speaks of her laziness with an articulate pride. She never liked school and wants to get out of the building as soon as possible, but seems to know that she has to stay in it to get the prerequisites. If she does not like a course then she just puts out the minimum to pass. On the other hand, she was quite proud of her high 70s in Chemistry and Mathematics. She was upset by her failures in Calculus and Chemistry courses; the teachers were at fault. She feels like she is going nowhere in Social Science and is frustrated that she can not enter Cegep sciences at Vanier. Her goal is to become a dolphin trainer. At the time of the last interview, her plan was to go to private college so she could take the science prerequisites she needs for her Marine Biology dream. Her first two semesters reflected her 'efficiency' philosophy, but as her goal of studies in the United States became more fixed, her subsequent semesters revealed her abilities and she began to attain respectable grades. She plans to go to an American university for a program in animal training. The only jobs she has had are those that don't require a lot of effort and where she does not have to get up early.

Current status: She is not registered in any Cegep courses and may have restarted high school at a private institution in order to upgrade her marks and acquire science prerequisites in an effort to get accepted

straight into university Biology in the United States.

*...School is important. However, I don't work that hard either. I like to do as little as possible. And I'm okay getting by as much as possible...and I just kept getting, like, under 60's, 70's in some classes...*

*...it could be just that reason, that I won't do anything if I really don't want to do it. If I don't feel like doing the assignment then I'm probably not gonna, but...I'm still gonna pass but, I still kind of feel the need to pass. Like I really feel the need to pass and like sometimes I wish I did better but, you know, then there's that laziness that takes over, so...(laughs)*

#### 4.2.19 Amelia

Amelia grew up in Notre Dame de Grace in a low income, single-parent, single-child family. Her mother, from Grenada, is a nurse's aid who had similar ambitions for her daughter and who exerts considerable influence bordering on pressure. Her elementary school experience was terrible. She experienced a lot of bullying and racism which was a distraction for her socially and academically. She was labelled a geek because of her thick glasses and because she used the community centre for tutoring after school. Apparently, the principal of the school provided very little help, even when her mother would speak to her about the problems Amelia was facing. She faced these confrontations wherever she went – at school, on the bus, at the community centre. She figures there were three classes of kids: geeks, in-betweens, and cools. The distinction was not based on just one factor but included the way a person dressed, the music one listened to, and the sports one played. She also feels that the bullies continue to pick on the individuals that do not defend themselves. Amelia is willing to adjust her lifestyle in order to succeed. She had some problems getting clear guidance about what program she should take. Even in the second interview, Amelia admitted that the reason she volunteered was because her mother felt it would be interesting. Amelia's mother has also resorted to strategies beyond encouragement.

Current status: Amelia did not remain in good standing in H04 for the second time, so she was not enrolled in the day program. As a result she was unwilling to partake in a third interview.

In secondary school, Amelia finally solved her problem with the bullies and began to gain confidence.

*...Ya. I did have a few problems at first, because at that time I was slowly starting to defend myself. I even remember I got into a fight with someone. I don't know. I think that ever since I had that fight with that student, things changed. 'Cause like, I learned how to defend myself properly. 'Cause like, I came out of my shell, you know. Everything changed.*

Her mother is a role model and fills an important part of her life. This creates pressure to succeed despite her lack of success in school.

*She tells me, "Amelia, I'm the only one that has to go to work, I know you're doing good, but please make me proud". It's not just her I want to make proud, I want to be proud of myself also, you know...She's strict. I think it's actually best that's she strict...I know my mom always told me "I grew up in a strict environment, so are you, and look I turned out very good. I see that you turned out very well and I'm keeping it up. Okay, I might be strict but you'll understand why in the long run."...*

*The reason why she is actually my motivator is because when she was young, she had a hard, a tough, childhood and I believe she thought okay it's very tiring after hearing the same story over and over, but it's actually impressing to see what she became. Now she's very successful, she's doing excellent in things.*

#### 4.2.20 Martin

Martin is of English / Italian background from Chateauguay on the South Shore where he lives with his parents and an older sister. His father is a chemist in a company which makes motherboards and computer chips, while mother is an educator with the intellectually challenged. Although he claimed that they were close, in some ways he appears quite alienated from his parents. He greatly admires his uncle for his many abilities as an entrepreneur, contractor, chef and for running a hairdressing school. He is a skate-boarder with friends like himself, who are very critical with a cynical attitude towards the system and the people who are in it. He plays bass in three bands. One is heavy metal and another is a backup band to his sister, more mainstream. This is his independent thinking and skeptical side. On the other hand, he is a team player who loves football. His motivation for school is to be with his peers, to play football, do some music and have fun. His marks reveal a truly efficient approach to school that maintains the minimum grades to avoid semester failure, and that allows him to play football and pursue his real interests. His peer group includes mostly guys and guys with girlfriends as long as they do not spoil the group. From our first contact, he presented the appearance of the archetypical angry young man. He assiduously avoided being interviewed and stood us up a number of times despite promising to come. He spoke in a focused and articulate manner, but remained guarded and unrevealing. He did not find a program to attract him and would have liked to design his own.

Current Status: Martin should graduate from Social Science in December 2005.

Chateauguay and school

*It's pretty boring where we're from. Like there's an arcade, but nobody wants to play video games, so... School was pretty much the same, it's just the people are different. I hang around with different people now and school's school... Standing around being bored in school... The teachers. We don't learn anything in school. All the stuff that I learned, I either knew it already and I just put what I knew towards what they asked on test or...*

*Well there are some funner classes than others, but in every class there are days when like, nobody was awake in class. There were a couple of people throwing, like paper balls or whatever, but sometimes when we'd do a fun activity, like in teams or whatever, people would be more into it, but still they would hardly... they'd give us like 75 minutes to do like 5 minutes worth of work. We'd do it in teams and then just talk the rest of the class... I find Cegep is a lot more organized. They get the information that we need to know to us a lot faster and it's more to the point. They don't waste as much of our time.*

*... But the English and like Economics and History and stuff it's all pretty much stuff that I already knew, so it's pointless even being there. They gave us a test and it was all stuff we learned as kids from like T.V. or whatever...*

#### 4.2.21 Sammi

Sammi was born in Egypt, and immigrated to Canada when he was 11 years old. Family is very important to him and exists on a transnational basis which includes his extended family in Egypt and England as well as Montreal. They are Coptic Christians and the church is a big part of their family and social life as well. His parents own their home on the West Island and both have university degrees. His father is an engineer and mother is an accountant. His younger brother is also a student at Vanier College. His peer network at high school included the Black students and his friends from church. He was streamed into the weak and problem classes. He likes the computer chat rooms where he can dialogue with a number of friends at once. Most of his friends, like himself, are not strong academically. He is not athletic and is somewhat overweight. At the time of the interview he had no girlfriends and had not really worked in paid employment. Sammi allowed the first interview because he was a new student in Explorations 2. He appeared very shy and was not at all happy answering many of the questions. Since then, he has been evasive and always claims to be too busy, since he is in Building Systems Engineering Technology (BSET), which entails a very heavy workload. Nevertheless, we maintain contact through our social interactions in the hallway. His language skills affect his academic ability.

Current Status: He has determinedly continued in BSET and has a record of passing most of his courses. He had only one bad semester in H04 when he failed the required Physics for his program and 1 BSET concentration course. He will need an extra year to complete the General Studies courses and should graduate at the end of 2006.

The transition from Egypt to French school on the West Island was difficult for Sammi and as his marks went down he was assigned to the weaker classes.

*Well in accueil, my marks were very good, I was studying hard, but like the more I go, my marks go down...I make too many friends and we hang out a lot and that's that...Friends from school, friends from*

*church...From my school, my friends are from Canada or maybe another country, but from church they're all Egyptian or Arabic, well not Arabic, but Egyptian.*

His class had a very difficult final year of high school, especially with the French teacher.

*Ya well, because I find we changed teacher five times... And it made a big problem and stuff...Like one of them, the first one, she had like, a heart attack. She went to the hospital. She came like at the end of the year. After we had like three teachers. One of them she left to Ottawa and the second one she just left, she couldn't take our class...Like me and my friends like, like my friends were all like, Black and like we stick together. If someone goes out, we have to get him in or we go out with him.*



#### 4.2.22 Noel-Pierre

Noel-Pierre lives with his widowed mother and two older brothers. He has led a very transient life between Montreal and Haiti during his elementary and secondary schooling. This dislocation cost him two years of schooling in order to ‘catch-up’ each time he moved from one jurisdiction to another, first when he came from Haiti into the fifth grade and the next time when he came back from Haiti again at Secondary IV. The extended time it has taken him to get his education bothers him. He experienced considerable racism as the only black child in his elementary school in Laval. He is very determined to continue in spite of his set-backs and credits this spirit to his father who passed away when he was ten. His two older brothers seem just as determined. The one was about to begin studying for a degree in electrical engineering and the other was enrolled at LaSalle College in Computer Science. His favourite subjects in high school were Gym and Mathematics. He has played AA basketball for Vanier, but he has clearly struggled with Mathematics at the college level. This effort has made him realize that he may not have the aptitude for Mathematics and spoke about getting some career counselling in order to find out what direction to take towards a suitable career. The family financial situation has obliged him to work part-time to pay his school expenses.

Current Status: Noel-Pierre failed three of his five courses in his first semester (A02). In H03 he passed five of five but by the semester of his second interview (A03) he failed all his courses. He took the H04 semester off, and enrolled in Continuing Education courses in A04 and H05 in order to re-qualify for full-time studies. Graduation is still some distance in the future.

Dislocation forced him to repeat two grades – in both elementary and secondary.

*Yeah, in school, because I had to do my Sec. IV when I came back here in Montreal, I had to do my Sec. IV again...to repeat it. And when I first came, when I was in elementary school, I had to do cinquième année, I had to do it again...I didn't feel comfortable, because I was always telling myself that, you know, I'm doing*

*a class again, that's not good, it's not good for my education, 'cause once I get to Cegep or to university, I'll always be late and stuff.*

Money has always been an issue for Noel-Pierre and his family.

*My family here and my family in Haiti, because we're not very rich, you know and sometimes I'm thinking if I get my way through basketball, you know, you could make a lot of money and that money I could share with my family, cause they're not very rich.*

Racism comes up time and again in the case of young people of Haitian background.

*Some people, like when I was in elementary school... they used to pick on me a lot, because I was the only Black guy in my class, when I was young... Yeah, yeah, yeah. When I was in elementary school at St-Charles, Laval, I was the only Black guy in the class. So I used to get a lot into fights with students, 'cause they used to be racist against me and everything.*

#### 4.2.23 William

William is from St-Laurent where he lives with his parents, and is in the middle between two brothers and two sisters, in what appears to be a harmonious and supportive environment. His father is a businessman who earned his Commerce degree part-time and his mother is a college trained daycare worker. William is a quiet man who has a few select friends. He was not committed to Cegep in the first place and was only really attending to please his parents. At Vanier, Mathematics proved to be his nemesis and it did not take him long to see that this would prevent him from achieving his original goal of studying in computer technologies. One semester was enough experience to convince himself and his parents that his future lay elsewhere. Even at Cegep, William began exploring alternatives to school, such as the Armed Forces. He left Cegep and while working part time at a local cinema, decided to take a one year correspondence program in computer repairs. This option is partly inspired by his observation of the career paths and degrees of success of an older sister and brother. The former completed a university degree while his brother became a self-taught computer expert and makes more money than his formally educated sibling. Once William was committed to a career path, there was a sense of relief on the part of both his parents and himself. Since then, he has shown impressive self-discipline. He works almost full-time at the cinema, trains in martial arts and studies computer maintenance. He believes he could still return to Cegep if he thought that would serve his purposes. In the meantime, he aims to get a job in the computer maintenance field.

Current Status: He spent only one semester in Vanier's Explorations 2 program (A02), before choosing an alternative career path. He has taken correspondence courses to gain certificates in computer maintenance, but has not attended Cegep since.

*...I didn't really know what I wanted to be. Many ideas popped up but I wasn't too sure at all what I wanted to do...I don't know. 'Cause my parents keep telling me how my sister stayed in school and she*

*went to university and now she's working at MDS (a pharmaceutical company).*

*...I did another [technical correspondence] course and I completed it and now I have an A+ degree in computer technician...And I wasn't scared to try it. I tried it and I really like it and that's why I went through it so fast...*

[the training never stops]

*...Constantly, because they're always evolving the technology. There's always, let's say, new viruses coming out, almost every day. So you're consistently learning almost everything all over again...*

*...Well, it helps out a bit with confidence. It also helps with discipline to stay focused. So I find that really helps out a lot...Cause if you're distracted easily, then nothing will ever get done. Focus is the key.*

#### 4.2.24 Vishek

Vishek emigrated from India with his family who raised their family out of their grocery store business. The family lives in Dollard des Ormeaux and the children all contribute to the work at home and at their two stores. Vishek displays a lot of respect and gratitude towards his parents for the life he has and for instilling in him the virtues with which he governs his life. Getting an education is his first priority, which goes hand in hand with helping to run the business as part of a family project. His college schedule takes second priority to when he is needed at the store, with one exception. One semester he made his school schedule the first priority and took the classes and courses he wanted without worrying about the needs of the family business, "...it was the semester from Heaven." He got the teachers, the courses, and the schedule he wanted and loved every minute of it. In addition, if he needed time for his school work his parents made sure he got the time. Vishek has a strong sense of purpose with respect to his education and has it narrowed down to courses that will leave his options open. At first, because of the family stores, it made sense to study business but he quickly realized that he was acquiring all he needed to know about business by being immersed in it and learning from his parents. His friends, he says, have good work ethics and strive for their goals. He has a very healthy attitude towards school and receives good support from his family.

Current Status: He was in his fifth and final semester for the third interview and graduated in December 2004. He is now at Concordia University in Human Relations.

The family project is clearly the major force in this young man's life, but his parents maintain a healthy and open attitude towards how his career takes shape.

*Like, I don't know. You may have heard, Indian culture, they always want you to be a doctor or a lawyer or one of the high class professions and my parents, that's what they want for me. They want me to become something good in my life and, because we have a grocery store business they want me not to have to work that hard. They'd rather I just get a good job*

*where I could support my family and just live the best life I could possibly supply for myself and through their mistakes or whatever they've done wrong in their life, whatever they feel they've done wrong, they try to tell me that I should learn, become educated and then I could get a good job in the society.*

## 4.2.25 Ahmed

Ahmed is the oldest son of a family that immigrated to Saint-Laurent from Pakistan via Texas and New Brunswick. His father, an engineer, acquired an Electrotechnology diploma at Vanier. His father has always sought to place his children in schools that will favour their educational success. Ahmed's younger twin sisters are enrolled in a school in the east end to avoid their having to attend the local high school which his father considered inferior. The family immigrated to Quebec when Ahmed was at Secondary II level but he was placed in a *classe d'accueil* and was going to be put back into Secondary I. To avoid this, his family paid the fees to send him to private school in English, which he completed before coming straight to Vanier. Ahmed went through a period of negative influences in Secondary III, skipping classes, using drugs and drinking. The arrival on the scene of a girlfriend and a good friend helped him recover for Secondary IV, but he deteriorated again in Secondary V because his girlfriend had already gone ahead of him to college. His girlfriend is very important to him. He associates with his friends who are an ethnic mix of people and many of whom have already reached university. Others have dropped out of school before completing Cegep. He is not involved in any organized activities outside of school, and plays no sports. He likes computer games and is a television addict. He is capable of doing 'nothing' when he is not motivated. He does not work but is inspired by business to try to make some quick money.

Current Status: Ahmed graduated from Social Science in the Winter 2005 semester. His plan was to attend Concordia University.

Like many young people, Ahmed hit his personal wall with the move from Secondary III to Secondary IV.

*Well in Grade 10, I was doing pretty good, cause like I was basically acing all the Physical Science and most of my subjects I was getting A's. So maybe at that time that was my whole interest, you know, going and getting my A and competing with this other girl who was getting As too. You know, it was the competition that was motivating me. But then when I got to grade 11 I*

*don't know what happened to me, I just...dramatically my marks started dropping like you know, like you know to 70's...And then when I got to grade 11, I don't know what happened to me, something just, you know, in my brain everything was just shut. I don't know, as if you don't have to go on any further. It's like something just bothered me when I was in grade 11.*

Ahmed's long term girlfriend is a high achiever who motivates him to keep up with her.

*...like when I was in grade 11, I knew that no matter what, I cannot stay an extra year in high school, because I have to reach so that I can be closer to my girlfriend, you know in college. So it's the same thing I think what's going to happen to me, like next semester, when she goes into university, so...what's going to happen is, like I'll see her in university and where I would have to work myself for me to reach university, you know. It's sort of like, you know, like a motivator...*

#### 4.2.26 Melany

Melany is the only child of blue collar Hungarian/Italian parents who are committed to her getting a better education than they have. They continue to be very positive and supportive. They sent her to a private French school for all of her elementary and secondary years. She feels that the discipline and other good habits that she learned there served her well at Cegep. On the other hand, she remembers being traumatised by having to go to school in French. Her natural shyness was compounded by her inability to speak French fluently for the first few years of her education. She finally made some very good friends and was doing well until her last two years when she and her friends were no longer in the same classes and she lost her motivation. As a result her high school marks do not reflect her abilities. Her real social life evolved out of her participation in and passion for ringette and girls' hockey in Saint-Laurent. At Vanier she proceeded through her Social Science program in an efficient and successful manner even though she was in the program by default. She lacked direction and eventually sought career counseling, which pointed out that she had skills that would flourish in a business program. While she is not totally convinced that this is the path to take, she is nonetheless giving it her best effort.

Current Status: Melany graduated from Social Science in the Fall of 2004. She is taking Mathematics prerequisites in Continuing Education in order to apply to Concordia's Molson School of Business. She acquired marks above the class average throughout her Cegep career.

Her social life rates higher than her academics and her weak marks in the last two years of high school were a direct result of being separated from her friends.

*Having my three, no, my two last years, like I got in classes where none of my friends were in them, so that was a downer. I think it would have been a lot more fun if I could have had at least my best friend in my class, for those two last years.*

Knowing she has to stay in school and knowing where she is going are very different.

*Getting a future for myself. I don't know what I wanna be though, I have no clue, so I just gonna study and see what happens.*

The discipline and work habits instilled at private school carried her successfully through college.

*Well, I find it O.K. 'cause since I come from a private school, the work was like, really, really tough sometimes, and I feel like a little at ease here 'cause, the work, most of it I can do and I can organize myself. Like, I don't know, in high school it was just too much (chuckles).*

Her life still revolves around her friends as the first priority.

*No, I don't want to work during school. I'd rather keep it for when we have like winter break or something. I go shopping with my friend, hang out with my boyfriend and that's basically it. It's always my best friend and my boyfriend.*

#### 4.2.27 Melissa

Melissa's father is West Indian and mother Ukrainian and she grew up in the high density, low-income Cloverdale area of Pierrefonds. She has always tried to maintain the peace between her parents and stays with her mother, who is bipolar. From a young age, life has been difficult. She always felt she was a misfit at school, afraid that her mother would arrive and embarrass her in front of the other students. She left home when her mother became seriously ill, (about Secondary IV) and went to live in a group home. Today she still volunteers with a mental illness hotline. She was always reflective and introspective and concerned about issues of injustice. From a very early age, she kept journals, read a lot, did drugs and listened to music. She had a boyfriend somewhat older than herself and moved in with him when she was still in her mid-teens. School was not a welcoming place and she was turned off by unsupportive teachers so she began skipping classes. Her arrival in Cegep as a mature student is part of a carefully thought out plan to use school to enlighten herself and not necessarily to gain certification even though she has maintained outstanding marks. She is a very principled person. For example, she criticizes the grading of students' work as unjustifiable and unfair since it is an attempt to quantify the intangible concepts of knowledge and understanding. This may explain why she still has not written the English Exit Exam, even though she completed her prerequisites for it and is a strong reader and writer who could handily pass the exam. She comes to school with a purpose, to gain knowledge in class. She greatly admired one younger English teacher for the way she respected the students and strove to create a learning atmosphere which was comfortable for everyone to work in. Her mother and father are both helping her financially so she can go to school without working. She reads a lot, especially in subjects like Sociology and Philosophy, but does not read fiction as a preference. She recently read The Bible and discovered Jesus, not as a religious conversion through any church, but as a role model and hero in the way he fought against injustice.

Current Status: Although Melissa has completed all the requirements for a college diploma, she is not technically a graduate since she has not written the final English Exit Examination, probably on principle. She plans to attend university and expects to be accepted as a mature student.

*Yeah. [by Cegep] I found like a purpose for myself and a direction in my life, which without it, I wouldn't have succeeded well in school. Like that, I'm sure of that... I'm pretty sure of it. I've thought about it and thought about and I realise that, you know, to have this purpose and this direction, like even the things that were bothering me in school, because there were things I didn't particularly like, you know. I don't like the competitive nature of schools, and that really, it bothers me sometimes a lot. Like, 'cause I don't really want to be part of it, I would rather just not be a part of it. But because I have that direction and purpose, and there is something that I want to realize in life and I want to realize my potential. I want to, and I firmly believe that justice is possible and it ought to be...*

#### 4.2.28 Shirley

Shirley grew up with her parents in Ste-Agathe in the Laurentians. They have been very supportive of her desire to continue her education. To finish her high school in adult education she had to move to Saint-Laurent and lives on her own during the week. She travels home each weekend to work and stay with her parents. Shirley had a miserable time throughout elementary and secondary school. She was picked on at school and on the bus going to and from school. She sought help from her teachers and the principals of her schools but the harassment persisted. Her mother and grandmother both went to see the principal with some positive but not long-lasting results. In addition, she has had some very unsatisfactory relations with men, which have left her determined to avoid the distraction those relationships caused. The big turning point in her academic career was the move to the adult education program where she was treated fairly by peers and teachers alike. Cegep continues that positive exchange and since then she appears to gain more and more confidence. She feels the Explorations 2 program provided her with a positive peer support group who remain her good friends. She admits to not having a particular career in mind and is comfortable with the idea of just continuing her education to gain knowledge and accept whatever she will end up with. She plans to go to Concordia.

**Current Status:** She is currently enrolled in Social Science and could complete her diploma in December 2005. At the time of final writing, we learned that she had transferred from Social Science into Special Care Counselling, a three year technology program.

She has established a solid friendship with another student that encourages her at school.

*I had good motivation from teachers and other students... We still do! And her whole family. Her sister, her brother, the whole family... not just academic. She is like, we are close in both ways, you know.*

She learned how to work the system to get teachers who would give her that extra help to get through a course.

*When they, like, I mean when they help you more, like, you know, when they give you office hours and they are always there... Or if you try to contact them by email, or phone, they always phone you back and they help, give you feedback on your work. You know, it's, when they make time out of class and during class, then it's good... Yeah! That is why I took almost the same teachers I had last semester. Or teachers that... you heard of this website [ratemyteacher.com](http://ratemyteacher.com)?*

The future is not clear as her weak marks influence the choices available to her.

*'Cause, I didn't know about the R Score, like two semesters ago... I wasn't paying much attention to it, and then all of sudden... you hear R Score and it's the main thing you need to get into university... mine is really, really low... What do I do now? I have no clue... I don't know. I don't know what I want to do yet.*

#### 4.2.29 Moses

Moses is from a secular Jewish family in Saint-Laurent where he lives with his parents and a younger brother. Although they own their own house, when we first interviewed Moses, his father had lost his job in sales and his mother was working. His younger brother is a conscientious and high achieving student at LaurenHill High School. Moses, on the other hand, attended the same school when he started hanging out with a crowd that was living a bit faster than those in his neighbourhood - drinking, smoking marijuana, skipping school, and watching his marks slide. His family started to notice and to clamp down with solid support which he now appreciates very greatly. In addition, an older acquaintance gave him some solid advice about turning his life around. He changed schools to Mile End Alternative School. The teacher / student ratio, caring teachers, and a bit of desperation and ambition helped him re-establish himself on an academic path. He also went back to his old neighbourhood friends. He came into Vanier through Explorations 2, and found in retrospect that it helped him a lot. He was doing well when he talked in his first semester. By his third semester, at the time of the second interview, he was failing, although he didn't really recognize or admit it then, and by the spring of 2004, he had failed out. He has worked since high school at Guzzo Theatres, and was a projectionist at the time of the first interview. His explanation is that he was working too much - he was promoted to assistant manager, really liked it, and had worked lots of hours. He still loves school, and loves to learn, but is quite critical of some classes and admits that he does not always learn with ease. He doesn't like to memorize unless the material is meaningful, and he wants what he learns to be relevant to everyday life.

Current Status: He was in Continuing Education, taking courses to re-qualify for full-time day studies, but the last courses he took were in the Winter of 2005.

*Yeah. I was putting in actually double hours, cause I got promoted...I found myself more working at work, rather than paying attention to school and my*

*studies...I just got promoted. It was a change in my job, I moved on to more responsibility...Assistant manager...Higher...That's what I like: responsibility, power and the money.*

[If you could send a message to the Ministry of Education]

*...Well, I'd tell them that they should pay more attention to students, like how you said, take them more into account, take their stories in account and maybe focus more on just the workload itself. Take into account that like, school isn't their life, they have...we are obliged to do certain things outside of school, you know: family requires us, work requires us. It's like we're not just machines, you know. It shouldn't be just school in our lives, like there is other things that we have to do in our lives, you know.*

*...it costs money, you have to pay everything, but we only make so much money, you know. If they made the work...if they took the workload down a little bit and let us work more, obviously we'd have more money... how do they expect us to do everything, when they're telling us no, you can't, you have to focus more on school. You can't make all that money and your parents aren't helping you, so you fall into like, you're into a dilemma, you know, you fall into like this trap.*



### 4.2.30 Jennifer

Jennifer shares a home in Laval East with her parents, brother and sister and Brazilian grandmother. She likes the small, quiet, largely francophone community where she lives. Her parents were divorced for 10 years, but recently got back together. Father is a human resources manager, and mother is a homemaker and odd-jobber. She and her boyfriend have been together since she started Cegep. He comes up often in conversation. She feels he is very smart but does not like school, and did not go to college. By the third interview, he was living with her in the family home. Jennifer is determined and ambitious to the point of being headstrong. She had a rebellious period with drugs, clubbing and confrontations with her parents. She is still a rebel, with little patience for rules and bureaucracy. She has always worked in telemarketing and restaurants. She likes her independence, and has a car which she shares with her mother. She attended several elementary schools, middle school, then Laval Catholic High School, and finally graduated from an alternative school, which she loved. She felt that it prepared her for the responsibility and freedom of Cegep. Jennifer recounted some tough times in elementary school, fighting, being bullied and bullying. She liked English and Mathematics in school, but disliked French. She wants to be an art therapist, and is taking Communications. She had planned to skip a year of Cegep by going to university in Ontario, but feels she was misled by an adviser, so she remained in Cegep instead of moving to Ottawa. She loves art, and the Communications program at Vanier.

**Current Status:** After a couple of failures in each of her first two semesters her academic results have been mostly quite good. She graduated from Communications in the Winter of 2005 and was planning to continue in Fine Arts at Concordia.

She had a rocky middle adolescence, but now she feels very happy with her life and her relations with her family, which has become very important to her.

*So...Yeah...a bit of a rough childhood, but not that bad. I've lived in lots of different places like*

*apartments, houses, in Montreal, NDG, St-Laurent, lots of different places in Laval...Ever since I started CEGEP, I've actually been home a lot more. So they like that. You know, I have to be home to study and I like it—it's like perfectly balanced right now—I have my friends, my boyfriend and my family, and my school...*

Alternative school provided an outlet for her creative energies that she did not find at the regular comprehensive high school.

*At Laval Catholic, I wasn't into that at all. At Phoenix I was involved in a couple of things. Like, I took charge of like, like 'cause the students do everything at Phoenix. If you want a yearbook, the students do it. I was in charge of the yearbook, I was in charge of the talent show, I was the president of my school committee. So I was involved at Phoenix. I liked that, yeah.*

#### 4.2.31 Raffi

Raffi is of Armenian extraction and lives with his parents and younger brother and sister in a semi-detached house in Chomedey, Laval. Neither parent went past secondary school and his sister is studying Early Childhood Education at Vanier. He remains active in Armenian youth activities, but it is just a formal connection. There is no noticeable family pressure on his studies. He does not drink, nor party very much. His friends are mostly Science students at Vanier. Overall, he does not see himself as having trouble in school, but in high school he did experience difficulties in Mathematics. He liked English, Economics and had a 'communist' History teacher who really stimulated his appetite for learning. He was a very quiet student until a Brazilian exchange student came to his high school for a year. It brought him out and changed his life. Now he would like to live in Brazil for awhile. Some high school classes were out of control, but he was a survivor. He had started Vanier in Explorations 3 intending to enter Computer Science Technology, but switched to Social Science, and loves it. He does not like to memorize, be lectured at or be given notes to study. He wants course material to be relevant; he wants to discuss it; and he likes essay writing for tests. At Vanier, he loves History and Political Science, and has been turned on to learning so much that he wants to go through for a Ph.D. Generally he finds college studies easy. He skipped a lot of classes first semester, so he failed a few courses, and took 3 years to finish a 2 year program. Most of his friends have moved on, so he thinks of himself as a failure for taking too long at Cegep. He plays guitar (punk and classical), has a cellphone, bought a car and has had 2 accidents already. He has a younger girlfriend and a tight circle of two or three close friends. He works up to 22 hours each week at the "Y" and at Vanier as a lifeguard. Between work and school he keeps very busy.

Current Status: Raffi graduated from Social Science in May 2005 and is currently at Concordia University.

Raffi's passion for learning may be rather recent, but he has embarked on the path with enthusiasm and personal commitment.

*I buy a lot of magazines and books. Like my parents don't read. It's not like they don't read English, it's like they'd rather read Armenian or Arabic. They have the Armenian paper at home and they have..like I buy books, like I buy some science fiction books, I buy some magazines, anything like just to read at home sometimes. If I'm bored or if I have extra money, I would rather waste it on a magazine than go buy candy.*

*...And politics is a big thing to me,...I also switched my program...I don't want to go in Computer Science anymore, I want to be history, like Ph.D. So, I want to teach History, either university or college...Like History, like it's not a problem for me. Like, I go home, I read my History...I read my History textbooks over and over, like for fun, if you can call it that...[with my friends] We talk politics a bit, we talk a little about religion, 'cause most of my friends are like agnostic and I just recently converted to Buddhism.*

#### 4.2.32 Giorgio

Giorgio is from a Saint-Laurent family of Italian extraction. As a teen, Giorgio began to challenge his parents for his autonomy. Whenever his parents tried to influence Giorgio to do better in school he would react contrarily and to make his point he would remind them of how poorly educated they are. He was not sure why he was so angry with his parents and attributes it partly to being jealous of the attention his younger siblings received. He admits to having an attention deficit and gets headaches when he reads. He claims he was bright enough to play around in class, and not pay attention and still get passing marks. He also talked about having many small assignments to do when he preferred to get his work done in one big assignment so that he was not busy all the time. Giorgio hit the academic 'wall' when the school he was attending was closed down and he was forced to go to another school in Côte-des-Nieges. He feels that leaving the more enlightened program at Father Macdonald and changing to a regular program at Marymount brought his performance down because of the influence of the lower achieving kids in the regular program. Everything was going fine until then. The change forced him into a longer commute out of his own community and may have had something to do with the change in personality. He got into disciplinary problems and displayed a disrespectful attitude towards authority. He describes some of the classrooms at his new school as totally out of control with violence among the classmates. Some of the teachers just ignored what was going on while others would not tolerate it. He claims most of the teachers were more afraid of the students than students were of the teachers. Girls and fun were his highest priority at that time. He decided to continue his education into Cegep because he did not want to be flipping burgers for the rest of his life. At the time of his only interview (A02), he was feeling a little depressed because reality was hitting; he could see that in order to succeed at Cegep he was going to have to work at it and relations with his parents were only getting worse.

Current Status: Giorgio passed 8 out of 12 courses in two semesters (A02 and H03) and has not attended college since.

*...by the time, last year I was a big guy, my parents couldn't really control me that much. I'm a 6'3", over 200 pound guy. What could they tell me? I was 16 years old. I don't have to be in school at that point... ever since my mom brought home my sister, I was kind of like...I was really jealous and I'm thinking that that's why I'm so rebellious towards my parents, because I had all the attention for three years and then it shifted and I got a lot less and I got...I don't know. I guess that's why I have this grudge against them.*

*...I used to read, but I really don't read anymore. I can't stand it. I get headaches when I read. I need perfect silence to read. I have this really low attention span with books. It's a problem when you're in class and you have to be writing an essay. Like I need perfect silence to do my work. So if I'm in class writing an essay, I won't be able to do it well at all.*

**4.2.33 Felicité**

Felicité lives with both her parents and an older brother in a duplex on the West Island. Her mother is a nurse, and father a bus driver. They are of Haitian background. Felicité went to a private Catholic girl's school, and was taught by nuns who were very severe and intrusive. Everybody knew everything about her life. A uniform and dress code were checked in detail every day, and good study habits were, quite simply, required. She liked languages (French and Spanish), did well in History and Economics, and disliked Mathematics. She enjoyed the social aspects of school life and went to school every day in anticipation of seeing her friends. She was on different committees and participated in many sports because she had the ability, and everyone was obliged to as part of the school regime. She has a longstanding habit of cruising along doing the minimum, cramming and working hard at the end to get through courses. Nonetheless, the habits learned at private school have carried her successfully through Cegep. At Vanier, she did not make many new friends and could not wait till classes finished, so she could go home and relax. Her mother is her role model. She has a part-time job in telemarketing. Her boyfriend is 2 years older, and studies computers at McGill.

Current Status: She failed only one course and got grades mostly in the 60s and 70s, graduating from Social Science 'on time'. Her goal was to study education at McGill. She wants to be an elementary school teacher.

*The transition was pretty good...I'm not surprised, because I knew like, people, teachers weren't going to be as strict and as involved in your work, but, you know, it still surprised me a little like how free you are. Like you don't have to go to your classes. You don't have to do anything. But in high school you know, I was...my high school, it was pretty good. Education like, it was higher level, you had to do 536 math. Everything was like a higher level education, so Spanish, everything. Now that I look back,...I was like, oh, I hate this school, I hate nuns and whatever, uniform... But now, in general, it was good.*

*I don't know yet what I want to be, like a profession, but right now I'm in Social so I do volunteer work now,*

*in kindergarten and I really like it, so I'm probably like, more towards teaching.*

#### 4.2.34 Veronique

Veronique and her mother are Anglophones originally from Saint-Lucia and live together in a high density, low income area of Saint-Laurent. She admires her mother very much. Mother was working towards a Master's degree at Concordia. Despite her mother's academic success, Veronique has never found school easy, and has not addressed her studies with all her heart. She was not motivated to work, had no career direction and was simply at school to please her mother. She often found herself distracted by the social networks that school provided and repeated in Cegep what she had done in high school by spending her time socialising in the cafeteria and common areas rather than paying any attention to courses. Basketball was her only fun at school despite claiming to like a range of subjects. She sees herself as being basically lazy and her poor work ethic reflected her attitude to school. As a result of her low marks, her mother had her transferred from Pierrefonds Comprehensive to Options II, an alternative school, to repeat Secondary IV and then complete her Secondary School Diploma. At first, she did not appreciate Options II but eventually she came to realise it was the best thing for her. The alternative school format worked for her with its tight discipline, but Cegep has been a challenge for her. Her social life is limited to a few close friends and relaxing at home with music and television. She works with her best friend in a very quiet dollar store and feels she has to work to contribute to the family economy. Her boyfriend at the time of her only interview was planning to go to Concordia as a mature student.

Current Status: She became a second time Review Board student in the Fall of 2003. Over three semesters of Continuing Education she re-qualified to enter full-time studies in the Winter 2005 semester. She could graduate in May 2006, if she continues to pass the majority of her courses.

[Her mother] *is a hard worker, cause she showed me one of her report cards, when she first moved here, high school, and I didn't see any marks under 85. She's a really hard worker and she's really...I guess it's just me,*

*I was just lazy, I guess. And she really pushed me hard to like...if it weren't for her I probably wouldn't be in school right now. I guess she really played a big part in my life, academically.*

*I would say in Options people were willing to work harder...they would all work hard and be quiet and listen to the teacher. Everyone knew that they were there for a purpose and it was to graduate, so we all worked hard.*

*These days... I'm trying to make [school] my first priority. Leave all my problems like behind me. Try to solve them at the same time, but not let it...I don't want to get caught up in them.*

### 4.2.35 Igor

From Kazakhstan, ethnic Russian, his mother separated from his father in order to come to Canada with Igor and his younger brother. Finances have been a problem, with the family getting support from welfare and his mother working part-time. His brother is doing poorly in school but refuses all offers of help from Igor. He was severely beaten by a drunk as a preteen resulting in a permanent disability in the form of debilitating, recurring headaches. He misses a lot of school as a result. Nonetheless, he is highly motivated to continue his education because he sees it as a path to establishing himself here in Canada. Igor was frustrated at the high school *classe d'accueil* French, which he felt delayed his academic progress and forced him to finish his secondary school in adult education. He entered Vanier through Explorations 1. He completely ignored and failed the core course of the program, Work Futures because it was a 'waste of time.' He already knew what he wanted to do in life. He is committed to finishing Architectural Technology and then opening a wine-making business in Ontario. Depending on how the business goes, he could always work in the construction industry and, in any case, he plans to start an engineering degree part-time while he is working. Architectural Technology suits his learning style, a combination of practical hands on and theoretical. He still chums with his high school friends who are a mixed crowd from Côte-St-Luc. For leisure and learning and extra money, he rebuilds computers and bicycles.

Current status: With his many absences, he has not completed a full semester without failing courses. He last registered in the Winter 2005 semester.

Architecture is a program that he is almost destined to be in.

*Well, I can easily sort of imagine objects in my head, the way they go and the way it works and my logic for the construction, the way it builds and the way it has to be built. It's sort of natural...So basically I could become a contractor easily...it sort of got passed down from my great-grandfather to my grandfather. My great-grandfather was a mason worker, so he built*

*furniture...and on top of that being a mason. So my grandfather, he built five or six houses. So that's me looking at him building a garage, so it's basically... Well, on top of that, my father was a steel worker, he was making sort of reinforced concrete...and my mom, she's an architect-engineer.*

He is an inquisitive learner who enjoys the challenge of using his hands.

*...in the past two years, I've built four bikes from scratch...I also like to build computers...In the past three years I built six or seven computers...*

*I have headaches which come two times a week...this time I missed two weeks, because of my headaches. Well not only that, 'cause weather change...I have high blood pressure...So basically my body doesn't have much time to adapt to the temperature, warm – cold, warm – cold...I can't stand up...if I was missing classes like, without my headaches...I'd do my homework. But with the headaches, I can't do it...Just flat on my back, I mean, I can't move much.*

#### 4.2.36 Sankara

Sankara came from Chad by way of Senegal in 1996. He lives in Côte-des-Neiges with two other brothers and his father who was off and on employment insurance during the course of the study, despite having a degree from a Canadian university. His birth mother is in Africa and his step-mother in Vancouver. Each mother is looking after a sister. In the Fall 2002 semester, he was working as many as 60 hours per week because he had moved into his own apartment and had to pay the rent. By the second interview, he had moved back in with his father, two brothers and family friend. He failed his first semester because he was working long hours and during the course of the second interview he also acknowledged that he had had a really good time. He came to Vanier from TMR High School, where at about 15 or 16 years old he started associating with a 'bad crowd' from Cote-des-Neiges. His language is a heavily accented English reflecting the street language of American hip-hop, which is his favourite music. He is a self-acknowledged party animal and enjoyed the club scene. He gets in free because he knows the DJs. His language almost became eloquent when he began to talk of the hip-hop scene and its culture. He spoke of plans to play football and come back to school, but had taken no Continuing Education courses to re-instate himself (lack of money) nor was he working out to get fit for football. He had no job by the second interview and seemed to have given up trying. With the most recent contact, we have learned that he is in night classes after spending almost 2 years in Toronto working in telemarketing.

Current Status: Sankara has returned to Continuing Education after his first 2 disastrous semesters in the Fall 2002 and Winter 2003. His goal is to try to pass enough courses to return to full time studies in two semesters. He still sees education in terms of a university degree and does not want any professional or technical training.

*...I'm not the type of guy that's gonna leave school, you know, start going for some professional techniques or other stuffs. So, now I'm really into school, cause when*

*I came here, you know, my education were on my mind. You came here for one reason. School, get a job, make your money, go back home...Well, first of all, get me a job...that's the first thing to do, you know. Get me a job. Just save some money and go back to school. And, I don't know, have fun some days, you know...*

He is a self-confessed party animal and truly loves hip-hop for more than its musical quality.

*...Well, I like...cause hip-hop is not only the music, you know, it's about a whole story, you know. People always...how would I defend it? I mean, I don't sing, I don't rap, so, you know. I won't really tell you I'm quite good, but hip-hop is like a whole...how could I say that? Like a whole big family...Hip-hop is like...it's a culture, that's what they say, it's a culture. And it's a whole other thing, cause you know the way you live, the way you dress. I would say it's just like the Matrix. Have you ever seen the Matrix...? It's just like that. They can't define the Matrix, but the Matrix is all around and, you know, and you live with it and all...*

#### 4.2.37 Ludmila

Ludmila is a very unusual case for the intellectual depth of her home environment. Every wall of the apartment which she shares with her mother is covered with books. But there is a certain level of dysfunction and turmoil in her life as a result of her family structure and circumstance. Her mother came with her to Canada from Poland, and her father remained and has since died. Grandmother appears to be well off but mentally unstable and has provided no help for Ludmila or her mother facing economic difficulties in their new country of choice. Her once strained relationship with her mother led her to spend a year in a foster home, but they have since learned how to negotiate their life together. Ludmila went to FACE (Fine Arts Core Education), an alternative school in the downtown area with a 'big brother' program that brings younger and older students together. The school had a very positive effect on Ludmila in numerous ways; she really got into theatre and something called 'family' which involved outings from the school. She made permanent friends there. These extra-curricular activities were negatively affected by the teachers' work to rule. Around Grade 8 she separated herself from the students who were really competitive about marks. She very consciously applied to Vanier because she thought it was stronger academically, and then was almost not accepted because in her last year in high school her dad died in Poland and she slipped badly in her studies. She has picked up her performance in several creative fields of Communications, always with her mother as guide, inspiration and whip. She is very critical of the ignorance and illiteracy of her fellow students at Vanier, in particular those in her program, when she compares them to what she remembers about European students. She works 27 hours a week at a climbing wall, partly to help out her mother.

Current Status: Ludmila attained excellent marks and graduated from Communications in Winter 2004. She is currently at Concordia.

She is extremely critical of her fellow students.

*...half of them don't even have hobbies...I have another friend from Face that goes here, and the similarities are striking between all the schools...I have to say we were told to be ourselves, whereas other people were told to fit in a little bit more than our school permitted at the time, I guess.*

*...They have no curiosity! Like, it's one thing not to have access and to not be introduced to something but they're not curious, they don't care...just non-motivated and non-...not curious and not interested in learning anything new. These people are, it's very close-minded.*

*...I haven't had a teacher that I haven't gotten along with and gotten to know on a first name basis and talked to and that's generally from the first day. Mainly because I really respect what they do and I can see a lot of teachers just love what they're doing and they put the effort into it and they try and make their courses interesting and as different as possible and in many cases it's not necessarily appreciated. But when I find something new that I haven't seen or haven't learned, I'm really interested and motivated and just generally try.*



### 4.2.38 Sevag

Sevag's early education was through the Armenian community, but the family's move to Laval has placed him with a more cosmopolitan mix of friends. At the time of the first interview, his parents were going through a nasty divorce. Sevag lives with his mother in an apparently comfortable relationship and his older brother is on his own and studying at Concordia. Mother started Cegep, and father is a jeweler with only primary education. He is the classic case of a student who has never liked school and only suffered through it until he had the chance to get out. There have never been any school subjects that interested him. Every school day was organized around his friends and music, otherwise school was something to be suffered through in order to leave as soon as possible. He went to three high schools, finishing at Western Laval. He stayed in school in order to get a good career and "to say that I actually went to school."

His real passion in life is music. He plays the bass. He participated in a high school talent show but never really studied music, so could not be accepted into the music program and ended up by default in Social Science. Now his life revolves around music. He played in bands in high school, and now spends much of his time playing, recording a bit, going to clubs. His preferred music is heavy metal and he used a lot of drugs when younger. He claims to have it all in balance now, despite admitting that he often went to classes high and knew it was a mistake, because he could not learn anything like that. He has worked weekends since Secondary V in restaurants, as a busboy. Despite working 20 hours a week, he did not believe that it interfered with his school work, because he never works during the week.

Current status: We met Sevag through the Review Board process after a disastrous first semester, and he has not attended Cegep since failing his first semester.

Music is his passion and fills most of his waking hours.

*I loved heavy metal as much as I love my mother...So passionate, I even got a heavy metal tattoo on my*

*arm...I'd say one quarter of the time throughout the whole week I'd spend on music, just playing it, listening, playing with friends, discussing, all that. One quarter out of my whole week...I try to spend as much as possible, cause it's endless for me. I'll never get bored with it. I don't think I ever will.*

School was of little interest to him and he was therefore easily distracted.

*...I didn't want to go through the whole process, 'cause I'm kind of a lazy guy. So I just picked something whatever I could take and I'm here, I guess...well there were a lot [of distractions]. Like I have to say peers, friends, what else, just the weather. Sometimes the weather doesn't really get to me. So like when I look outside and I see cold weather or a blizzard or something it just gets my will away...like takes my will away to come here or to learn or, you know, sometimes it gets to me, the weather.*

### 4.2.39 Brent

Brent is a Quebecois with a mixed Italian heritage on his father's side. He lives with his parents and younger brother in the distant middle class suburb of Boisbriand. Father has a high school background and is a manager at a food distribution store while mother has some Accounting courses from college. Brent has a temperamental side, as a result of which he has burnt a few bridges. He has a longstanding, steady girlfriend, also studying the arts. His parents don't understand why he insists on this "artsy" music thing, and have now refused to support him financially while he studies. He has also had run-ins with them over the issue of staying over at his girlfriend's. All his close friends are francophone and Vanier was sometimes an alienating polyglot compared to his upbringing in a more mono-ethnic community. In high school at Polyvalente Ste. Therese, he was a big man on campus, a star football player and a guitar player in a travelling school band. Brent is a big strapping man who is as enthusiastic about his music and Vanier's music program as he is about his sports. He squeaked through high school on his natural smarts and some cramming and came to Vanier to pursue his two passions. Like his father, he has also played serious hockey earlier in his life, and, by his own word, is an outstanding football player. But he also has a strong artistic temperament, has really gotten into jazz, loves to dress up and defy gender stereotypes. He is full of ideas, has lots of enthusiasm and lots of confidence, but he has found himself once again, letting his studies slide. He made the difficult decision to give up football in favour of music after a year at Vanier because doing the two was simply too demanding. He talks passionately at some length about music, including details of technical aspects and history. He has worked in the food business like his father, and has also made money as a musician in bands.

Current Status: By failing his music theory and history courses, he has gotten out of phase in his program, so he is taking longer to finish. Otherwise he has done reasonably well.

*I didn't push as hard as I could, just...not 'cause I was lazy, but just 'cause I was happy where I was and I just wanted to play, that's it. I just wanted to have fun...and it's still like that with me...sports and stuff like that.*

*...for some reason, I just always find something better to do than my homework or practice or read. I always find something better to do, so, you know...I just find myself, often I just don't do the work and like at the end of the semester, like right now, I have to cram stuff 'cause I've been lazy, you know. And, you know, I really hate myself for doing that 'cause, I mean, you know, I could have just studied all semester.*

*...So, I'm scared, you know. I don't know...I won't say I don't know where I'm going, but I don't want to end up where my father ended up. You know, I don't want to end up working like he is...*

*...that I think that are missing to this school, is like just, you know, being involved in the society, you know. I think that there's...just the language barrier, I mean. It's unfortunate, you know. It's two different societies, different television stations, radio stations and da, da, da. There's nothing that mixes...*

#### 4.2.40 Homer

Life has never been easy for this young man and his family. Immigrants from Belize, the family has been dogged with poverty for years. He lives with his mother and an older brother who is also in Cegep. They live in the high density, low-income Cloverdale area of Pierrefonds and his best friend is a doctor's son in an affluent nearby area. Other acquaintances from the area are in prison, on parole or struggling to finish their secondary school through adult education programs. Homer spoke of going to primary and secondary school hungry and ironically was always very overweight as a young boy. This led to considerable peer rejection and many of his friends were marginalised types like him. In high school, he put himself on a diet and an exercise regime and slimmed down. His experience of being fat taught him to think for himself and he never got involved in gangs, drugs and the work\play syndrome. Football gave him a healthy outlook and became the source of a new set of friendships. He could not afford many of the regular activities available to most young people. He was never a great success in academics, but did enough to just get through. In his first interview, he used poverty to explain his poor performance, but a year later he had made his career choice. He was committed to getting an education, because "...no-one can take it away from you." His girlfriend was ahead of him academically. She completed Social Science and moved on to Concordia University. When he entered Cegep, he did not know where he was going. Since his epiphany in the second year, he has decided on a career path and committed himself to it. He wants to be a personal trainer and is looking towards a career in Exercise Science, Physiotherapy, or a related field.

Current Status: In the Winter 2005 semester, he left full time day studies in Commerce to do Mathematics and Science courses at night to improve his marks and get the prerequisites he needed to be allowed into Health Science in the Fall of 2005. He is in Health Science at the time of writing this report.

The family project is complicated by ever-present financial issues. This imposes serious stress as a backdrop to this young man's complicated life:

*...actually, she [his mom] got a job too and she's pretty happy with her situation now. So financially that takes a lot of pressure off of us. Cause before it was just...me, my brother, my mom, we'd try and orient ourselves to help each other, that's why work was such an important...it was a priority for me in the past. I know I loaded myself with 25 hours, I should have focused more on school but I couldn't exactly, cause my mom...my mom is okay now, so that takes a lot of my stress away. And yeah, so...we still help each other.*

#### 4.2.41 Jason

Jason is a brilliant and well spoken man but comes across as emotionally and psychologically unstable. His parents are separated and he is completely alienated from his father's side of the family. He started in a private Jewish school and then transferred to a public school in Notre-Dame-de-Grace. His marks were excellent throughout grade school and then he hit the 'wall' in high school. His mother has been very supportive of him and recognizes his academic talents, continually encouraging him to go on. Throughout his schooling, he had a difficult time 'fitting in' with any particular social group for long. He would even change the way he looks and acts and his manner of speech in order to do so. One peer group he fell in with was into drugs and 'dissing' the system. He found himself finishing his high school at alternative schools. At Vanier, he failed entirely in his first semester (A02). He just stopped coming to school and was using a lot of marijuana and generally feeling lost and unattached at a big college. He has the impression that there is nothing for him to learn, particularly in Communications, but feels that he must take the formal education route just to "get the papers". He has considerable disdain for the system and what it could offer him. By the second interview, he was beginning to blame his mother for his shortcomings and, in addition, wrote a long rambling paper decrying how feminism had made life difficult for young men.

Current status: In the semester after Review Board (H03) he excelled in every course he took. Then he failed out completely in A03. This forced him to take Continuing Education courses to re-qualify for full-time studies. He registered for preparatory Mathematics and Physical Science in H04 but appears to have never attended class because he received a grade of zero in both. He has not registered in Cegep since then.

*If you ask the question, why are more men dropping out of school when compared to women, the answer, simply put, is because nobody has faith in men... This is mainly because men are known to leave women for younger more attractive ones. A lot of relationships*

*will come to an unpleasant ending, leaving women with feelings of resentment towards men in general. In addition, quite frequently, these women are left with children as well. Thus to surmise, there are a lot of single-parent mothers out there who do not even realize how much resentment and distrust they harbour towards men. This is an unfortunate reality. Unconsciously, without realizing it, these mothers will infuse their children with ill trust towards the male sex. Now, if one such mother has a son, the son will undoubtedly have a hard time building his self esteem. He will have this problem, because to a certain degree he will be affected by his mother's distrust in men. In time, he may even learn not to trust himself. Now, everybody is good at something, so what is stopping men from achieving their full potential? Well, of course, you need motivation but you also need trust and faith in your own abilities. This is something that a lot of young men are facing. This is why a lot of young men have dropped out of school.*

#### 4.2.42 Raj

Raj comes from a low-income working class immigrant family. She is the elder sister with two younger brothers and bears a traditional woman's load of extra work and responsibility for the family as well as dealing with many of the restrictions and extra responsibilities faced by women in traditional family settings. She failed her first semester in Explorations 2 and one of the researchers was also on her hearing panel for re-admission. She talked about unhelpful teachers, parental problems, debt for Internet connection, and avoiding the gossip of the Tamil community. She spoke of her parents threatening to send her back to Sri Lanka for an arranged marriage because she wasn't doing well in school. By the second interview she had gone to Sri Lanka and her parents decided not to force her to stay. She was living more at ease with her parents' strictures and spoke about engaging them in discussion. She had "seen what had happened to her friends who confronted their parents." At that time she was doing three Continuing Education courses to re-qualify and wanted to enter the Special Care Counselling program. By her second interview the locus of control had shifted and she was talking about how her failures were due to chronic absences because she was so tied up in her problems. Despite being an evening student, she was coming in during the day to visit her peers who are still at Vanier College and she was volunteering at Maimonides to gain experience in the field of social work.

Current status: She is not currently registered in any Cegep courses. After several semesters she requalified to return to full time Social Science in H05 and failed five of the six courses she took. She has made four unsuccessful attempts and has yet to pass the Introductory English course.

Much of Raj's dilemma derives from her status as a first generation immigrant child from a very traditional milieu. Tempted by the hybrid Canadian culture, she nonetheless was bound by the family expectations of a dutiful and obedient daughter. This led to an ambiguous relationship with her family. While committed to them, she also resisted many of their

impositions. Over the two interviews she came to accept more and more their demands as the lesser of two evils.

*...like some of the stuff is okay to agree with them. But then some of the other stuff is like, I don't know. I think it's not right what they're doing sort of like...like going out with like, guys, I don't think it's like a real big problem. Like, they're your friends, you know. But then they think it in the other way. Like we might get close one day or something and then problem will evolve and I'm like, it's not true, it doesn't always happen, you know.*

*...Yeah, I'm okay with it, cause I see like what happens if you like, do disobey them. So I don't want to do it and then like get in that sort of trouble. 'Cause I've seen like a lot of my friends, like rebel against their parents and then get sent off to Sri Lanka or get married, you know, and I don't want that happening...*

#### 4.2.43 Thomas

Thomas is from a well-to-do Arabic family that lived first in the L'Acadie area and then Laval. His father is a dentist and mother works in the clinic. His younger sister is hardworking and high-achieving. At the first interview, he was still with the Boy Scouts. It was a matter of pride because he wants to prove that it is not just for small boys and he loves the outdoors. He is a self-described computer games and chat addict even though he recognizes that it is self-defeating. He has never had to work, although he has helped out in his father's dental clinic. He went to a series of private schools and describes himself as leading two different lives, one at school where he is polite and fun-loving and the other at home where he terrorises his parents. He is full of life and likes to play jokes. After Secondary III he fell into a bad crowd and had a disastrous school record. His leisure is taken up with his friends, playing around, going to movies, and the park, but they are not a gang and they do not do drugs. At the first interview, he felt he was changing his ways partly because of a good girlfriend who is a top scholar and helps him with his homework. He is driven to get into Science so he can become a dentist like his father but his weak marks have prevented him from advancing on that path. He was very resentful of having to enter Explorations 2 in the Fall of 2002 and felt he did not need to be there even though two other colleges refused to accept him because of his low high school marks. In the Fall 2003 semester he was in Social Science, but managed to take three Science courses only to fail all of them. The subsequent semester he enrolled in Continuing Education and successfully repeated two of the sciences.

Current Status: At the time of writing he was still taking Science courses in Continuing Education. They were still proving to be a challenge and he still had a couple of semesters to complete before he could graduate.

The pressure of family and social context is a heavy weight on Thomas. Everyone expected him to become a dentist like his father.

*...I stay at school because that's where I thought the road was. If you're not in school, that means it's*

*not worth...I don't know, you're not supposed to be anywhere else, but school and I had parents pushing me, because my father is a dentist and you had to become as high as him or you'd be an insult... Your grandmother is like...keep aiming high and everything, you know, always had that...guests would come over...one day I'm gonna come see your office, you know one day as a doctor, so I'm thinking like, okay...*

*I had two attitudes, one at home and one at school. I was two different people in one day. At school I was like this prankster. I used to do a lot of pranks in school or in class...I always had respect to all the people that were older than me, that's the way I was raised, to respect people...This other guy at home, oh man, I'm different. At home I'm more myself, you know, because at school I'm behaving, but at home I don't behave, I burp, fart. I'm at the computer, I'm rude...*

#### 4.2.44 Joseph

Joseph lives with both parents and a younger brother in Montreal North. The family is from Mauritius. Mother finished high school, dad did not, but both have good jobs. Joseph's education is very much part of a family project and they provide good support for his efforts without making many demands. Joseph is a classic case of the 'readiness factor.' He was a decent student in high school in Rivière des Prairies. He liked Science, disliked Mathematics, found teachers helpful, and spent a lot of time at a Montreal North community centre with tutors. He failed his first semester at Cegep for some very common reasons: lack of discipline, skipping classes, missing assignments, hanging out with a gang at the cafeteria, and playing cards. He just was not used to, or ready for, the responsibility and autonomy afforded him by Cegep. His peer group after one semester consisted of about fifteen young men and women at Vanier, some from high school and others he met at college. Most had the same first year experience. He played a bit of sports, but spends a lot of time in solo activities like his computer, etc. He had two or three jobs in high school, but has not worked since arriving at college. He was enthusiastic to return for the second interview and came with a close friend of Italian extraction. They live four blocks apart and have an almost identical experience, from high school through failing in their first semester, doing night courses to re-qualify for a Cegep DEC program and now paying high tuition fees to study computer technology at Lasalle College. They feel that they wasted a year of their lives, but are now happy, confident, and optimistic, and want others to learn from their experience.

Current Status: Student at Lasalle College where he is committed to a program for which he could not have had access in the public system where he lacked the prerequisites.

Joseph has a few close friends and is more likely to do solo activities that interest him.

*At home I'd rather just be alone. Like spend time by myself. The computer and watching TV and movies.*

Despite being committed to the family project, he had considerable difficulty with the discipline it takes to succeed in school.

*The low point of high school. Well, through my experience, like I find it like a bit boring and like, I would usually like sleep in class sometimes, depends if the topics were interesting or not.*

#### 4.2.45 Britany

Britany grew up living with her mother in a small community just off Montreal Island's western tip. She gives a lot of credit to her grandmother as an inspirational force in her life and has a mature relationship with her mother. To complete her high school she had to change to the West Island. This allowed her to finish her high school credits in one year, rather than two where she was. She felt a lot more comfortable with the adult education approach; so much so that she was appointed valedictorian of her final year. Throughout the years in the small town schools she was very outgoing and involved in the social scene. She was very active in the extracurricular activities at her school, sports, student council and others. In retrospect, she feels the small town school did not have the facilities to help her with her learning difficulty. She found it particularly hard to manage subjects in high school that required memorization, like History, Science and some Mathematics. The move to the bigger school allowed her to accomplish her goal of completing high school on time, and through the community service requirement (Big Sisters) at Place Cartier she discovered her aptitude for working with 'challenged' people. Upon graduation, she took two years off to work and move out on her own. That experience convinced her to get into a field that she was passionate about, which is what led her to study in Special Care Counselling at Vanier. She was able to hold on to the job she had before coming to Vanier with reduced hours to accommodate her studies. In addition, she has moved back home with her mother. This allows her some independence, money for school and to contribute to her living expenses, car, etc. Starting Vanier at the age of twenty provided her with a mature perspective on school work and the way she spends her time on campus. She is narrowly focused on the work at hand and avoids the social dynamics of the younger students. Her boyfriend is at Vanier and they support each other in their respective ambitions; he is in music. Her life is quite a grind. Between a heavy school program, a part-time job and a relationship, she does not have much time for anything else.

Current status: She should graduate from her program in the Fall of 2005.

*...As far as like the transition into Cegep, I found it a little hard, because like, I know it's not a big difference, but I was working out in, you know, the workforce and took time out of high school, and I found that a lot of the students came straight from high school and they weren't in the same frame of mind as I was. Like I'm there to learn and...to be focused and I found a lot of them were like, oh, it's a social party, you know. I found like, I'm 22, but just the little [difference between], you know, the 17's and 22, it may not sound like a big difference, but when you're doing the transition and you see what's around you, I found it was hard...*

*...especially in this program, it depends...if you're going to succeed, you have to just have just like a natural love for human kind and...you just have to respect and you have to be willing to help. And a lot of people come in, they're not realizing that, so that's when they don't get through it...*



#### 4.2.46 Didian

Didian was born in Canada but started school in Haiti. His father is a taxi driver who went to Cegep in Montreal and his mother works in a juice factory. He has two brothers. He returned to Canada for the majority of his schooling at 7 years of age. He changed school several times and so his progress was delayed each time. His last primary school was an inner-city disadvantaged school in St-Laurent. His father and mother separated when he was twelve. Thereafter, he was in two high schools, one in Saint-Michel and the other in St-Laurent, depending on which parent he was staying with. He defines himself as lazy, never did homework and was satisfied doing just enough to get by. Basketball was his passion all through high school and his team-mates formed his peer group inside and after school. He saw a change in his performance and attitude when he was in high school at age thirteen or fourteen after his parents separated and his father was no longer available to help him with his studies. He started skipping classes and also wanted to stay out late playing basketball with his friends. This also led to problems with his mother. His approach to homework did not work in the first semester of Cegep, when he failed four of his six courses. To adjust, he cut back his employment to weekends only, and stopped playing basketball, but was otherwise reluctant to ask for help. He is a pleasant, shy, polite person who is nonetheless very confident in what he is doing. He knew many of the gang members in Montreal North as childhood friends, but was never in trouble in school or on the street. Didian was recruited through Review Board after his first semester and conceded to his one and only interview as a *quid pro quo* for being allowed to return to college. He never accepted to be interviewed thereafter.

Current Status: His marks reflect a consistently good performance since his first unsuccessful semester and he graduated from Social Science in the winter of 2005.

*In elementary school, I was a good student. In high school, I started to be a little bit lazy...I had my father that was always looking after me, that's why...He used*

*to help me with my Math and French and each morning before going to school, he used to make me repeat the lessons again...he went to school here. And then when he left, when I was in Sec. I, then I started to be a little bit lazy, that's why.*

**4.2.47 Jacob**

A Ghanaian born student, Jacob came to Canada at fourteen years of age and settled in Park Extension. His father is a factory worker despite having a university degree from Ghana and mother has a high school education. He appears to have a complicated family life but he would not address it directly. He blames his poor school performance on his family problems. He claimed to be estranged from his mother who had kicked him out of the house, but in one circumstance used his mother's illness as an excuse for missing an appointment. He lives with his uncle and keeps to himself. He spoke of being very distrustful of friends and other Ghanaian people even while claiming to be in popular demand as a singer in the Ghanaian community and churches. On arrival in Canada, he was put in the French system. Like many others, this delayed his progress through secondary school and he had to finish in adult education. While he was always ready to talk, he had great difficulties with his expression in English. In many cases he was prepared to give a morality lecture about doing the right thing as if he was trying to avoid talking about his personal life. In fact many of his claims to be successful and high scoring are not supported by the facts. His volunteer work as part of the Explorations program received a very mixed evaluation. On the one hand, he was willing to put in time, but he lacked the social skills and insights to work with others. He was observed in other courses being unable to work cooperatively with others. He claims to have made a hip-hop record and wants to be an artist. He also spoke of wanting to enter Nursing but had made no plans to apply or take the prerequisites. He worked 10 hours each weekend at McDonalds where he says he was given the employee of the month award and trains other employees. He had a girlfriend in high school who was very important to him.

Current Status: Jacob passed five of six courses in Explorations 2 in his first semester at Vanier. He returned for the following semester (H03), but failed three of five courses and has not been in Cegep since.

His experience has made him distrustful of family and friends.

*...Even my mom usually...she was angry with me. I don't think that my mom can do that to me. So that's what I've learned, that even your family, everybody can disappoint you, you know. So always try to trust yourself and you have to be bold in everything...*

*...My life, because of what I've seen in life, I don't really give much chance to friends. Because sometimes, I'm telling you if your life is going to be messed up, miserable, sometimes bad from your friends. Do this, do this, follow this, you know...Gossip...*

#### 4.2.48 Audrey

Audrey is of Greek extraction and lives in an apartment with her single mom and two siblings. Her mother supports the family as a factory worker, but Audrey never once spoke of her father. She was already twenty at the time of the first interview and her older brother was at university while her younger sister was also at Vanier College. Her slow progress through school is really due to a serious hearing disability. She finished high school by dint of hard work, persistence, a teacher's aid, as well as good family support. Her low marks did not qualify her for college studies, so she began Cegep in Continuing Education for two semesters before being accepted into full-time studies in day school through Explorations 2. All through elementary and high school she had a helper-teacher, and she has had to learn to operate much more autonomously at Vanier. She is very serious and disciplined about her school work and regularly seeks help from The Learning Centre. She plans to go to university "to become something" possibly a teacher of young children, perhaps those with disabilities. She does not hold a job during the school year and has trouble finding work otherwise, because of her disability. She keeps her friends to a minimum in order not to distract from her school work. Her best semester was when she got good marks in her Anthropology and other courses. All her interviews were with her friend, Tefanny, whom she met in her first semester in the Explorations program.

Current status: She is still in Social Science and has experienced delays with most of the 'traditionally difficult' subjects (Macro Economics, Psychology, Integrative Project).

She does not get high marks, and her disability forces her to be disciplined and work very hard for the marks she gets.

*...I come to Vanier College not to make friends, but to get your education, focus and pass. Because some people like, fool around and everything and they don't pay much attention about their education. So, stay with the friends I have from Explorations 2 and before that, and I hang out with them and do stuff together...*

Finances are an issue in a household with one steady income.

*Me, my mom would support me how long it would take me to finish school and to help each other, it's the main thing. To pay the bill...Yeah, so we help each other, whenever we need help...whenever we have problems with something...*

*...Like in the summer I have to work. I don't want to take part-time school, but I couldn't because I have to pay my things. My mom can't pay for my school and everything, so I have...no choice. And if I'm in school, they want...full-time or day time people to work, so it's kind of hard to find a job for part-time.*

### 4.3 From the Profiles

As the reader may now be aware, it was a daunting task to attempt to draw generalizations about people as unique and interesting as those in the Sample48. It is equally challenging for a large public institution to respond to such diverse talents and needs. These are round pegs that do not fit easily into institutional square holes.

Many issues present themselves when trying to portray the educational culture that they are coming from and the cultural amalgam of which they are an intrinsic component at Vanier College. Diversity of ethnicity and language distinguish the Sample48 as it does Vanier as a whole. Many of them have had to deal with racism, dislocation and adaptation as immigrants and children of immigrants. For many, poverty is an ever-present reality. Many simply had to work as their contribution to the family and could not have attended school if they did not have paid employment. They have been buffeted about by the system and it shows in their lives and performance.

Family is still an ever-present and important reality for them all. Many are in the final stages of separating from parental control and setting off on their own paths. Some are deeply committed to the family project and others are quite on their own. Regardless, as adult members of the family, they are all working out their new roles and relationships.

There is considerable insecurity and confusion about where they fit in and apprehension about what lies ahead. Of the twelve who graduated, there was great anticipation of the move onward to the next stage. For many of the others, as their academic options become limited, the future becomes less clear. The seventeen who persist in their studies still believe that post-secondary education is some form of key, regardless of how their transcripts look. The nineteen who have discontinued their studies, though technically dropouts, may nonetheless be preparing for careers through other training routes. They are all weighing their options and looking for a place in society.

Everyone was asked to prioritise the elements of their lives and without exception they put their education high on the list, but it becomes very evident through observation that school is only one part of their lives. Family, peers, partners, work and life interests like music or sports, all called upon their energies and distracted them from focusing on academic pursuits. In many cases, they are quite ably involved in these outside enterprises, and school is not nearly as gratifying as the credit they get from earning their way. Nor do they see how school can help them in these pursuits.

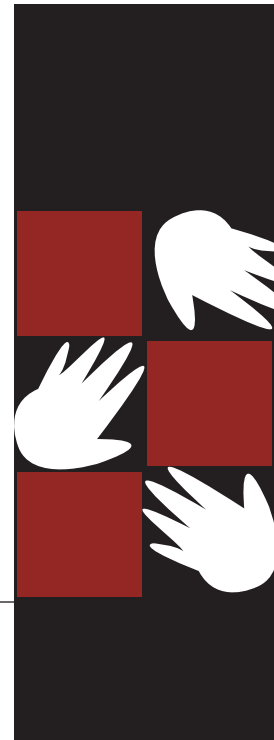
Without exception, we came to respect and admire them as interesting individuals, unique in the diversity they represent. They come across as talented and committed to moving forward. They gave us tremendous insight into the complexity of their reality.



# Chapter Five

## Sample48: What They Say

### 5



This chapter presents a view of the educational process gleaned from what was told to us by the 48 students in our sample representing the bottom quintile of new students entering Vanier College in the fall of 2002. Their remarks, however, are presented through two filters on the way to forming a meaningful pattern for the reader of this report.

From over 2,000 pages of transcript we have selected those remarks which appear to best represent the experiences and attitudes described by these students and especially when they were expressed in a pointed way. In the end, the representivity of these quotations was determined by careful reading on the part of the researchers and extensive discussion among the three of us.

In addition, we have woven an interpretive framework around the comments, grounded in what they said, but rendered here through concepts which interpret what they say. Hence in the taxonomy which follows, notions like the wall, dislocation, interculturalism, cognitive dissonance and efficiency refer to patterns whose shape was not analysed using these terms by the students, yet the contours which defined the shape of the conceptual framework were provided in the texts. Most significantly, the readiness factor is an interpretive concept which reports their responses to certain key

questions, but goes on to draw inferences about the fit between what the students say and do on the one hand and what is required for a successful strategy in college study on the other.

In short, the model used to present the view of students is initially descriptive, but moves inductively to present experiences and attitudes which are common to a number of them and then further to an interpretive analytic framework in the context of the demands and expectations of college study.

Responses from the informants are grouped into four categories: Psychological, Social/Cultural, Structural, and Individual Patterns of Accommodation. These are meant to indicate common sense spheres of meaning. A short explanation is provided for each. In addition, certain highlights from each of the four categories have emerged as key concerns or themes and the bulk of the students' message is related within these key themes.

### 5.1 Psychological Factors

These comments refer to key elements of the students' approach to their educational experience which revolve around individual motivation and identity. Though everything that an individual does could ultimately be seen as psychological, we limit the themes here to

the students' personal orientation toward their studies. Specifically we address the general commitment to continued study as a way of 'becoming somebody' and the oft-repeated pattern of students in difficulty wherein they simply come up against a 'wall' of disinterest and low performance in their studies.

Having a definite or fixed orientation is directly linked to motivation and success in school. Sebastien struggled to return to school after dropping out of high school at age 16. He attained very good marks throughout Adult Education and his first three semesters at Vanier but still did not have fixed goals. Like several others, his motivation was better defined by what he did not want to become rather than what he planned to do.

**Sebastien** ...*Every single year when teachers or Guidance would come around at the beginning of the year, they would always say: what do you want to do? You have to kind of know what you want to do. This and that, and I never knew what I wanted to do. I just, like, I mean, one week I would be interested in this, another week that, and, so I didn't know what I wanted, but then, what drives me now is that I know what I don't want to do.*

One of the students who graduated in 4 semesters and who also had a clear vision of what career path she wanted to follow from the beginning had this observation of her classmates.

**Ludmila** *I've seen a lot of kids fail classes generally. Um, it's hard to refer to those as kids anymore, but um...I don't know, I find there's either too much seriousness on that level or not enough for most people, and I've met countless people that changed programs and aren't sure, and go over the same over and over again or just quit because they're tired of trying and they can't find the self-discipline to do it.*

As the reader will observe later, the world of part-time or summer work often also provided the opportunity for these students to learn what it was they did not want to do for a career. The following student related this story about an experience as a volunteer.

*...I do the volunteer work at the Animal Health Spayed Neuter section, can't do it, I'm sorry. Like I*

*mean we're allowed helping the veterinarian in the room, I couldn't go in there. I went in there for one session and I saw the blood and stuff and that's just for spayed, neutering and I just couldn't, my stomach turned.*

Manon on the other hand was driven to continue her studies so she could see more and work out what she really liked. She still is not sure of her future path but she knows that continuing will only be to her advantage.

**Manon** *And again, Studio Arts is broad, you know, so I can get a taste of everything, so that again would be postponing my decision though, leaving everything open, trying a bit of everything. But still I don't feel I really know where my real talents are, you know, type thing, like they can be applied to many different things, I think, so I want to try a bit of everything.*

One element of her maturing through the Cegep process has been the move to her own apartment in St-Laurent.

*...I'd never had like a space just to myself, I always shared a room with my, like, sister and sometimes my brother at the same time too. So, like, I never had time alone, so last year that was a big adjustment and at first it freaked me out, like I was scared to be alone, you know, type thing. Like if my roommate wasn't going to be there that night, I was like, oh no, you know, like I'd be freaking out...But once I got used to it, now I like treasure that time, you know, it's like I love that time, you know, I find...more in finding out about yourself, you know, when you're alone, so.*

This kind of challenge toward maturation often accompanies the advancement in studies at college level, contributing in a direct and profound way to the stress level of the student. Some respond in a positive way as did the previous student, while others don't mature enough to meet the challenge.

Even after failing two disastrous semesters, Sankara still held to his credo that there has to be some fun in life. The priorities remained money, school and fun, though it is not always clear which takes precedence.

**Sankara** ...*Well, first of all get me a job...that's the first thing to do, you know, get me a job. Just save some money and go back to school. And, I don't know, have fun some days, you know...Na, na. You gots to have*

*fun, 'cause if you don't have fun... I'm not those type of people who only thinks about working hard and, you know, going to school and...you know, you have to live, you got to live, you got to breathe sometimes, you can't just let something rule you.*

*...Guys love to party. Sometimes on weekends, sometimes let's say, for example, Thursdays until Sundays, you know, it's all about partying, having fun, get-togethers... Yeah. So when you get up on Monday morning, you know, you have a big headache. You can't really...you have to get back into the routine, you know. Sometimes it's not easy.*

Despite setting aside the time and being committed to the studies, many students are distracted by easy temptation.

**Thomas** *...and I've got only one problem with the studying - I get distracted. That's why I don't get that much good marks. The computer...the thing is I chat a lot and the games. I really like games, you know. The thing is I do my homework on the computer, so while I'm writing an essay, you know sometimes you get tired and you just minimize and you click on that icon and you open your game, just for a couple of minutes and then you find out that you've been two hours, three hours and you're like oh no and you stay overtime and you stay into the night. Night is like 11:00, 3:30 and you have a class at 8:00 a.m. The friends call you up... Chat is horrible. Chatting is horrible. You just sign in and got just two friends, only two friends on line and you just start talking and talking, you know, sometimes about the most useless things. Now you can do better things than that, but...*

**Mickey** *...And distractions really start there and grade 11, really the grades went down dramatically, where I don't know, just a lot of distractions and then you start going out at night and I played hockey. And you then you need money, so you start to work. So you want to keep school a priority, it still is a priority, but there's other priorities too.*

Focus was also an issue for many.

**Jason** *There was so much pressure on me. So many different things going on in my life that I could not focus on anything. I could not focus on anything, 'cause I did not understand and I had no self-confidence.*

*...I go yeah, I'm interested in so many things, I just don't know what to, you know.*

*...so now I'm trying to focus in school and let it take me wherever they will, let me go as far as I can in school.*

The appeal of social time with peers (as elaborated in 5.2.1) is so very magnetic.

Ultimately, a successful educational project must make the process personally meaningful for the student. The simplest of gestures may make a connection.

**Jennifer** *I don't know. It was really cute, Vanier sent me this letter and it had said, your teachers say that you're doing really...it's like a little red card and it says, your teachers say that you're doing very well in class and it flips over and says, "only six weeks". So it was really cute, yeah, it made me happy that day. But they're trying to say you can do it.*

### 5.1.1 To Be Somebody

It is simply stunning how frequently students report that they want to continue in their education at the post-secondary level in order to become somebody. They have internalized the view, perhaps gratifying to educators, that one is worthless until educated. They often don't know quite what they mean by the claim, and it could make a worthwhile study by an educational psychologist, but it is tied up in some idea of self-worth at the individual level and social status and advancement at the societal level. They have heard repeatedly from family, teachers, and the media that in today's world, in the information age, one can only sit at the table of modernity and participate fully in the contemporary world with an education. For most of these students the short version of this argument is: you will never get a decent job unless you obtain formal credentials beyond high school. The social process of credentialism (institutional advancement only through the acquisition of formal training) has crept into personal agendas.

However, expressed only at this level, 'to want to be somebody' is one of the weaker and more vacuous motivations to study beyond high school. Having no direct link to any program or course, let alone personal interests, aptitudes or specific goals, the vague desire to augment one's status through further education



might prove to be sufficient motivation in certain communities, such as that in a residential school where the material benefits of increased cultural capital might be more evident. But in the hard-scrabble world of street youth, part-time jobs, 'hoop dreams' and family pressure, becoming someone may occur through many paths. However ill defined, most students recognised the need to stay in school if they were going to get anywhere or gain some stability.

**Michel-Henri** ... 'cause I wanted to be someone, I wanted to have a good education and get a good job. It's not because I really like, it's not because I enjoy school, it's because if you don't go to school, you won't get an education. That's really the main goal.

**Tefanny** I dunno, because I don't really know what else to do other than being in school... School is important, to, like, wherever I would want to go, because I'm not like, like you know people sort of do, like, art, they could be anything like that, but that's not anything guaranteed or as guaranteed as whatever when you take school. So I like the stability of it.

**Gino** ... I was going to school to learn, get an education, do something with my life, you know...

Often the desire to be someone was counterposed against the fear of being like other friends on the street or very unattractive working conditions.

**Enid** ... Besides my parents - the fact that I do want to learn. I don't want to be like people I see like, they don't do anything with themselves. It's like, at home, on the streets, causing trouble, like I know that even though, like, I don't always want to be here, that I have to have like education, cause like later on in life I want to do something, so at least like, finish college, and then I could do whatever I want after that...

**Roman** I have a few friends who don't go to Cegep, like they got their high school education, now they're working. Where you gonna work? Pizza Hut for the rest of your life? I gotta do something, you know, you can't, you know, making \$20,000 and \$15,000 doesn't get you through life anymore; you can't do it. Back in the day it was a lot easier to have a high school education and actually make something of yourself, you can't do it these days, like you have to. Keeping me in school is that, like knowing that I won't have a future

*if I don't stay in school and my parents obviously, like I said, my brother was out for a year. They almost, like you know, they almost kicked him out, they were like, you know, "You have to go back to school, you have to..."*

Shirley puts the issue in very fundamental terms:

*Oh yeah, if you quit in high school, you're still in high school, you're basically screwed, you can't get anywhere. I couldn't get into Vanier without math. You basically can't get a job if you don't have anything more than high school. You can get crappy jobs, you can be picking garbage off the streets, you can be cleaning people's windows, unless you get something underneath the table, you know - you don't want that.*

Others have a vague idea of what higher education will lead to career-wise, but have very clear impressions of the kind of life style they hope for.

**Roman** I just want to go to school to get a good job. Just to succeed in life, to say that I actually went to school, not only high school and actually I want to do something, actually. I don't know what, but my goal... personally, my goal is to be a musician, just a regular musician, like know about music, all kinds of music and basically play it. Just... that's what I would like to do for the rest of my life, but since I have to go to school and get a real job, I'm doing that.

And another student was warned by her boyfriend:

*... 'Cause he's the one that first told me, he's like, listen, I know you don't want to be here, but you have to be here, you know... He always said, you want to be a bum, do you want to work... do you want to be one of those squeegee people?*

### 5.1.2 The Wall

We use 'the wall' to describe a state in which one comes to a point in daily life when the centre doesn't hold, to badly mix two metaphors. The daily regimen, the rules of the everyday, common fulfilments and satisfactions all of a sudden lose their meaning. Sometimes a crisis is occasioned by the break-up of a relationship, a change of school or home neighbourhood (or both), a few bad grades

in one's courses, not making the basketball or football team, or any one of dozens of other situations. Intellectually, the wall is the obverse of an epiphany (described below in the context of the Readiness Factor (section 5.6).

Sometimes recreational drugs are involved and they may be either cause or response in this syndrome. The use of drugs may begin as a lark, a fun thing done to stretch one's experience, widen horizons, to make friends. Then as the use of drugs becomes more regular, the user begins to notice that his or her circle of friends has changed, apathy towards school sets in, the family starts to look like an enemy, and a vicious spiral begins. Sometimes the drugs begin as a stress-relieving activity in response to a crisis, but the same spiral is engaged.

Some of our informants hit the wall in the middle of secondary school, about 14 or 15 years of age. The Wall seems to be associated with a point in school during the transition from middle school (grades 7 and 8) to the higher grades. There is very likely a youth maturation element involved, a wall being what one runs into when youthful rebellion and identity crisis are unleashed in an environment surrounded by literal and figurative walls on all sides, fortified by apparently intransigent institutions and unsympathetic families. For a time, everything which is obligatory seems broken and boring. Many students noted that their performance changed at that point, often without their being able to identify the cause.

**Roman** ...*High school, up to Grade 8 my marks were mid-70s about and uh, I don't know, when I got to Grade 9, it, um, I don't know, it didn't really go downhill from there but it went on a bit of a, you know, it went a bit downhill. Like, um, I was never good in math, so I went to summer school in math like, uh, two years in a row, Grade 9 and Grade 10... So, I don't know, I don't really know what happened, how it went down, like, by steps...*

Learning how to deal with life's problems can be one factor complicating Cegep life and some people learn later than others.

**Raj** ...*It was just like my problems, I couldn't stay in school cause like I would... I wouldn't be able to*

*concentrate so I just, you know, skipped school and went off somewhere... [my friends] went through it in high school and me in college, that's the only difference.*

The wall can be built by poverty and reinforced by the inability to see a way around it. Once constructed, there doesn't seem to be any point in trying to do well and a self-imposed inertia sets in.

**Tefanny** ...*Like, I don't go anywhere. I don't have money to go anywhere. Like it's either look for a job or watch TV. Not either, but like spend your time doing that. And then while you're waiting to find a job, you just watch TV, cause you don't have money to go out anywhere. Your school work's done or it's not demanding enough to have to spend a whole lot of time on it. And like, what am I gonna do, just sit there all day and do nothing. So, it's like there's a TV and it's like all right...*

Boring courses, courses that appear irrelevant, or teachers that aren't helpful still frustrate her after being at the college for a year.

**Tefanny** *But like a lot of people who come to school... most of them go into Social because they don't have [any] idea what they want to do and they think Social just leads to anything, but it doesn't necessarily. And then that's why a lot of them drop out, because it's not doing anything for them. Like, right now, I don't like to be in Social, but because I don't have any of the courses that I like want to take, because Social's not for me and I find most of it boring and like kind of irrelevant. Like I don't want to take Economics and I don't want to take Sociology and like English is fine, because you know that's what you got to do and I can deal with English. English I like because I'm gonna have to do it anyway and I speak it and it's always good to improve writing skills and all that, but the other social stuff... in fact I dropped two of my courses on the first day because I didn't like them and I didn't like want to have to sit through it all semester knowing that I wouldn't want to pay attention and I wouldn't want to be there and I might not show up, so I cancelled them. And so I'm just like trying to do the best with what I have, but... Especially with Economics it's hard, cause it's not very interesting to me and the teacher is like the least helpful of all. And she asks questions that aren't understandable and then she doesn't necessarily want to help people find the answer, she just wants the answer and then she's like easily frustrated if you can't get it quickly and all that and I don't find that very good.*

Homer found that his first couple of years at Cegep were particularly difficult because of many external problems. The home financial situation was compounded by relationships and events.

**Homer** ...*Well, it's been long, it's been hard. It's been a lot of like, determination and pushing on my part... Like, I remember since all my interviews with you, I told you about work, how it's being influenced on my school, exactly money. I started a relationship without knowing what I was getting myself into, this is an emotional problem. I got into a car accident, broke my shoulder, which is another pack of emotional problems. I lost my way for a little bit. But even though I felt like I lost my way, I still told myself that I got a purpose, I'm gonna do it, I'm gonna go through it. I'm here now, it's the final stretch, I'm tired, but I can't wait to see what's ahead.*

Starting in high school, his effort to get in shape through sports and fitness training has given him a way to relax and de-stress:

**Homer** ...*Working out, I discovered that's it's a way of balancing myself even more. Like it's something I enjoy doing, it's a way for me to escape. Escape work. Escape all the responsibility of life. Just go out, push a couple of weights. It takes away the stress. It takes away the anger. It takes away the frustration. Whatever may come across my way, just go exercise and it feels more relaxed...*

Sevag's older brother had already completed Cegep and moved on to university and had been encouraging Sevag to stay in school. Despite his support, the transition to Cegep was too difficult for him to handle. He wasn't the only one who had difficulty dealing with long breaks between classes.

**Sevag** *But I wasn't shocked, I was like okay this is Cegep, but like the long breaks I had, they were, like, just too much. I would be like what am I going to do for 4 1/2 hours, you know, and that was three days out of the week. So, like either I would study or I wouldn't study or I would just like, you know, go home, fall asleep and I'd forget about coming to class. That transition was kind of hard to get used to. Those long breaks, where you have to like take advantage of them and like study, but sometimes I wouldn't do that. So that was kind of hard to get used to. So I decided not to have any more long breaks.*

Sevag admitted that marijuana was a factor.

*Well not to open another subject, but whatever. I don't think I have a drug problem or anything, but that was kind of sort of the reason, like I'd go to class, I'd be, uh, high and that's about it, and I wouldn't be able to learn. I don't think marijuana does lack motivation, cause I have a different point of view about it. I don't know about anybody else, but I'm sure respected with that point of view and yeah, I guess that was part of the reason why I failed like a bit. I'd be like, just too into pot. Like I'd be... I wouldn't learn. Obviously you can't learn when you're high, but you can learn after. What I'm trying to say is, it didn't really make me fail or anything; I should keep it for after school, kind of thing, you know.*

As with Sevag, Gino had two older brothers who had already graduated from university. He was one of those who squeaked through high school with very weak skills and poor grades and hit the wall when he reached Cegep.

**Gino** ...*But high school was a bit different than now college. I realize college, now, like you really have to do good in school. Like in high school it was just like, okay we would do this, you know pass and that's it, just move on... just the basics and that's it. It was more like on the fun part in high school.*

Shirley tried her level best to address her difficulties in test performance.

*I don't know, I'm like the worst person for a test, I'm so bad. And I went... I spoke to [a professional's name] in the Learning Centre, I spoke to [a counselor] in Student Services. Somebody recommended me to go there, it didn't help. Then I saw [another professional's name] a few times. I've tried everybody's method, I just blank out. I've tried different studying methods. Like I've tried rewriting everything, I've tried re-reading everything and then I tried reading everything out loud, I've tried doing a little bit at a time, nothing sinks in, nothing is sinking in.*

**Mickey** *I went through Review Board the first semester and they told me, you need to pass four classes and I said, for some reason every time somebody's told me, oh next time, na, na, na, na, oh sure, like if they're gonna kick me out, sure, sure. You know like, I don't know why... and even... for some reason, I don't know even why I was thinking that, I said, ah even if they kick me out, but I see it now, now I'm wasting another*

*semester because I'm only doing two classes. So really, I've wasted a year and a half, you know, so it was a big waste of time and...*

## 5.2 Social/Cultural Factors

The responses considered social and cultural are concerned with the immediate social life of the informants. The key themes which emerged were the primacy of social life in their educational environment, the importance of their family of origin, and the role of a boyfriend or girlfriend; these three are elaborated in detail below as 5.2.1, 5.2.2, and 5.2.3.

We asked them what they thought about the inescapably superior performance of females as reflected in virtually every measurement of academic performance. Many of them recognized the better work habits of young women, though most offered no real explanation of the different levels of performance. Some saw boys as more 'hands-on' practical learners with little patience or use for the more theoretical subjects.

Gino has this to say about relevance:

*...Guys in school, like, I don't know, sometimes we find like all we do, we know we're never going to use it in our work field ever again, you know. Like the French and the Math, you know, maybe we'll use it, but not as much as what we're doing in school...like we know, we're never going to see this again in 20 years from now, you know. Most guys would rather go into a trade, learn with their hands, what they are doing and that's it. Go work right away...*

Others, usually female, felt that girls had a more developed sense of deferred gratification.

**Maria** *I think guys think that they don't need it, that they just have to do manual work and they'll be fine and they want the cars...They have that distraction. They want the material stuff and girls think ahead. Okay, maybe I won't have it now, but watch me later...*

We did ask the Sample48 about their leisure time activities and got scattered comments about sports. Some in the sample were, or had been, very active in athletic activities. Martin,

a college football player, underlined the way in which sport could serve to teach life lessons:

*Well I joined football and that's pretty much changed me a lot, because I used to be more conservative and not very active. I just stayed home and played video games and studied and stuff and now I'm more social. I met a lot of people and it taught me a lot of discipline and gave me more incentive to try harder.*

He explicitly acknowledged the role of coaches.

*In Chateaugay we have a lot of bad coaches, but we have some good ones and those good ones you're always going to remember. They're the ones who gave you the chances and they actually taught you something good and that's like lessons that, they go beyond football, they're like into life...*

And he recognized the importance of intrinsic satisfaction through sports.

*Cause it's fun... Things you have in life, you're gonna do better in and things that don't really make you have a good time, you're never going to try hard in that, because you just don't like it, but you know you have to do school...*

When the interviewer pursued the issue of 'school' lessons from football, Martin described his day this way:

*We'd hang out, go to class and we'd hang out and we'd go to more class.*

**Interviewer** *What does hanging out entail?*

**Martin** *Standing around being bored in school.*

They said quite a bit about music and its importance in their lives. Those for whom music was important, and there were many, listened largely to rap, hip-hop, rhythm and blues and rock. Almost all the students had opinions on music, and reported that listening to music was a very important pass-time, often while doing something else, such as college assignments. Some also played music, and one was even a student in the Music program. For these students music was a key element of their life. A few would become passionate about how their music influenced their life. Sankara normally spoke in short one word answers until

he was asked to describe what he liked about hip-hop and he became almost eloquent:

*...Well, I like...cause hip-hop is not only the music, you know, it's about a whole story, you know...Hip hop is like a whole...how could I say that? Like a whole big family...Hip hop is like...it's a culture, that's what they say, it's a culture. And it's a whole other thing, cause you know the way you live, the way you dress... They speak about that [unemployment] in the rap music and all, you know. Speak about everything, how life goes on, what is good, what is bad...you know, it's just some kind of religion...*

The place of music and the importance of a music culture to these youth is a study in itself, but our findings are not systematic enough for extensive commentary.

### 5.2.1 To See my Friends

The overwhelming message in the interviews with these students (and most especially with reference to high school) was the absolute primacy of social life connected to school. Not all of the social connections and activities at school could be said to be positive for the students' own comfort or security, yet they were driven to see others, connect and plan with their peers, check their styles, chat with some and gossip about others, compete with many, pick on and get picked on, and in so many ways both direct and subtle, come of age among those whose opinion matters most. The peer group reigns.

One of the major issues when it came to deciding which college they wanted to go to was whether their friends would be going to the same college. Those who made a personal decision to separate from their friends sometimes did so as a kind of epiphany, a way of putting away childish things so they could concentrate on a program of study. Yet even they often became ensconced in a group at the college, usually beginning with a group from their high school, or a group which is identified by national origin. This latter is not difficult to locate at Vanier College, as the 'hang' spots are largely identified by colour of skin and parental place of origin. The students refer to this pattern of de facto ethnic micro-neighbourhoods within the college as

segregation, yet even those who complain also typically participate.

The community of other students was the central reference point in their school life.

*Some days there would be something I'd be looking forward to, I guess gym or art class or some kind of slacking class where I could just go and do something easy and get out. But I wasn't too happy with math or French or English...all those...just like every other kid. When I went to school, I would mostly look forward to, I don't know, **seeing friends, that's it.***

*I guess just getting to school, **just the atmosphere, my friends.** Sometimes like if I had a class at 1:00, I'd come to school around 11:00 just to be in school...*

***Just my friends,** just like talking, I just like socializing with people, yeah, that was pretty much my day, make my day. Then classes, I'd have people in classes, and then, I don't know...*

Over and over this was the message.

*I wasn't looking forward to like just the work we had to do, but like **seeing my friends** and ya, it wasn't like, work-oriented or anything.*

*Like I look forward to, like, **seeing my friends and...well, seeing my friends,** but most of it is like, I just want to get through the day as quick as possible.*

This last comment echoes the attitude, noted in 5.1.2 above, that a long break between classes was an extremely negative thing, to the extent that courses could be selected for that reason more than for the content or teacher. After all, the academic part of college life for students with these priorities is largely something to be endured.

Gino's first priorities were simultaneously the same – fun and friends. He had a long-term vision of why it was important to have fun while he was young. (Even some very successful students shared this philosophy, as noted in 6.1.)

***Gino** ...It [high school] was really good actually. It was fun, you know. We had fun us kids while we were learning too, you know...When I went to school, I got there, we all met in the morning, talked a bit and went*

*to classes. Then we had like our breaks in between classes, talked some more and that's it...we were smokers. We smoked in the morning. We had our morning cigarettes with our coffees, that's it.*

Even when he speaks of his teachers, it is not in relation to the courses or subjects, but fun friends to be with.

*...The teachers were fun too, because like, they would get into our conversations, the students you know...we were all in the same boat, basically we just went there, we did our stuff in school and got our grades to pass and that's it. But we were there for the fun.*

*...Ya, I was young, so I wanted to have fun. I wanted to enjoy my life. So when I get older I couldn't say, oh, I wish I would have done this when I was younger or that, you know. I say, I enjoyed my teenage life and that's it, you know...*

The transition to college imposed difficulty on a person as social as Gino. He was no longer able to give his friends the time he would like to.

**Gino** *...Because you can't, like, plan. Let's say you want to do something, you can't really say "I'm going to do this with my friends," cause you know you have something coming up all the time...so now you have to reverse it, like there's no more "okay I'm going to go out tonight with my friends...go have a coffee, then do homework the next night." It's like you have to do it constantly, homework.*

Hanging out with one's friends has many dimensions. Though it is often the primary motivation for going to school, it can also be the root cause of many academic failures. Failing out of college or university by playing cards in the cafeteria instead of going to class is a venerable pattern repeated over the generations.

*...Hanging out in Jake's mall [the big student lounge area] too much, that was my biggest distraction. I said...I would keep telling myself, okay you have to go to the library, do your stuff, do your work, but then like you come to school and you settle down and you don't want to, like, get up to go to class and, like...sometimes I would take my books just there and do it, but then people would be talking, then I would be all in the*

*conversation, then it would get me distracted from my work and it would be really hard.*

Manon, in retrospect, recognized, or was led to recognize, the impact of one's close friends as early as junior high school.

*Friends are like a number one priority for me...In Grade 7 I guess I kind of hung out with the wrong kind of people. My mom also thinks that's why I did poorly in grade 7. She was convinced that [this one girl I had known since primary school] was always a bad influence on me, you know, and I didn't want to hear that, you know. I definitely see it now, like I see where she's headed in life and where I...like I'm not trying to toot my own horn type of thing...You know I can see it was, but at the time I was totally blind to that and I'd push my parents and...even my younger brother and my sister would say, you know like, we see how you act when you're with her and we see how you act when you're not with her, you know, and it's totally different. So I was in almost every class with her too. Like that's pretty much where I got into trouble in math and in English in grade 7, it was with that.*

Once up against the wall like this, academic recovery takes some willful strategy. Manon was able to trace the path through her pattern of friends and how they had affected her progress through school. With good family support and a conscious effort on her part, she made the break necessary to develop a positive and supportive peer group.

*...So grade 8 I kind of wised up type thing and I started hanging out with a different group of people and these people were more like intellectual type thing. Like they would push me to do better.*

Jennifer is clearly conflicted about how to be the social person she claims to be, yet retain the discipline necessary to draw away from friends to go to class. Note her comment on how rich kids can afford to go to school forever, but as someone who has "always worked" to pay her own way, she cannot afford to spend extra semesters getting her certificate.

*I guess you could say my friends...I don't know why but I go for people that are kind of opposites of me and a lot of my friends, especially at Vanier now, they, yes, they're somewhat interested in school but they're either rich and you know they don't really care 'cause their*

parents can pay for them to go to school over and over and over again every time they drop out, or they're just, I don't know why they're here, but they just skip classes over and over again and that is a distraction for me at some points 'cause they're just like "why don't you just stay," but I just tell them "No. (laughs) I'm going to class, sorry." But they could've been a distraction if I'm the type of person that just gets distracted very easily, but I'm not.

Others, too, recognized the importance of class origin on the way one approaches study:

*I'm seeing people, you know, my friends, their fathers have a lot of money, I have a lot of friends their fathers have a lot of money, studying, you know, whatever "I'm taking over dad's company anyway", whatever, you know. So, I see them and say, you know what the fuck, I'm not in the same boat as they are.*

Jennifer's view of the lesson she learned is tied in partly with her ambition (she now wants to be an art teacher) and partly the recognition that performance in college while working does not leave very much idle time to be filled up. When asked what she used to do in high school for fun, what were her 'leisure time pursuits,' she responded:

*Like, just stupid stuff, like, like for instance, when I used to do drugs, and that also reminds me, when I started CEGEP that was another thing that changed about me—because my life is so busy, there's no time. So...and I like it now, it's been awhile and it's cool, you know. Before it was just like, "Ah, there's nothing to do, let's go driving around. Ah, there's nothing to do, let's go hang out at a bar...let's go stand on the street." And yeah, O.K., it was fun back then but like I said, now I pass by, I see my old friends and I'm like, "they have no lives." This is all they're doing. Like I like doing different things. The most fun thing to do is I like staying home. I don't care, all my friends can come to my house, we watch TV, you know, it's all good (laughs). There's a lot of people that always come to my house.*

Sebastien was slightly older and had been out of school for 4 or 5 years before he made the decision to return. Part of that decision was based on the unsatisfactory peer group he worked with.

*...Well, I can have fun in class, It depends what class, but I mean, sometimes when you start learning something it's all right, it's kind of fun, and then, I meet people at school so, that's another reason why I want to come back to school was to...I wasn't very sociable before, then when I went to work and what not, it is even harder to meet people. There are only the people that work there and I didn't really fit with most of them. So, I wanted to come back to school and I figure if I apply myself, I'm in Health, maybe I'll meet some other people that share the same interests as myself. And, so, that's another motivation to go into school, because it's a win/win situation...*

Several in the Sample48 commented on how difficult it was to retain social contact with those friends who did not go to college. Interests, priorities and ambitions change. The notion that the people you 'hang' with can make a big difference in your life may be more than just a way of speaking. In some parts of Montreal the reality of street life is very close. Young black men in particular have to make careful conscious choices.

**Sankara** *Street gangs, no, I'm trying to stay away...I mean, I got a couple of friends, a lot of friends, you know, that's on the streets and doing that stuff and all, but I'm not into that...no, plus this summer I lost a lot of friends...which was in...well, it was, you know when you get into doing drugs and selling it and all, you know, you create, you make yourself enemies. People will say, oh you took their territory, you took their drugs and some stupid stuff. I always thought...They got killed...it's part of life, you know, there's tragedy, there's drama, you have to live with it, that's it.*

Friends fill the lives of students, especially if they feel unhappy in their family circumstance. For a young woman from a traditional family, the virtual world after school is as important as the contact at school.

**Raj** *Stay home, go on the Net, that's pretty much it...And I'm always on the Net. (laughing)...24/7—like weekends I'm always on it, it's like...MSN, everything...I don't go on chat until I make my MSN. And a lot of people are online so I talk with them all day...these are people I know and their friends and so we got to know each other kind of thing...when I was, like in grade...like nine, I used to be on the phone for, like, five hours but then you got MSN and Internet so every time I called somebody, it was like, they were busy*

*on the Internet. I just got MSN so I could talk to them all the time, you know, I don't have to call so it's like, oh, good.*

Tefanny stood out as a solitary figure who didn't really care for friendships from the school milieu. Apart from family, her childhood and neighbourhood friends were the people that she still socialised with. Part of this is because she dislikes school and flees the premises as soon as she can. However, she explains that her first semester in Explorations put her together with people that she had to interact with in numerous classes and with whom she still remains in touch as a peer network at college. When asked if she had made friends in college, she replied:

*Not since really the first semester [in Explorations], but that mainly stemmed from the fact that we were in most of our classes together. So it was easier to just, like know these people and the fact that we went camping for a weekend and like, we were all talking to each other anyway. So, if I see them I guess they'll be like...I could be like, how's it going, you know, what's new. But when you're changing from class to class and there's so many people, I'm like, usually you just want to do your work. Cause you're not talking in class anyway, well you're not supposed to be, I know some people still do but...so you're doing your work, you're not really sitting there...*

An isolated or marginalized person can become quite paranoid by the way he or she is treated by peers. Jacob wanted to produce a hip-hop album and was upset by the lack of support from his friends.

**Jacob** ...*My life, because of what I've seen in life, I don't really give much chance to friends. Because sometimes, I'm telling you if you life is going to be messed up, miserable, sometimes bad from your friends. Do this, do this, follow this, you know...Gossip. So this, for instance, the time I started making my album, I was looking for help, somebody to help me to do this. But what I was doing is, people were saying that I was joking. Saying, Jacob is lying, say he's going to do this, he didn't do it, you know. But in life, everything takes time, you know, everything takes time. So because of that, people started giving names and later on they found out I'm doing it they were shocked...surprised. Life that's why, everything that you do sometimes, you have to keep things secret...*

Despite their classroom antics that at times appear disrespectful, many students are brought up in communities where authority and age are greatly respected. This bifurcation is clearly multidimensional, what with family authoritarianism on one side and an 'academic conversation' on another, different elements of maturity expected on either side of this great divide between private and public life. The link between home and school was first and foremost friends, so a strategy in their presence was necessary.

**Thomas** ...*I had two attitudes, one at home and one at school. I was two different people in one day. At school I was like this prankster. I used to do a lot of pranks in school or in class, but I never got caught. I was with my friends, you know. I was like the innocent one, because I always behaved in class. You know...I always, always. And like let's say the teacher got mad at me, I would always give up instantly. Let's say they tell me to get out of the class, I would just get up and get out of the class. Like some people would resist... what'd I do, you know, I didn't do that...I would just get up, pack my stuff and go out without a word. I would do that and that's why they liked me most of the time, because I wouldn't fight with them. I always had respect to all the people that were older than me, that's the way I was raised, to respect people...*

### 5.2.2 Family

It is not for nothing that teachers often refer to these students as kids. They are juveniles, adolescents, young adults, overgrown kids who occupy that liminal zone between the enchanted garden of childhood and the cold, hard ground of adulthood. Their entire being expresses this contradiction (and conflict) between roles. Almost everyone in the study claimed that parents and family were important to them. How and why family was important differed significantly, and a number of them did not actually spend a lot of time with their family. There were a few who had effectively feuded with their family, and, though the vast majority lived in their parents' home, many of them actually lived quite separate lives. Issues such as curfews, economic independence, and parental discipline formed recent memories and were occasionally points of negotiation,



but most were quite free from direct parental control, according to what they said.

Some few in the Sample48 came from highly educated families. For them, parental and community expectations were there from the beginning.

**Thomas** ...*I stay at school because that's where I thought the road was. If you're not in school, that means it's not worth...I don't know, you're not supposed to be anywhere else, but school and I had parents pushing me, because my father is a dentist and you had to become as high as him or you'd be an insult...Your grandmother is like...keep aiming high and everything, you know, always had that...guests would come over...one day I'm gonna come see your office, you know one day as a doctor, so I'm thinking like, okay...*

**Igor** ...*Well, she says, as long as you're finished Cegep and get to university, that's fine by me. As long it takes, but just finish it. As long as you get diplomas and all that stuff...*

More commonly for these students, higher education was a new thing for the family. Parents were in the vast majority of cases supportive of their children's studies, though they did not always know how to provide that support. A classic case of this latter would occur when the family operated a business in which the child also worked. Though the child was encouraged to study, there was little free time allowed for the child to complete assignments, read, review and prepare outside of class hours. The family business required a commitment of hours from the child which undercut academic success even while the parents were encouraging further study. In somewhat less dramatic fashion, students were often in the throes of becoming more educated than their parents simply by being registered in college. It is difficult to overestimate what a burden this pioneering role can be, and how cynical it can also make the student.

**Sevag** *Well, education, yes, is important in my family. Everyone in my family wants me to go to school and continue until I go to university, until I can't do it anymore. But, well, my parents have some sort of an education. My mom went to Cegep, but my dad didn't. My mom's been to high school, but my dad hasn't, but*

*they come from two different places. And my mom was born in Lebanon but she came here and got a Canadian education until Cegep. She dropped out of Cegep because she met my dad. My dad said this and that, what are you doing in school, let's get married, whatever. So my dad's not the educated kind of man, although he thinks he is wise, but I really don't think he's wise. He's got experience, but there's a difference between experience and wise. So, he's not, yeah...they're kind of educated, they know like how to react to situations and stuff, they're not stupid I guess.*

*Well, if my parents would tell me something about my schooling, like you have to do better, like I would always use my dad as an example. I'd say, you didn't even graduate from high school. You should be proud that I'm at least going to Cegep.*

Ludmila was the classic case of an immigrant child who would succeed in her studies.

*It's funny because my mom was actually noticing a couple of days ago that you never see an immigrant on the street. And I think that's because of a lot of higher hopes for their kids than they did for themselves. The emphasis is placed on education, so like it or not, whether the kid enjoys what he's studying or not, he's going to have an education of some sort. And I think it's hard, I mean, you have so many people that don't have time or don't have just the strength to argue or push or force, you know. It takes a while for that sort of discipline to kick in. It took me until Sec. V, so. It's hard, I definitely see the parents...I have an only parent who had odd jobs for a long time and who wasn't always home, but somehow always made time.*

And Sankara expressed very clearly his own place in a family project (Lapierre and Loslier, 2003). Family project refers to situations in which the priorities of the family are accepted by the student whose goals in school fit the overall plan.

*...Well, actually...Uh I would say personally that it's...uh kind of family affair, you know, 'cause uh, I gotta recognize that when my dad brought me here, you know, uh...well, one thing I had in mind is that I came in Canada, in America, to study, you know, have a better study experience, more...uh, how could I say that...a better career and uh...that was all about it, you know, 'cause uh, it was, uh, mostly about studyin'—the point of coming here in Canada was to study, that was the first point.*

While there is family pressure and family projects, other families are very loose about their child's path and the student has already made decisions about who she is pleasing.

**Tefanny** ...*like my mom, she doesn't really, like say, "Oh, what kind of marks have you been getting, have you been getting tests lately?" or anything like that. But my dad, whenever like I talk to him he's like, "Oh, yeah, how's school, whatever," It's like, "Fine, just fine, yeah, fine," I'm not really gonna say, you know, but it's not even like it's that big of an influence on me...I'm the biggest influence on me 'cause I know exactly how high I wanna get or how much I'm gonna do, so I'm... It's like my dad, he'd get like really mad depending on how low it goes...But it's not like I'm saying, 'Oh, I gotta do great for my dad,' or whatever because I don't really think about him until, like, he asks for the report card...So I just do it for me...*

In fact Tefanny was quite self motivated to remain in school since there were several family members encouraging her to drop school.

*My family like said, "You don't really need to have some kind of degree or anything..." , but it's just that's it's preferred usually...*

At the stage of adolescent questioning of parental values and authority, family pressure can sometimes have an adverse effect.

**Raj** ...*my parents are pretty like strict. Like, it's only my mom, though, like I don't really talk to my dad. So, my mom's always like on my case, she's like, "Do this, do that," you know. It's like, she got me a tutor and she makes me, it's like, she's encouraging, but sometimes it's like, she's really annoying...It's like...sometimes it's like, like sometimes, like she puts you down, like, you know, because she knows, like, if she yells at me and puts me down that I'll just do something to prove to her that it's wrong, right, so she does that most of the time and it actually works.*

Family pressure is not always helpful or listened to.

**Tefanny** *And so my dad was saying, "Oh, I don't know, maybe you just have a problem with the teacher or something," so he was pretty much blaming it on me. He said I was just finding a reason to not do it and blaming it on the teacher because I probably have a problem with the teacher and not being there was*

*affecting my marks and like stuff like that, 'cause I knew it wasn't my fault. And so, it was like, not helping either.*

In her first interview Tefanny told us that her mother didn't really care too much about her schooling, but in the second it was a more nuanced critique of mother's ability to help, partly because there were a lot of people in the house.

*...but because so many of us want to do so many different things and it's hard for people to like keep track cause there's a lot of people in my house...My mom kind of has an idea of what I want to do and like how long it's gonna take, cause I talked to her about it. But she doesn't really know what to do to like help or anything like that. Like the most she can do is listen and be like, okay, but like there's not really anything she can do or say that will make it any better or any worse...*

Family problems take many shapes. It would take a much more rigorous form of analysis, as well as access to some fairly delicate data to determine the extent to which family difficulties or severe pressures disable the student from being able to perform.

Jacob, on the other hand felt abandoned by his parents after his mother kicked him out of the house. His attitude towards family and friends seemed to be one of distrust.

*...Even my mom usually...she was angry with me. I don't think that my mom can do that to me. So that's what I've learned, that even your family, everybody can disappoint you, you know. So always try to trust yourself and you have to be bold in everything...*

**Melissa** ...*Well, for one my mother is a manic-depressive and so there were times when she wouldn't be taking her medication and I'd be dealing with that at home and something that was...well, when I would go to school the underlying idea in my mind is that my mom would come to the school and embarrass me, that she might embarrass me. It's just like not so much stressed, but I was a little confused about what it was that was going on with my mom and her illness and to bring that to school.*

A dysfunctional family situation was an element in Sebastien's dropping out of high school

early. Relations with his parents had been difficult, but during the course of his first two semesters at Cegep they began to support his efforts to return to school, after his father joined Alcoholics Anonymous.

**Sebastien** ...*so that was the only reason was that that I even considered moving back in. And I saw that he [his father] was doing better...he was kind of changing, going to meetings and what not were helping him out a lot. And that's why I went back, and since being back we haven't had any problems.*

In fact, the parents gained pride from their son's achievements. No one in the family had ever done so well in school before.

*...They are happy. I know they tell all their associates that, yeah, we got a boy in Cegep, you know. Because for the years, they would always, you know, they kind of felt bad because whenever they talked to all their peers, and how their kids were doing, you know, their kids are finishing high school, their kids are going on to cegep and that, and then, you know, all my brothers, I mean, I'm the only [one] who goes to cegep. I got 3 other brothers...*

The pressure can be a two way street. The threat of returning to her homeland to settle and possibly marry was very upsetting to one student, but sometimes a family can feel the strain when their child is not doing well. After failing her first year at Cegep, the young immigrant woman's family took her to resettle in their homeland, fearing that Canada was messing her up.

**Raj** ...*Yeah. But that didn't happen. They took me there and then they felt like really bad for me, because I couldn't cope there. I was like sick and stuff with the weather change. So, they're like okay, fine, we'll give you one more chance, so I'm back here...I guess like, I don't want to be sent back to Sri Lanka, sort of, so I have to like...and plus I want to prove to my parents that I'm not that, you know...that I lost touch with my education. I want to prove to them that I can do it, because they think I can't...*

Raj had to go through a difficult time with her family before a *modus vivendi* was reached.

*I don't know, I've learned my lessons and plan to like stay in school instead of skipping and all that. Face*

*my problems, tell my parents, you know, the truth and stay out of trouble.*

Tefanny's outside life is very limited and the themes of boredom and lack of money return frequently as if one contributes to the other.

Family pressure can be very indirect rather than straightforward nagging. Manon had little interest in high school but knew she couldn't drop out even though it was a common occurrence in her rural setting.

**Manon** *Um, I guess it wasn't one of my top priorities, type thing, but I really...my dad always really, really encouraged me to go to college. That was like his main goal. So he really...I always tried to like, you know...a lot of people drop out of high school... [she never considered it]...cause I know it would just crush my father, crush him.*

That pressure can be self-imposed when one is the oldest in the family.

**Manon** ...*Um, my brother, well my sister, my younger sister. She has quite a severe learning disability. I don't know, like I feel like I'm a definite role model for her. Not as much my younger brother. I'm not worried about him, like where he's going and stuff. He can achieve stuff you know, even though he's young, like I know. But my younger sister, she's 12 now, it's her first year of high school and she really needs encouragement to stay, cause she gets discouraged very easily, like obviously, when you're not doing well. So I feel like everything I do, she's gonna pick up on it and I notice, like I am a big influence on her, you know. Whatever I say is cool or whatever, she's next one on it. My brother is like that too, though...*

Regardless of the hurdles and whether the goals are realistic or not, many immigrant families hold tenaciously to the family project in which the children's education is a key element of social integration and mobility. Sankara, a low achieving student, from a well-to-do professional family, faces a culture of expectation to be like the parents that adds even extra pressure.

The difficult family situation facing some students can be a real burden and school, rather than helping, can simply further complicate a young person's life.

*Oh ya, my grandparents live next door. My grandmother's sister lives two blocks down. A lot of family live on our street. Like my aunt, it's like down the street and like my cousins live in Montreal, but right across Lachapelle, so they can drive over like in three minutes. Like they're over at my house everyday, my little cousin and my cousins. They're older, so they can come over, they can drive.*

Siblings also had a significant influence on the individual. This influence was seen to be both negative and positive, primarily the latter. When the individual is the first born, pressure can be applied to be a role model.

*Oh ya, it was very scary. Like when we first...like I'm going to Cegep, I was the first one in the family that enrolled, because I have a younger brother and sister.*

*Yeah, I'm the oldest. I can do whatever I want, especially my parents work, both my parents work, so my dad's gone from 9:00 to 6:00 and my mom's gone to 4:00 to like around 12:00, cause she works at a bank. So there's a two-hour period where I'm god at my house, if I'm home, so. I finally realize my parents when they walk in the house and it's dirty, it happens to me a lot, when I walk in, like what the hell. Like I never used to realize, cause I made the mess, and now that my little brother and sister make the mess and I kind of understand how it's frustrating for them.*

The parents play a significant role in how the siblings feel about each other and how they are compared by performance criteria.

*My brother's actually on five teams at school and plus one team outside of school. He's on the intramural soccer team, rugby, basketball, I think he plays volleyball and after school like tutor he does...Like he always does homework, he never watches TV, little nerd. He's like the protégé of my family. I'm like the average one, I'm the weird one and my sister's the girl, that's different. She's the only girl in the family, so that's different and my brother, he's the smart one. My parents always talk about him, so.*

Many students are fortunate to have an older sibling who will play mentor.

*I see him [my brother] once a week, twice a week maybe and he's over once in a while. He's the one who's trying to help me with this Cegep thing. Him and my mom*

*want me to continue my education, you know, and they are trying hard and stuff, so...yeah.*

*My brother too, you know, watch out for this guy or you know. So, ya they influence me on decisions that I have to make like about peer pressure, because...smoke, and have sex with people... so ya, they definitely influence me.*

Some parents are in the position to see that the environment at home is conducive to productive studying and some are not.

*...I like it, I mean, it was quiet, but that's the thing. Like sometimes I like quietness but now I find I like it more that there's so many people all over the place, you know, like I rarely get the house alone, there's always someone around—I like that. It was a bit stressful, like my mother trying to take care of both of us and she has hard times like keeping jobs and everything. It was just a bit stressful and I didn't really...there wasn't a lot of people to talk to, you know, like if I was having problems. Now there's everyone to talk to.*

Ludmila states with pride:

*Yes. Every place is lined with books. We actually have a room dedicated to books and there's the computer.*

Jason takes advantage of the opportunities for the right environment when he gets the chance:

*Well, me and my mother have our own apartment and my grandmother has an apartment. My mother lives at my grandmother's apartment and I live there too, and about once or two times a week, I get to go home and enjoy a bit of peace and quiet, basically.*

Ludmila has grown to appreciate the support without undue pressure she has received from her mother:

*...Well, I've been lucky, I've never had to handle parental pressure to do something I don't enjoy doing. I've been taught early on that you have to do what you're passionate in and not just something that earns you money, so you can work and earn money, and work and earn money and just end up doing that type of...*

When asked, Ludmila was very willing and able to deliver her insights on the role of parents in the children's education and career goals:

...I don't know, I think a lot of times listening is the biggest thing. I've had a lot of that as I've been talking to a few of my friends in university, who are now in their late 20's, some of them. The biggest regret they have is that their families weren't involved. A lot of the time I've had that where, you know, it's, oh no, my mom's coming again to school or she wants to see what I made and...

.....one thing I started to realize is actually that I'm pretty lucky, I have someone that I know will be there for me no matter what. If I was in trouble and on the other side of the globe, I know if she'd have to, she'd sell everything to be on the other side of the globe with me. That's never a fear I've had. I don't know, I can still talk to her about anything and she talks to me, it's a lot of talking.

...Be very involved, whether or not it's appreciated. I think that's what...that was one of the big things as I was growing up, is that there was lots of involvement whether or not I felt I needed it.

Students spoke of the influence of their extended family. Mickey refers to his grandfather:

...He was the vice-president of Bell Canada and he had a very, very good job and he's still doing very well for himself now, even though he's retired. And it was very, like for him, if I dropped out of school, I wouldn't even be ashamed in front of my parents, as much as my grandfather. He takes it very seriously.

Another student goes back three generations:

...Yeah, well, it sort of got passed down from my great-grandfather to my grandfather. My great-grandfather was a mason worker, so he built furniture, and he built furniture and on top of that being a mason. So my grandfather, he built five or six houses. So that's me looking at him building a garage, so it's basically...

One student explained that between his mother and his aunt he felt surrounded:

...but with my mom and my aunt, like I have no choice, so I'm just gonna hear it, so I just do it.

Some students spoke of the strategies used by their parents to maximize the opportunity available for their children to develop both English and French by sending the children

to school in the language other than the one spoken at home.

**Stephane** *It was a good experience cause my first language is French, my parents enrolled me in an English school, so I could learn English to become perfectly bilingual.*

Other parents did not insist on such broadening.

*Well I started off at a public French school. I went to French school my whole life.*

Numerous students admitted that the only reason they were at college was on the wishes of their parents:

**William** *I'm not really questioning it, it was just at first, I was just doing it because my parents what I wanted to do. So now I'm looking to see what I want to get into, so I'm not just taking random...*

**Paula** *...Like the reason I came here was because of my parents, they wanted me to come to college...But other than that, I was...I didn't have the urge to come. I didn't...first of all I didn't know what I wanted to do, so I was like what's the point of doing a program that I don't even know if I'm gonna be interested in. It's just really...*

### 5.2.3 Girlfriend/Boyfriend

When we had formulated a preliminary draft of the interview schedule to employ with our sample, we had the opportunity to share it with a Work Future and Yourself class of Explorations in which we were invited guests. The class critiqued our set of questions and found that they appeared able to engender valid responses, except for one huge oversight. We had not included a question about girlfriends and boyfriends.

The responses did fit into a discernable pattern. Some had had a relationship in the past and expressed no interest in beginning another one. Some actually chose not to have a relationship, seeing it as an unnecessary distraction from their studies. Sometimes, however, a boyfriend or girlfriend served as a positive role model to remain in school and get their work done. One young woman lived in her parent's house

with her boyfriend (who had not completed high school) and was very pleased with the arrangement.

Despite what the class (referred to above) thought about the importance of boyfriend or girlfriend, this did not appear to be an important concern for very many of the informants.

Many of them had eschewed relationships because they hadn't worked out and because relationships really distracted them from their schoolwork or other priorities.

Audrey

*...Yeab. It's like...to understand that you have your own life going on and plus your schoolwork, you know. So it's hard to work it out...*

For a young man, relations with women can be quite a distraction.

Michel-Henri:

*...the girls that I talk to that really influence me... really kept me off school... They're always calling at my house and uh, it's really hard to focus when the phone is always ringing... just to talk to them, some of them want to go out with me but I'm already taken so...*

An occasional pattern (which we observed through our 'deep organic connection') was that of young men who had high-performing girlfriends who not only encouraged the young man's studies, but also served as his tutor. Thomas's slide into bad company was turned around by one such relationship.

Thomas

*...In Sec. IV, it's because I met a girl. I met a girl which had amazing, amazing results, you know... She got 98 in average total. One of the best in our school. I think, the smartest. So I teamed up with her in classes and oh, she really, really boosted my notes up... We went to her house, we did our projects together. We did our homework together. She was like the best thing that happened in Sec. IV, you know...*

Many students are very leery of entering into intimate relationships because they see it as a source of additional stress to what they

are already experiencing. This is also one sociological occurrence that they are capable of learning about vicariously through their peers.

*...No, if it's gonna happen, it's gonna happen. I don't work for it. I'm already stressed enough with homework and projects and it's going to be just more stress. I have friends that have girls in trouble now. It's okay.*

*...I don't think I have time for a serious relationship or that, what do you call it, like that day-to-day thing. I know, cause I have friends with girlfriends and they don't know what they're doing (laughs). Sometimes I tell them, what did you get yourself involved with, you know. Sometimes I thank the Lord that I don't have a girlfriend.*

*...But, yeah, no, I don't know, I just...it was never really a priority for me, I was never a, you know...I've seen in most of my friends' relationships that it's more of a hassle, more of a problem, more of another stress, you know, than something good, you know, so, I'd rather not be bothered with it at the time. It's not gonna be worth it, so.*

It's no wonder because there are plenty of hard luck stories of relationships gone wrong.

*...Oh I had one. I met her here like the first day this semester and then like two months later I asked her out and nine days later she broke up with me.*

*...So like she didn't really interfere with my studying, but she did interfere with my going to classes, that she did. Like we never really had breaks together, so either I had to skip a class or she had to skip a class. So I ended up, during that nine days, skipping four classes, so bad.*

*...If I skip work to go see her, I lose money, if I skip school, I lose marks, if I skip her to go to work, I get in trouble from her, so.*

Parents and other family members will let on that girlfriends and boyfriends are an inevitability. One student related this story:

*...My parents are like...they ask if I have a girlfriend. I'm like no...they're like, it will happen soon. My uncle always tries. You always have like one pervert uncle and I have one and he lives around my street too. (both laugh). He's always like, I'll book*

*you up, I'll book you up. (Both laugh). That's it. My grandmother's against dating...like not till your 21, so I always have to hear that from her.*

Some students are really not in a hurry for these relationships and take a patient and mature outlook:

*It's not like part of my agenda. I don't like...I'm not looking, but if it comes to me, you know, I won't mind. But it's not like I'm hunting or whatever for a boyfriend. Sometimes I'm like oh, I want one, or whatever, but it's not like a priority.*

Of course there were the relationships we heard about where one or both of them were a positive influence towards reaching their academic goals:

*...Yeah he is, 'cause he like encourages me to like, go to school when I don't want to go, like in the morning, like I call him usually to like wake him up and I'm like, I don't want to go. He says, go, go, you'll be finished soon and like, yeah we can go like go to the same school and like finish early and do stuff together after. So, yeah, he makes me like want to, he makes me go actually to school*

*...I don't really know, um, my boyfriend's been a really big influence in my life*

*...Well I guess, yeah, when I first started dating, he was always like, you know, you should be more mature when it comes to school. And I think he helped me a lot...*

*...Well it's been two years with him and he helps me with school and...cause he left Vanier last semester and he did most of the courses I've done, so he helps me through it, which is good.*

### 5.3 Structural Factors

Structural factors are in the realm of social facts, i.e. conditions of social life which are external to the individual yet impinging on the individual in an unavoidable fashion. They are powerful elements of the social environment, sometimes in dramatic flux, to which the students must respond.

The world in which these students live is complicated, and larger social forces are often deeply experienced yet only dimly understood.

By the time the students in the sample48 arrived at Cegep, most had studied in at least two languages, most had grown up in a family with at least one lineage which was neither English nor French, most had studied in more than one high school, and most had worked and/or were presently working in the paid work force. Some lived in one-parent families, some had some form of learning difficulty or 'behavioural' problem, and some had experienced a grinding poverty. This makes them quite a different population from the Vanier College student of a generation ago. All were performing weakly in an educational system with standardized curriculum, behavioural requirements and mechanisms of evaluation. They are the educational 'underdogs.'

The key structural themes we have isolated, based on the above profile, are (5.3.1) languages and inter-culturalism, (5.3.2) dislocation, and (5.3.3) paid work. Commentary on these themes was not always extensive, partly because these issues were not generally pursued in as much depth in the interviews as were educational issues proper, and partly because for these students such structural issues are part of the air they breathe. These themes are so profoundly a part of their daily life that explanation of their contours to interviewers such as ourselves did not always come easily. Their terms of reference for such issues are very different from those used by persons attached to educational institutions – it's a bit like asking fish to describe water to a fisher.

Underlying everything else for a significant minority of the Sample48 was simple, unadulterated poverty. Some were living in circumstances wherein the resources needed to study at college level were extremely scarce. Despite the stated formal declaration that Cégep is free education, for many students, adapting to the real cost of post-secondary schooling can be very difficult. In the case of one student from a family on welfare, the expenses kept building, and because of the difficulty in pulling the money together to pay the college fees, there was the added fee for late payment.

**Tefanny** *Oh, the billing process. I don't like it, because they always want...like with me, because... okay, the first semester, I had to take Explorations 2 and since The Science of Survival was part of Explorations 2, you had to take it, you could not not take it and then it cost \$170.00. I'm like, okay, but I don't have \$170.00 extra dollars. And then in order to get my schedule, I had to go to the Financial Aid office and like, okay, I need to see you about getting it. And he's like okay, I'd like to know when you're gonna pay and by when you're gonna pay...I had no clue of this. So like the most he could give me is like a week or two and I won't have the money by then and if I don't, then there's \$50.00 that I have to pay extra...And so after all it came up to \$247.50, no \$367.50 and that's a lot, considering the original thing was \$147.50 and I think I registered late, yeah, no I registered late...yeah, I registered late. And so altogether it came to that and then for the next semester because I had to pay it a little later, because I had to get the money and all that, then there was that whole late registration thing, it was just like such a mess. And then because they want late fees for everything and then...if you're on the computer and you're playing a game or you have your cell [while using college computers in a lab], it's also a fine, but it's like a big fine...but they charge like for everything, and it's just kind of overwhelming...*

Her financial situation makes her impatient with the students who live off their parents without trying. She also appreciates the people who have to struggle through school depending on scholarships and bursaries.

*Like their parents are paying for their education and they don't really care if they waste their parents money, cause there's just more coming back at them. And so they're just here, they don't do their work, they slack off, they talk to their friends, they skip class and I'm like, why bother...But if they're not paying for it...because I think, usually, when it's not coming out of their pocket or it's so easy to get, like just money for school and stuff, it's easier to blow it off, cause you don't really think about it. But then there's the people who need scholarships and are working really hard and had such a hard time getting in, especially getting into their program. And then there's the ones who are slacking off and like, they just look at them, kind of, with disgust, because you wish they were putting more effort into it, considering they have it easier.*

For some, structural issues included not only financial problems, including the timing and amount of loans and bursaries, but also other procedural and bureaucratic problems associated with their college studies. Course selection and difficulties in registration came up several times, and seemed to especially plague certain individuals.

**Shirley** *Well, basically the problem with me is that my registration date was like at the last one on the list, so basically I had what was left and there was nothing much left. That's how I ended up getting the philosophy. I ended up getting the Geography of Recreation, but it's an interesting course anyway, so it doesn't really bother me. But some of my courses, the majority, were basically on the fact that I had what's left and it's really not fair because Social Science students are basically at the end of the list, you know, they go alphabetically and then by your student number, you're still at the end of the list, you know, so you basically have to take what's left. I couldn't even get into a gym class, nothing was left. I tried Yoga, Dancing, Fitness, everything, and nothing was left. I mean...*

One bit of good news is that the college experience for many, especially if it began with an intensive encounter in a class or program, led to friendships that arched over all the structural gaps between individuals. Many of these students take a bilingual, multicultural environment completely for granted, and new acquaintances simply become new friends.

**Enid** *Yeah. It started, 'cause in my first semester I was in Explorations 2, so like our SOS trip, our survival trip, it just made everyone...so that's how, like pretty much my first friends were from my Explorations 2 class, cause we all got close in that trip and everything and then I just met other people from other people. And some people I had known already, so.*

### 5.3.1 Languages and Interculturalism

It is often presumed that adaptations to a new language of instruction and the complications of immigration with its attendant marginalization are significant factors contributing to educational underachievement. We have found that it is not as simple as all that. Many of these students are at least trilingual: they are studying in English, they have done some major part of their earlier



studies in French and/or have worked in French, but their first language and the language spoken by their parents is a third one, most often European, though increasingly Middle Eastern, Asian, African or Latin American in origin. This is at least as common a pattern for the scholarship students as for the sample. Yet adapting to different linguistic environments has been a common story for these students. Teachers, often struggling with their second language, will quip that our students speak three languages fluently, yet are literate in none.

Some of our sample are clearly 'Bill 101 refugees,' i.e. have been forced by law to study in French elementary and secondary school because their parents were not educated in English in Canada, but have now chosen to study in an English Cegep. Though students of French mother tongue do somewhat better at Vanier than the average student, those who are working three languages have a rather more complex pattern. Repeated or permanent marginalization as a linguistic or ethnic minority can be expected to interfere both with the learner's engagement in the educational process and with performance on standardized measurements of academic achievement. One of the important effects of such adaptations is the frequent retardation of the pace at which one moves through the school system. When this happens of course the student finds himself or herself older than the others in the class and embarrassed to continue. This effect is also produced in Dislocation (below), and the two can be combined to form a kind of negative synergy.

In addition to the delay of academic advancement imposed by integration into the French language school system, one student felt that it had a very negative impact on his knowledge of English.

Jacob:

*I have to go to French school and like it's not that much easier at that age to pick up the French very fast. You know, it's kind of difficult because, you know, that time, normally you didn't study it in the beginning, so to learn at this age, this point is really difficult. So and also that destroyed all my English, because you have to*

*study French always and you don't speak English. So later on when I came to English school, I was finding difficulties in English, because sometimes when I'm writing English essay, I'm using some French tense, you know in it. Because everything that in my mind is about French, you know...*

Many in the Sample48 describe this kind of linguistic limbo.

Maria:

*No, [school] it's always fun, but I mean when you're growing up like me, I didn't, I knew English, I knew Portuguese and they stuck me in a French school... So, it was rough at, like I remember crying every single day because I didn't want to go to school because I couldn't understand my teacher...*

Most students in the Sample48 had a clear ethnic identity (or identities), yet they were rarely cultural conservationists. They were mixers, interculturalists, living variations of what Raffi describes:

*In my community, I'm part of the Armenian, there's an Armenian youth thing, like a youth community, so I'm part of that. Like we go every second week, every second Sunday and we talk about what's happening in Armenia, what are current events around the city, cause there's a huge Armenian population here. So, anything relating to the church, bazaars or get-togethers... I'm Canadian now. I don't even speak Armenian at home anymore. I just gave up. Like my parents are too conservative and I don't like that. Like you can't do this, you can't do that, you have to speak Armenian. So eventually they just gave up, cause I... but the Armenian community like, I am accepted, like everybody likes me, like I'm a very active member of the Armenian community, like I go help, I go do this, but the fact that I don't speak Armenian isn't a big problem for them. I speak Armenian enough to understand and speak, but like... like I had a presentation to do the other day, but like... the current issues in Armenian, so I spoke in mostly English, cause I couldn't do it in Armenian, but nobody cared.*

Some students, usually with their parents' strong encouragement, were consciously seeking a fluent bilingualism.

Stephane:

*It was a good experience 'cause my first language is French; my parents enrolled me in an English school, so I could learn English to become perfectly bilingual.*

And yet another student went beyond that:

*...And it's fine like that. I enjoy class. Like my Italian class this morning, my teacher's very perky and, I don't know, it's fun...Yeab. I'm not Italian, I'm learning.*

Interviewer:

*Good for you. So, what is your nationality?*

Student:

*Portuguese.*

### 5.3.2 Dislocation

Those whose educational experience is one of being bounced around through different schools, school boards, school systems, languages of instruction and sometimes even countries are encountering a kind of disruption in the sequence of learning patterns the effect of which is not only difficult to estimate, it is difficult to describe. Add in abrupt changes in financial status, living circumstances or family situation, and the social scene can be very messy.

Jennifer is perhaps the extreme case of changing schools often, making the classically itinerant 'army brat' appear stationary:

*When my parents were together, they moved around about three times. And that was from, I think, Laval to Montreal to Laval. Um, my parents divorced. Actually 'cause first my mother had custody over all three of us, it was only a couple of years after that my brother decided to live with my father. So we moved around, I'm gonna estimate about seven or eight times. I went to four different schools in grade 1. I went to a different school in grade 2, different school in grade 3, different school in grade 4, so I was never in one place at the same time. I guess it could have something to do with, I don't know, like a lot of...I've never been in the same place at the same time. The house I'm living in now, I think it's the longest place I've ever been in my life and that's been like two and a half years about, almost three years, so...*

High school was almost a jungle.

*I started off by my middle school, [a named] Middle School, and then I went to [a named] High School for 2 years and that wasn't really working out for me and I ended up graduating at [a named] Alternative.*

She really liked the alternative school, and thrived on the individual attention as well as the mature way in which she was treated, and attained Cegep entrance standards as a result.

The year or two before Cegep thrust Sevag abruptly into the real world and its many stresses. His parents went through a bitter divorce, he was working 30 hours a week during Secondary V and his lifestyle and school habits were forcing him to make some decisions about the future.

**Sevag** *What other distractions, I don't know...well last semester I didn't have...I wouldn't call it much of a distraction, but it was kind of like in the way of school. Like my parents are going through a divorce and everything, so it's the battle of the parents and shit...well sorry, that slipped out. It's the battle of both sides, you know, and I'm kind of stuck in between. I have a brother that moved out and the parents, you know, everyone wants custody all of a sudden of an 18 year old. I don't get it. So that kind of was messing up my mind with the studies and this, keep up with this and plus I was working 30 hours a week. It was hard to keep up, you know, I was kind of awake 24/7, like I had to listen to a whole bunch and I couldn't keep up. So it was kind of an overflow.*

To add to this stress, the move from one high school to another (in three different languages of instruction, all in Montreal) upset his social world. When asked what he would most like to have changed about his high school experience, his response is a yearning for stability.

*...if I started going to an English high school from the beginning I think, then...and have my friends throughout high school. Instead of going to one, meeting people there, going to another one, meeting people there and then, and then finally coming to the last one and meeting all the people there, you know. I'd rather...I would change, like just going to one high school instead of three, you know, that would have been my decision, but since that didn't happen I guess that's the only thing that I would change.*

In addition, his father's citizenship makes travel to the Middle East (where his family comes from) impossible because of conflicts there and especially military draft provisions.

Jacob came from a private school in Ghana to *classe d'accueil*, then briefly attended French high school before finishing in adult education. He never felt he got a good grasp of any subject, let alone language, through that process.

*...Ya, adult section. So, but when I went there, when I started English school, I was finding difficulties. The first semester I was finding difficulties, because everything that I was studying in French school, the math is different. It's okay, but you know the writing, I find very difficult in English, especially History. Canadian History, I was finding difficult...*

The move to Cegep came when many other things were happening in Sankara's life and had a major impact on him.

*...Well, for the moment, uh, well through the experience that I'm passin' through right now, it's kinda difficult for me 'cause, uh, well I have to move from my parents house uh, I had to take an apartment and uh, that was, uh, much responsibility already and uh, I had to find a job and there was school too so, uh...Well actually I don't, I don't really find enough time to do my, my homeworks and to study, to...you know, uh, have a little bit of time to sleep...*

With all of this linguistic crossing, it is not uncommon for there to be a problem with placement in second language courses:

*...Well, the only bad thing is my French, cause I got placed in 102, which is an advanced one, and every time I go to 102 they tell me to go down to 101, and when I got down to 101, they tell me to go back up to 102. So I haven't had a French...it's like my third semester and I haven't actually been in a French yet. So it's been very like...every time I go to French they tell me to down or I go to the lower one, they tell me to go up. So I don't know what's happening. I have to go talk to a counselor about that.*

Predictably, a common peer experience is something like this:

*I always moved through different circles, even in high school. I never really stayed with the same people. I was always going from group to group to group.*

Igor had suffered a serious head injury from a gang beating:

*Well, it was...we had fights in '98, '97...there was fights, Russians against Filipinos, Latinos. That was pretty crazy.*

*...I have like a very, very short attention span, even like if I go to class, like I could be like not even tired or wide awake, I'm hearing the teacher but like, my mind is somewhere else. I'm not even like purposely doing it. I'm like that at home also. If someone's talking to me, I don't even look at the person and they're like, hello. If someone's talking to me, I'm just like, uh ha...*

*...Every teacher receives a letter saying that I might be missing classes because of my headaches. Cause usually...if I was missing classes like without my headaches, I'd do my homework. But with the headaches, I can't do it...Just flat on my back, I mean, I can't move much.*

Several students moved from one high school to another when they got into trouble, were not doing well, or simply did not like the school. More dramatically, some had to leave the parental home.

Ludmila:

*Ah, my mother and I drive each other crazy. We love each other very much, but I need a space. This past Christmas, right after, I actually ended up moving out for a month. And, I had found an apartment and we had both finally started talking and agreed that I would move out.*

### 5.3.3 Paid Work

The vast majority of the students in our sample are active in the paid work-force. Some effectively hold full-time jobs, working 25-40 hours per week, while they are full-time students. Most began to work while in high school. The types of work vary immensely, from telemarketer and clothing store salesperson to swimming pool lifeguard, professional musician and movie theatre manager. Some in the Sample48 have

deliberately decided not to work while studying, though this pattern was more remarkable among the scholarship students (see Chapter 6.1). However, most students in our sample expect to work part-time, as indeed do most students in the public college system.

Most of the jobs held have little or nothing to do with the students' field of study, and none said that their job would ever be as important as their studies, yet there were a couple of instances where the opportunity to work more, make more money, or hold more responsibility was attractive enough that it jeopardized academic performance. In at least one case, the student failed his semester because of the additional work-load he took on. These students are 17 or 18 years old when they arrive at college, and most will not finish their college program, if at all, until they are in their twenties. Coming typically from working class families, often from a single parent household, these are young adults active in the general economy. Despite the tuition-free Cegep system, most of these students do not have the option, or at least do not feel that they have the option, of studying full-time without paid employment.

Stephane was very realistic about how much he could work in a week and still attend school. Especially after his unsuccessful semester, he reduced his work to the minimum.

Stephane

*...I wanted to know how it felt like to work, instead of working around the house. It's like working with a boss and a supervisor, it's a different environment... Well for school it got in the way, cause it's like, it was after school hours and then sometimes on weekends. So it would be, you get very tired, but I keep pushing myself on... I worked during the summer, but when I learned that I was accepted to Cegep, I tried to cut the hours, cause I knew Cegep was going to be a big... a big demand, yeah.*

Summer work proved to be a valuable experience for one young woman and especially helped prepare her for Cegep.

**Manon** *...it helped me like, confidence-wise and just knowing that I could do it. Like the first week I was*

*so ready to quit, it wasn't funny. Like standing out in the heat flagging, telling cars to stop and go. And it's kind of intimidating. You're telling like a semi(tractor trailer rig) to stop, you know. Some of them don't even stop and you have to jump in front of them and tell them to stop. And like you know, cars passing and it's intimidating... you know people, driving by waving to you, you know. It's like, oh my god. So I was so ready to quit. But I found it really helped me like be more independent and like it prepared me more for this year. My mother even says she's seen me change. You know I was more like [ready to] go get what I want... So I really liked that experience.*

That first experience in the work force is often short lived and a valuable guide to what is not wanted.

**Raj** *...Telemarketing. I was selling life insurance and education savings funds... Yeah. But, um, I don't like talking to people much--on the phone, so I quit... [after] around like a month and a half.*

The work possibilities open to a young person can appear pretty pointless if not unpleasant. Why bother if it is just going to make you "miserable"?

**Tefanny** *Working in clothes... just, I'd like to avoid telemarketing as much as possible. But in like, a really desperate situation, I'll work at like IGA or something, 'cause it's right close to my house... And two of my sisters work there anyway. But it's 'cause everyone that ever works there keeps saying, "Oh, it sucks so much," and I don't want to have to be miserable there because a lot of things make me miserable. I don't like to be miserable.*

Many family situations are so tight that work is a necessity.

**Audrey** *...Like in the summer I have to work, I don't want to take part-time school, but I couldn't because I have to pay my things. My mom can't pay for my school and everything, so I have to, no choice. And if I'm in school, they want full-time or day-time people to work, so it's kind of hard to find a job for part-time...*

**Enid** *Well, yeah, cause I can't always depend on my mother and my father, depending on them to give me money, they have like their own bills to pay and stuff like that. Like, if I want it, I can't really go ask them*

*for it, if I want to go buy a pair of shoes or a pair of, like shoes or clothes or something. I can't always ask them, so. Also for school I help my mom, she paid my fees and I bought my books, so. We kind of like balance it, my dad helps also, so we all like pitch in here and there to help me.*

Sevag's family economy has changed dramatically since his parents have split.

*Yeah, there has been a fair change, I guess, but economically, well...I noticed my mother's been working double the time than she's been working six or seven months ago, with my dad...yeah, she's been working double time cause she has all these lawyer fees to pay, plus the house bills and this and that and the car. A lot of stuff to pay, or I can imagine, and I've been working just about, a little bit less, cause I thought 30 hours was way too much, maybe I'll cut it down to about 20. So I'm thinking 20 hours is good. But financially, we're not really in danger, if you want to say it. We're pretty well off, we still have a house and enough food and grandparents and...Everything's kind of cool, but there's still that tension, you know, between those two.*

Raffi manages a heavy course load as well as 20 hours of work.

*Well, I find 'cause my parents can't really afford to pay for it, like I don't know if I said it before, so I have to work and I have eight courses this semester, or seven. Like how it's supposed to be, I think it's seven, eight, eight, seven and you graduate, I wouldn't be able to work. So now what I do is I work 20 hours a week, which you're not supposed to, and I go to school for five courses. So it's about 20-20 I think. 20 hours of work and 21 hours of school. So basically it's like a full-time work.*

Note that this calculation includes no mention of hours needed to do assignments, read or prepare for tests and exams.

Not all students can readily find jobs.

**Sankara** ...*Right now I'm just thinking about my life and, you know, working and my financial situation and all that kind of stuff, you know, a lot of serious stuff...Well right now, it's a big problem. It's a big problem, I cannot move on. In this country you cannot move on without money...[job possibilities] they're really low these days, you know, this time of the year. Especially in the winter time, you can't really find a job.*

*But I'm getting through it, you know. I mean I had a lot of interviews going on, now I'm just waiting for people to call me up...*

Applying for jobs always involves an attempt to reconcile the schedule, demands and energy required for the prospective job with that demanded by their college studies. The litany of challenges is endless.

*...I applied for East Side Mario's, like just working at Pizza Express for my uncle for five years, pizzas, I and wanted to go like, just like Monday I finish at 12:00 and Friday I finish at 11:00, so there's like four days and the weekend where I can work. And I still have enough time to do homework, cause I don't work all day. We only work from 9:00 to like 6:00 and then at night I can do homework. It wasn't really gonna come into like interfere, so like that would be good to work there, but I applied and they didn't call back, so.*

*...Well, the only change this semester, I'm working. It's become a lot tougher now to manage my time with work and school. So I have less free time...but, well...less free time now, then the future's gonna pay off. So, I, like, besides studying, it's very hard to manage my time. I had a lot of trouble managing time, so that's been a very big sacrifice for me.*

*...Yeah, I'm a lifeguard at the YMCA, right down on Decarie, right in St-Laurent here. So it's not that far from school, so it's good, cause I just finish, I can walk to work or I can...actually Monday mornings I work there before I come to school. I work at 6:00 in the morning till 8:30 and then I have class at 10:00. So I wake up at 5:00, so that's really...it makes you fall asleep in Monday classes a lot, especially in history class on Monday, my first class, so I usually kind of doze off, but...it's bad. That's one of the things that's really getting to me. So next...like next semester, I'm gonna try not to work before school.*

*...Cause I go to school at 8:00 o'clock and I come home at 10:00 after work like...I go to school from let's say from 8:00 to 12:00 and after 2:00 o'clock I work till 9:30, so I come home at 10:00, my parents are worried. But besides that, like I don't break things in the house anymore. Even with my friends, and my friends rarely come over, cause I'm rarely home. Like the week, I have like two, three days off the week, and whenever I have off I usually sleep or go out and study or something like that. So, the whole parent thing is getting better, especially now that I have my own income,*

*like I don't have to rely on them. It's like mom, "do you have 20 bucks, it's like, yeah". I pay for my cell phone, I pay for my car. I bought a car also, with the money. So now I have a whole budget which I try to follow, which is really not working properly. I'm always broke, paycheque to paycheque kind of thing.*

*...Yeah, I really don't have a lot of time. As soon as I do my timesheet at work and I write down like 22 hours a week, I'm like what the hell, I've been here for like a whole day, like the entire week I've been here, like a whole day of the week, I've been at the YMCA. So it kind of comes as like a shock. And sometimes, I write 12, and I'm like, but it feels like I was here for 24, so like, time has become like a blur. I really have lost my grasp of time recently. I can't really tell anymore.*

*..Yeah, but I'm really tired in class sometimes. So it averages out. I get like five hours of sleep a night on the days before work and the other days, I get ten hours of sleep, so I have to make up hours here and there. On the weekends I sleep like 12 hours. Like I fall asleep...like Fridays I don't go out, cause Friday mornings I work, so Friday night I fall asleep at 9:00 and wake up like at 12:00 o'clock the next day.*

*...Now, I work, well I started off with like two, three. I should be at four, five days a week now, like not very many days, like now cause it's slowing down, instead of getting more for Christmas, it's slowing down for Christmas, cause people don't really like to go bowling. So I work like maybe Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, maybe sometimes a Sunday or something.*

*...Last year it did, because I was working during the week. I was working Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays and that would be, like, I'd go to school, come home, get dressed for work, go to work, and come home and sleep, so I didn't have time to do homework. But now, I think, when I'm during the weekend, it's better in a way cause I have time to do all the stuff I have to do during the week, during week...I'll do that during the week and whatever other pastimes or stuff I want to do, I'll do it over the weekend and that's when I go to work. Like before work, I'll do my favourite hobbies. I don't think this semester it's going to affect my grades, cause, as I said, I'm not working in the middle of the week now, I have five days straight which I can dedicate to school.*

*...Depending on my schedule, because I had to start college and the time it would take me to get to work...I*

*only have to work Saturdays and Sundays, but if they really need somebody then I would have to go say on Thursday night or on Friday night and work.*

Some jobs were dead easy. Luigi liked his.

*...Ya, made \$10.50/hour. Half the time I was just sitting there talking on the phone. There was nothing to do. I was working the night shift – 12:00 – 5:00 a.m., so there was no one there, there was no one supervising me, so I would do everything fast, fast and just sit down and talk on the phone.*

But Felicité's job was a nightmare for her, requiring skills that were simply not her forte.

*...Ya, so I had to recognize everything and you know pass through, take the code and everything. So I thought I was going to be able to do it, you know. But I went home and I learned it, you know, green apple, this, this, this, different kinds of apples, different kinds of pears and, you know, it was really hard, but I went and like two days later, I think, and then my boss, she was really like, not demanding, but like she was expecting me to know everything. Cause it was my first time working and you know I was kind of like shy and I didn't know what to do, but in the beginning it was okay, I liked it a little, but then after, like I had to stand up for so long and try to remember...like people, like she made a girl, like, stand behind me, like the girl who already knew what to do to like help me, so I found that was a little too hard and too stressful for me. I don't know. I really didn't like it and then she was like, oh B. you misplaced something, like you know you had to put money in an envelope after a certain amount of time to calculate how much. She was like you put it in the wrong place so we can't keep you. I was so happy, because I didn't want to stay anyways, I was going to tell her that I wanted to quit, but you know, she made it easier on you, whatever. But, I didn't notice that I made that mistake, but I don't know if she invented it or, I don't know, but I just was happy to leave.*

She did find a job she could manage.

*..It's like telemarketing, but like I'm not selling stuff, I'm just like closing people's accounts and stuff. It's a magazine company, so like I call them and tell them like they have this balance or that balance or do you want to renew it or close your account, stuff like that.*

These forays into the work-force were occasioned by a bad experience with a cellular telephone.

*No, I have this bill of like \$480.00 that I need to pay before I can get another cell phone and this is plus \$200.00 for cancelling it. I had a contract, so they charged me \$200.00 'cause I cancelled it. So I have to pay all that off, like I have to pay it before I get another cell phone, but I miss it.*

Jessica is a veteran of the paid workforce and by her second year of Cegep had developed a lucrative and comfortable niche.

*...Yep. I work one day a week but I get lots and lots of tips (laughs). I work at...a breakfast place...They have, like crazy business there. There's people that line up outside and everything. I used to be a busgirl but then I got fired and then I got rehired as a toaster. So I make toasts, all day. All day I make toasts...I get about 50 bucks tips a day.*

*...Oh, yeah. Um, I've been working here for about six months, I could say. I think I'm actually, this is one of the jobs I'm going to be keeping for a while. 'Cause I actually, I like my boss, I know him, I have friends that work with me, I love that job. Before that I was working at a telemarketing company. I was making 1000 bucks a week, which was good money, but I couldn't stand it—I couldn't stand talking on the phone all day. But it was an amazing job, like you can leave whenever you want, you can go to the bathroom, you can go smoke a cigarette, you can do whatever you want, and you're making 1000 buck a week. It was crazy, I couldn't believe it. But anyways...And before that I was working at, you know the Car Show, GM? I was working with GM and that was a pretty good job—it was 10 bucks an hour but I got fired. And before that was A&W, and before that was MacDonald's.*

*...Sure. Um, MacDonald's I quit after six months. A&W I quit after six months. GM was a really good job, it was hard to get back and forth but I was working with my boyfriend and you're not supposed to work with, you know, girlfriend and boyfriend, so they split us up and he was working for GM and I was working for SAAB, Saturn and stuff like that. So we were separated and what happened was we got into a very, very big fight in front of, well not really in front of the clients or whatever, you know the people there, but in back of a curtain, and my boss saw and he got very upset but he didn't fire us, he just said, "Don't do that*

*again." And that day, when I was leaving work, there was a big incident at the metro and I got punched in the face by one of the security guards and I broke my nose. So when I went to work the next day, they saw I had black eyes and a nose, they said, "You can't work for us anymore, you're both fired." It was very, very...yeah, it was a very serious thing and we broke up, my father kicked him out of the house...big thing. Yeah, but it's all good now (laughs).*

*...No, that's why I balanced it all out. Like, like the other jobs I had, like if I was still working at A&W or MacDonald's I wouldn't be able to do it 'cause they won't let you just work one day a week. But the job I have now, it's just, the way it works out. Like, first of all, they don't need anybody for the week 'cause it's not as busy. They only need us for the weekends and before I was working Saturday and Sunday, but I didn't enjoy it 'cause it was school all week and then work. And I didn't have any time to do anything, so me and my boss just had a little talk, and now I just work Sundays. Every Sunday I work.*

The working experience is often an object lesson in why the student wants to remain in school.

**Mickey** *The money that I could get after. I knew that if I came out of high school, with a high school degree and I went to work, I saw the people at Subway that I was working with, they were 40, making \$7.00, \$8.00 an hour. I didn't want to do that my whole life. No not at all. And it's really, for me it's the money. If I could make the same money coming out of high school, I'd do it. But now, I'm in a two year program here and then university, so. Maybe it shouldn't be focused on that, but it's really about the money. I'm trying just to get a good job later, that's all.*

There are a number of instances (as noted above) wherein the student works in a family business, sometimes in a highly responsible capacity (such as restaurant manager). The stretch between demands of the job and demands of college studies can be wrenching in these particular cases. These cases of working in family businesses can also be both lucrative and tempting as life careers, in which case further education drops down significantly in the list of priorities. The family enterprise offers a serious alternative to the academic world. Knowing that they could fall back on work in the family business may even take the

incentive out of working very hard at school. Gino has been helping in his father's shop in the textile trade since he was a small boy and knows the business very well.

**Gino** ...*The way I thought of it right now, I figured I'm going to try to go to college, do, like I said, the Building Systems, as an Engineer, if that didn't work out, maybe I'll just think of taking it over. I have fun when I go work...[would he take it over] No, right now, no. It depends, if I would be serious about taking over the company, yes. But right now, no, I want to see what school's about, you know. Like I said, I'm still young, so I have lots of time to...*

He had no real need or incentive to work anywhere else and his father made sure he had money for his everyday needs.

**Gino** ...*Work is whatever. I really don't need to work for my money, cause my dad can give me money when I need or I have to do something. So I just work to have some extra money for myself, you know, that's why...*

Responsibility to parents may take quite a different turn, as in Maria's case. She had to take care of her aging parents, who spoke neither French nor English, as well as work and try to re-start her education at 20 years of age. In the end she was unable to stay in Cegep.

**Maria** ...*Ya, it's hard, the fact that I finish school and I know I have to go to work. But yet I have to go straight to work and when I get home at 10:30 I still have homework to do for school the next day...I don't work that many hours. I work maybe 15-16 hours.*

Ludmila and her mother have some issues between them, but whether sharing an apartment with her mother or not, Ludmila needs to work. At the time of the interview below, she was working 22 hours a week and describes the 'catch 22' in which she found herself. She was extremely frustrated when a teacher did not appear to sympathize with her plight.

...*Um, well the work thing has always been an issue. I've been helping out my mom for a long time. I pay for my school, I pay for my bus pass, I pay for various things. It was just another step. I'm probably going to be moving in July anyway. I have to pay for my*

*university, so I have to save up money for that. And basically I need to work to be able to go to school. That's actually been the biggest challenge, since a lot of teachers don't understand that. They seem to be offended by the fact that I actually do need to work. As much as I can understand it that they believe that their particular class should be a priority, there should be some level of understanding that not all the students are with their parents.*

...*I suppose it's a generalization. A lot of students at Vanier have the means and don't need to be working. They work because they want to go out and have expensive clothing. In my case it's a little bit different, but I think on that level I actually had a teacher apologize, because I had to explain that to them. But without that I would have a lot of troubles getting in. When there was a Metro strike I couldn't get into class because I wouldn't have been able to work. Had I not been able to work, if I wouldn't have been able to work, I wouldn't have been able to pay for my bus pass to get to school in the first place. So it just kind of defied the entire point (both laugh). And I actually... my teacher got so offended that she hung up on me. And I had to come into school and physically sit down and talk to her, because there wasn't any other way of reasoning with her. And when I finally told the whole story, she sat down and said, look I'm sorry.*

No matter how one views the relative responsibilities here, no matter what one thinks about who should apologize to whom, Ludmila's plight is clearly one instance of a generalized problem that reaches to the core of a central complication in the lives of the Sample48. Cegep study and paid employment are juggled by these students in quite impossible ways.

#### 5.4 Individual Patterns of Accommodation

The model of the educational process which we present in this report is based on a gulf between the educational culture of the students in the system and the formal educational process presented by the institutions. As individual students encounter this educational system, they develop adaptive strategies. Some strategies yield effective academic results, others do not. Some are more satisfying to student participants in this stage of their careers, whether or not they reap scholarly success. All students make personal adaptations



to their new environment when they arrive at Cegep. As youth they are both captured by the fleeting moment, and constantly aware that their future begins now.

We have isolated four key patterns of accommodation to the educational system. A general recognition of the necessity of coming to grips with the differences between high school and college is expressed through cognitive dissonance, efficiency, persistence and the dream.

Individuals were well equipped to describe differences and challenges encountered when arriving at Cegep:

*...It was the very big change. Cause over here like, it wasn't like in high school where the teacher would like sometimes be behind your back and everything. Like over here like, for some reason I feel like a number instead of a person. Cause there's so many people, so many students and also I wasn't uh...like you're more free to do whatever you want.*

*...So in high school you had to go to class or else you get suspended, over here like you don't have to. Over here like if I had a class in the Cegep, I would seriously go and that was like...it was a big change.*

*...Now like what I'm perceiving for this semester is that there is going to be a big X on the cafeteria doors, so I won't go inside (both laugh).*

*...Pretty well, I think. In the beginning I was a little, like overwhelmed by everything. You know, so much people. Cause in high school you know everybody and everybody knows you and you talk to everybody. But here it's different, cause I don't know, you have to meet everyone, you have to go meet everyone, the people have to come and say hi to you and you don't know everybody, like you walk around and I don't know, it's just like new faces everywhere. It was all different but now, like, I'm used to it and I don't like, miss out, I don't know, being all with girls, like it doesn't bother me.*

*...Like more liberty to do like, go to class if you wanted to, do your work if you wanted to, like no structure really, like teachers telling you you're doing bad in this or... like they did, but not as much as in high school. That's really the only difference, the big difference.*

*...Adaptation...um, I had to figure out a different way of learning. Basically I was used to spreading an entire thing over a year and being tired of it and here you have less than six months to learn seven subjects properly and remember them. Um, I actually found that better than high school, but still, it was...I actually had to sit down and figure out how I was gonna do that. I had to adapt my work schedule. I had to adapt my social life. But it's definitely been worth it and you learn from that as well.*

College in English is seen by many francophones as a means to improve their abilities in English. Many students of Haitian extraction with family connections to the United States are particularly interested in this method of increasing their mobility in terms of work and further studies.

**Michel-Henri** *Yeah, I could've gone to a French school, but um, going to a French school for 11 years, well, I really wanted to get my English to get better, so I went to English school. And most of the jobs are in English...we see that there's lots, there's more, it's because of the jobs that are more open in the English market, that's why... 'Cause you have always been in French school so making the transition to English school will make you, allow you the best of both worlds so...*

It can be very difficult for a young person to learn how to ask for help or even take advantage of the available resources, even when they are struggling and are aware of additional resources.

**Homer** *...Oh, another thing...that was the resources that were there, even though I didn't use them that much, cause I did use some of the resources, when I really felt there was no other choice, I couldn't understand it by myself. Like now I'm starting to let go of my, I think it's called, pride. You know when you don't understand, when you think you can understand something and you want to try the best you can, and you don't want to go to someone else because it makes you look...So I think it was my pride that stopped me from using resources.*

Much depended on the school from which one came. Felicité found that she had sufficiently internalized the discipline required by the nuns in her private girls' school that she knew what to do to succeed. Jennifer and Moses were well

equipped by the alternative schools where they had completed high school, as was Ludmila.

*...I look at people that went to my school...I have another friend...that goes here, and the similarities are striking between all the schools, whether it's dress code, the way they talk, what they read, what they do on the weekends,...how they learn, how they interact with other people, it's just all strikingly similar. I have to say we were told to be ourselves, whereas other people were told to fit in a little bit more than our school permitted at the time, I guess.*

Ultimately, something has to click which enables the student to pay attention to the process which is being engaged. Sometimes an external warning such as a mid-term assessment can trigger the accommodation. Even when she had learned to make the extra effort through precisely this process, Shirley was reluctant to recognize the personal effort it had taken. She had learned how to take a warning seriously and do what was necessary in the last half of a semester.

**Interviewer** *...your score was at mid-term, it was four at risk?*

**Shirley** *Four failing.*

**Interviewer** *Four failing. Flat out failing...*

**Shirley** *I had that last semester too, I had failing in like, everything, and then everything just popped right back up...Mid-term is like...like I always get like, failing mid-term and then I'm like, courses change.*

**Interviewer** *Is it the course that changed or do you change? Do you think you changed?*

**Shirley** *Things get easier for me for some reason. Like I know what the teacher expects and I know what kind of assignment we have to do and I know how he marks and...*

**Interviewer** *So it takes a little while to get warmed up.*

**Shirley** *Yeah, it takes a while for that hamster to move in my head.*

### 5.4.1 Cognitive Dissonance

Since Leon Festinger coined this term in the context of members of a doomsday cult coping with a planet that carried on despite their dire predictions, cognitive dissonance has come to mean competing interpretations which co-exist within the mind-frame of a single individual. More precisely, a world view which continues despite 'active' evidence which challenges it forms the classic case of cognitive dissonance. In the context of these students' mind frame, we use cognitive dissonance to refer to a 'blithe' belief on their part that their commitment to their studies is sufficient and that they are doing okay in their courses despite the facts (of which they are, or should be, fully aware) that they are missing classes, not submitting assignments, failing tests and therefore failing their courses.

Few of the students in the sample admitted to having serious academic difficulty while it was happening. In fact, for the researchers, it was quite stunning how capable and confident the students appeared to be in their first interview. It was as though the sample we had selected for the bottom quintile had somehow proved to be a huge exception. These students are often, as we have also learned from working with the quintile over many years, 'good on their feet.' They talk a good talk and sound as though they are in control and will do well in their courses. Of course, the longitudinal evidence tells quite a different story, as noted in Ch. 2.4 above. The pattern of academic performance, with a failing overall average of about 55% over 6 semesters, for both the sample and the population in the bottom quintile, is about what one should expect based on longstanding patterns with large numbers of students in the college system.

Many of these students had learned in high school that they could afford to ignore the warning signs and still expect to 'succeed.'

*...And I don't see where in grade 11 or in grade 10, I knew that if I didn't do my work, I knew I would still get in the same program at Cegep. I for some reason, never got worried with anything. I knew that if I failed the exam, you know what, big deal.*

A surprising number of students expressed a liking for certain subjects which nonetheless gave them trouble. A favourite subject of one student, also considered his easiest, was in this case a Mathematics course which he had already failed. This contradiction could be expressed in quite a nonchalant manner.

*...I'm going to go back and do my 436 again and pass that. Because I know I can pass it easily. So Math was my favourite. It was always the easiest for me and the sciences.*

Worse yet perhaps, is the pattern whereby lower achieving students are refused entry to their program of choice and are left with very limited options if they wish to study in Cegep. They must enrol in a transition or 'bridging' program such as Explorations, or, if they can squeeze by the minimal entrance requirements, take Communications, or more commonly Social Science, even though they express no interest in the subject matter or the direction in which that program of study would take them in future. This pattern of using large general programs as 'dumping grounds' or 'holding tanks' is a liability not only for the students but also for teachers and other college personnel who so often hear students refer to their program of study as 'Social' in a disparaging tone. Many are in Social Sciences by default and it shows in their records.

**Tefanny** *...I don't like to be [in] Social, but because I don't have any of the courses that I like, want to take, because Social's not for me and I find most of it boring and like kind of irrelevant. Like I don't want to take economics and I don't want to take sociology.....in fact I dropped two of my courses on the first day because I didn't like them and I didn't like, want to have to sit through it all semester knowing that I wouldn't want to pay attention and I wouldn't want to be there and I might not show up, so I cancelled them. And so I'm just, like trying to do the best with what I have, but...*

Cognitive dissonance also characterized other attitudes, such as those toward drugs. Those in the Sample48 who admitted to the use of drugs only sometimes saw that usage as interfering with their studies. Sevag considered that marijuana, at least, had no impact on his academic success.

**Sevag** *I just think let it be, you know, if it's illegal, it's illegal, big deal, as long as I have the right to smoke in my own house without being bothered by anybody else, I'm happy, cause I don't like smoking in open territory or just being so open with it, you know. I'll just stay in my house, relax and that's it. Stay in the house and relax, that's what I think. Opens up my appetite, which is very good. I mean it does some positive things for me and sometimes I get really interested in stuff, like just out of the blue, I just like see something and if it has nothing to do with me, I'll just keep on reading it, you know. If it gets my interest, then I'll do it, I'll read it or I'll understand it. That's what, you know...I don't think of it as a burnout drug. I don't think of it as a hippie drug or a black drug. I think it's something God put on this planet for a reason. So, that's my opinion.*

Sevag had just failed his semester when he made this comment, and has since discontinued his studies.

Students in the Sample48 and others we have worked with over the years have often spent years being told that their academic capacity is significantly above their performance level. Mickey reports one such 'sermon' from review boards at Vanier.

**Mickey** *They brought me into the, where maybe ten kids in each class, they kept us there for maybe fifteen minutes and na, na, na, na, you don't have to fail, it's not a train, you're not just following, you know, you need to get your grades up to make your own path and stuff like that. Stuff I've heard of before, you know, so...and anyway, it was true what the guy was telling me, it made a lot of sense, but it just wasn't enough to wake me up, I guess, you know.*

#### 5.4.2 Efficiency

The efficiency concept described in the Readiness Factor (section 5.6) was extremely well articulated by Tefanny in her first interview. She would do enough work just to get through and no more than necessary. By the second interview her goals were becoming more fixed and a modifying corollary became apparent.

*...And it usually depends on what it is though, like with sociology, I just want to pass, so I can remain here next year, next semester and like, continue to*

*whatever. But when it comes to science and math, I want to actually do my best and get as high as possible, because I want to have the clearest understanding of it. With the other stuff, I don't really care about it. So it's like okay, well, I'll listen and I'll take notes, I'll write whatever I'm supposed to, type thing, but with everything else, I want to actually have a clearer understanding of it.*

Efficiency, as we use the word, comes from the economists and refers to the maximum result for the minimum input. However, several mature students fit the academic definition of efficient learners as they planned their lives to accomplish good marks and do everything else that had to be done. Sebastien worked hard to return to school after dropping out of high school. In order to pay his bills and attend school, he was efficient and sacrificed his social life to do it.

*...I work while I'm here, like I'm efficient when I work, but I need to have some free time because I don't have much free time...because I [work] 24 hours every week now. I cut down to that. So that's Friday night, Saturday morning and I sleep all Saturday, then I go to work from Saturday night through Sunday morning. And then Sunday either I work, but at that point I do school. That's what I have been doing in the last three weeks, because it's near the end of the semester or I just go to sleep. And then I wake up and it's Monday, so I only have Monday to Friday to do school work...with everybody else, it's like, they got their weekends, I don't have my weekends, so I have to really try to fit it in through Monday to Friday. Every day for me, I'm always up for long hours.*

**Tefanny** *School is important. Like, I know, but I don't work that hard either. I like to do as little as possible...and getting by as much as possible...At first I was strong and then I got lazy.*

Even when the motivation strikes her, she just doesn't see the point in putting out when getting by will do.

*...I still kind of feel the need to pass. Like I really feel the need to pass and like sometimes I wish I did better but, you know, then there's that laziness that takes over, so... (laughs)*

Another individual who works explains:

*...Most of them are on the weekend, but even then, I have no time. I have no time to write essays. Like if I'm...I'm always one of those last minute essay persons, like I write the night before I hand it in and it's pretty good. Cause of work I have to write it like maybe a week before and that's really...it's really, really tough for me, so some of my essays have been late this semester, cause I can't do that. Like if it's due Wednesday, I have work Tuesday night, so I can't do it, so.*

Another student with more ability than his marks reflect relates his efficiency strategy.

*...French was just too easy in an English school for me. I would just get enough to get an average grade of 75 and I was happy with that. I didn't want to be a super, you know, smart guy in French, cause the French there, it was kind of easy then from the French school.*

A popular default program at Vanier gets mention:

*[Vanier Sports and Leisure was second choice after Dawson]...I don't know how I got here, but I'm here anyway.*

Students figure out how they get maximum returns with minimum output and for some it works and for others it doesn't:

*...No. I didn't pay any attention (both laugh). School comes really easy to me. It's just those classes, like English and French. They really bug me because there's a lot of little assignments rather than like one big assignment and I don't want to be bothered with work all the time. So if there was like one big assignment in each term, I would do it, like one weekend. It wouldn't really bother me that much. When they ask me to do work every day, I'm not going to do it.*

*...Well, because of my hobbies, I don't usually get to my school work until like 12:00 in the morning, so I would always rush, rush to do it. Even now I like rush, rush, but I seem to do it better now for some reason. Like for that essay I wrote for Mr. Quinn, it took me a half hour and I got a pretty good mark.*

*...When I hear people saying I have two hours of homework to do when they're in high school at night, I couldn't believe it. I went to one of the hardest schools that I heard of in Montreal, after Brebeuf, I heard, so they said, I have two hours of homework at night.*

*I said it's impossible. If I did my half-hour, which I didn't even do at night, if I did my half hour every night, I would have had 80's easily in school.*

**Martin** *Yeah I behaved more disciplined, like toward the rules, but the homework it never really changed. I did like what I had to do.*

**Interviewer** *A sort of minimum effort there.*

**Martin** *Yeah.*

**Interviewer** *Just enough to get through?*

**Martin** *Yeah to get like okay marks... Well I'm going to do what I have to do and work as hard as I have to work to get what I need for school... out of school. Like I need to stay in school for the football team...*

Ludmila was highly critical of other students' efficiency strategies and of the teachers acceding to it.

**Ludmila** *Oh easily. Um... I actually... we had a conversation with many of the teachers actually, and a lot of them try and shock their students by displaying incredible facts and, for example, showing them films that perhaps they haven't seen before, or articles or something that they wouldn't usually have. And, I had one teacher... here, actually, that wanted to show them a French movie and some of the students started complaining that it had sub-titles, that it would take more effort*

*...that they felt like giving and she happens to be French and when I get really upset I blurt out stuff in French. I said, there's a wonderful thing called sub-titles, they learn to read, it's not that hard. And the teacher answered, in French, well with people like this, what do you expect.*

*... Yeah, and I've had more than one teacher tell me that.*

*... just non-motivated and non-... not curious and not interested in learning anything new. These people are, it's very close-minded. Not that I don't want to be generous, but I'm generalizing, of course, a fair deal but...*

The following conversation illustrates how conscious they are of their minimalist approach.

**Interviewer** *So are you at risk then? How many courses are you at risk in?*

**Shirley** *I'm passing two for sure.*

**Interviewer** *Out of?*

**Shirley** *Six. So I have to get like another two, basically out of the way.*

**Interviewer** *In order not to have to go to Review Board.*

**Shirley** *Yeah, yeah.*

There was no interest in working hard in order to improve the chances of passing all six. This student knows that she needs to pass only four courses to stay in good standing, so that's what she will try for.

#### 5.4.3 Persistence

Some of these students continue to plug away at their studies despite, in some cases, tremendous odds against their success. Three years after our first contact with them in their first semester at college, several have shown, and continue to show, tremendous tenacity.

These are young adults, now in their twenties, who remain years away from earning a DEC, yet here they are slogging on toward a dream.

*... I just like, just to find a better job. Like not just stop at the high school level. Just to go further, so that more doors are going to open for me.*

*When I got up to go to school, what did I look forward to? The end of the day.*

*... Yeah, I'm really looking forward to finishing. Like it seems so close, so like I really want to finish and like, go to university and do that and get over with this and have a real job, so yeah, I'm looking forward to that, that's why I want to finish as soon as possible. I'm taking like intensive French during the vacation, so I'll finish quicker.*

*Umm... I want to get an education (laughs). Like, my family isn't really, like, my family does help me a bit, but they're the type of people that, "If you want to drop out, go ahead," kind of, you know. Like they do say, like, you know, education's important, you need to*

*get a job, you need to do this, do that, but they let me make my own decisions, and if I told them, "I want to drop out of school," they'd tell me, "It's not right, but if it's what you want to do, go ahead." So it's all about me. And what I want to do is, I want to continue school. I like Vanier, it's helping me to be motivated in everything and I like the way it is, like my life is very busy right now. School is the number one reason and I'm actually into studying (laughs) and, you know, there's a lot of things available at Vanier to study in, to do everything, you know. So...*

*...Well, I don't know, like, I can't influence, or maybe I can, I don't know, like you have to experience it for yourself and everybody's different. Like, for me, Vanier's great, like it's helping me in so many different ways. Like, I like having school as an excuse, kind of, (laughs) you know. Like if anybody's like, "Let's go party, whatever," I'll be like, "No, I have to study," and I like that 'cause before, you know, what can I say? "No, I don't wanna party," and they're like, "So, what are you gonna do?" "Stay home." Like, you know (laughs), it's like, they understand when you say, "I have school." And it just helps me out a lot, like I like just being able to go in the library, read a book, and yes, I've fallen asleep in the library before, it's very comfortable.*

*...I know, but I wanted to get it over with and have everything ready. Like, I look at all the other people I know and they're 21, 22, 23, they haven't even done Cegep and I don't want to...you know, I want to get it done now, so. I just wanted to finish, you know...I wanted to have my DEC after two years. You know, like everybody I know, three, four, five years. I wanted to finish it in two. It's really hard.*

**Amelia** *...Well, the best thing is, just as long as you keep a positive mind, you know, cause whatever goal you want to achieve, it's best to like...no matter how long it will take, just stick to it. That's what my mother says. Even all her friends told me the same thing.*

*...Yeah. 'Cause I wanted to go to Nursing for at least...I was hoping to enter it this Fall, and just get my Math and Chemistry, whatever, but I might have to wait until next Fall and I want to start soon.*

**Manon** *Yeah, yeah, it bugs me closer and closer I get...like I had a class of Portfolio, that's like mandatory to take for Communication students to prepare you for like university, you making a portfolio to present and everything. And that was like...just got*

*me thinking, you know, more about what am I gonna do...If I keep working hard, opportunities will come, so.*

Below are excerpts from conversations with students when we asked "what do you think you did that allowed you to be a successful student?"

**Shirley** *I didn't give up.*

**Interviewer** *You didn't give up?*

**Shirley** *...I pushed myself more every semester.*

**Interviewer** *Yeah, yeah. You pushed yourself even more and more, so the intensity got higher and higher.*

**Ludmila** *...I failed a course last semester, not by choice.*

**Interviewer** *Not by choice. What happened?*

**Ludmila** *...I missed a lot of school. I had trouble catching up. My mom got really sick and I had to miss a fair deal.*

**Interviewer** *Uh huh. That was a rough semester for you.*

**Ludmila** *...It was a really rough semester. I had trouble catching up and when I did, it was...*

The word quit doesn't seem to be in many of these students' vocabulary.

#### 5.4.4 The Dream

For this generation, ideas of future are very different from those which were nurtured a generation or two ago. Ubiquitous images of famous figures in professional sports and entertainment have given some of our youth unrealistic expectations, and popular television shows have made certain professions especially glamorous. Very few of these students, if any, will become doctors, lawyers, professors, research scientists, crime scene investigators or dolphin trainers, yet such dreams are commonly held. Some are highly reluctant to give up on such desires, and their determination is described in 5.4.3 above.

Staying in school is possible if there is a dream or goal, but not knowing where you are going for sure can be complicated by temperament.

**Tefanny** *Probably, I'd like to study biology. Because what I originally wanted to do was like, train learning mammals and seals and all that... And you need science for it, but like in the beginning I didn't know exactly what I needed, so that's why I have to take all the courses now. And um, so, like there's usually kind of problems because I'm not entirely sure what I needed. At one point I was thinking it was Animal Health, which is why I didn't get signed up for physics and all that. And uh, but I figure like as long as I keep with what I want, I can keep my mind on when I want this, it's not really a problem in like showing up to school and doing the work and like staying throughout.*

For whatever reason one takes night school, it can be taken as a sign of commitment to continuing and pursuing the dream.

*...That makes sense. See, that also proves that like they have some kind of ambition in mind. Because you don't go to night school for nothing, you go... usually they go... cause day school just seems like, okay, well, you've been doing it all your life, you might as well just keep doing it. When you go at night, you actually have a reason and it's more concentrated, you're able to focus more on whatever it is you're doing. And so, night school is usually for a purpose.*

For a young man who has a weak background in Mathematics and Science, his commitment to become a personal trainer made him all the more determined to deal with this weakness head on, even if he knew it was a formidable task.

**Homer** *...To become a personal trainer you have to learn the basics of working out, the basic elements of, the compose muscle, the movements like lateral movements, horizontal movements, we had to learn those ones... And I found that extremely, extremely interesting and that's one of the reasons why I'm kind of excited to get to Sciences, cause if I know that I could apply what I learn in Sciences into my job, it would mean ten times more just... And I have future hopes of becoming a physiotherapist, but because I'm not in Sciences my road is gonna get kind of bumpy, but I'm gonna try...*

For Sankara, the dream remains to settle down into a quiet life on his own.

**Sankara** *...I mean, I got a lot of plans of life like everybody else, you know. Like every other guy. Have a nice job and trying to get into a relation with some girl... and, I don't know. Go back on my own and take an apartment back on my own. Try to get me a car some days, you know...*

He has many dreams even if the way to actualize them is not clear.

**Sankara** *...Well, actually, right now I don't really know, I gotta say, 'cause uh, there's many, many, many problems and many possibilities... I thought of being a pilot, a lawyer, computer worker, you know, in the office, and uh, there's many things, you know, thought of doin' building systems, architecture...*

In a subsequent interview and despite his academic record he still held on to the dream of a university degree and a job that would come of it.

*...Well I'm still trying to go Commerce, cause I want to get into financial stuff, you know, management...*

**Interviewer** *Weren't you the guy who was complaining about math last time we talked?*

**Sankara** *No, I don't like math, but I like a little défi, you know. So, I'm gonna try to get into it, work hard, you know, get into maths and that's it and we'll see what I could do.*

If their skills were matched by their conviction and passion the dream would be more realistic:

*...Well there is, like, my godfather, but he's not, like family. But like my cousins are doing both what I want to do, they are both are in computer sciences. That's good, like my cousin, one of them, also had trouble in math, and he got through it, it's kind of what I want to do. Just finish my math, finish my calculus and go to computer sciences. He did it and I want to do it too.*

*...Well I want to become a graphic designer. Something to do with computers. Working for Microsoft or like some game company. Making the movies like Toy Story. Something that has to do with computers and engineering, like designing. Not really hardware, more like software, programming. That would be good.*

Sometimes the opinion of other people in their lives played discouraging roles:

*...Yeah, well, I had no choice. I changed my program before I told them (his parents) and then I had no choice but to tell them, cause then they would have realized it sooner or later. My mom freaked out and my dad was like, let him do whatever he wants. And my mom's like, no, he won't make money as a teacher. That's the main thing my mom used to worry about, you won't make money as a teacher and stuff like that.*

*...I talked to her and she's like, yeah, you want to become a teacher. I also want to be a paramedic. I don't know if I mentioned that before, like last time.*

Sometimes they don't really believe in themselves until they get encouragement from others. Manon got her first taste of positive reinforcement on her artistic skills at Cegep.

*...The high. Um, I guess the first time I was in Studio Arts, the first semester, and my teacher would hold... started holding up my sketch pad to show the class how it was supposed to be done all the time, so that, you know, made me quite happy. I guess that was...that was the first time too that somebody said, oh wow, that's really good and everybody was coming up to me after class and saying, wow, you're really, really good, you should definitely do something with that after. I'm like, okay. So this is actually really happening now, you know, it was always just kind of a dream that I would go into the arts, you know, but it's like okay, it's actually a possibility now.*

Often the “sky is the limit”.

*...Yeah, Ph.D., yeah. So I thought like...I heard you should get your undergraduate at like, one school and then go somewhere else and get other views and stuff. That way I can maybe get my Master's or something here and go somewhere in Europe where they're more socialist. Somewhere where I want to go, like maybe like, down in South America or something, anyway.*

This student felt that if his friends could do it, so could he.

*...Well, I have a couple of friends that are really smart, like one goes to Vanier, that's really, really smart. Another goes to McGill now, he was at Marianopolis.*

One student keeps it very straightforward and specific.

**Amelia** *No. All I just hope for, just as soon as possible, get into the Nursing Program, that's the only thing I'm hoping to achieve.*

While others are quite vague.

**Mickey** *...No. I just know I wouldn't like to have a boss on my shoulders the whole day. I'd like to have maybe my own business, but what, I have no idea...*

*...After I, like finish at Vanier, I want to take like a year off, just work full-time, money, go to university and take something in psychology or social psychology, something around there...*

*...At this point I'm not really sure. I have an idea, but I'm not a hundred percent sure...*

Ludmila is willing to just let the dream unfold.

*My vision. Well, I hope that one day I'll be recognized. Artists make millions, but, as unlikely as that is, I don't know, I'd probably teach art at a university or college level, so I'll be in university for a long, long time.*

## 5.5 Teaching and the Classroom

The Sample48 were full of comments about what they liked and what they did not like about their Cegep courses and the manner in which they were taught. They were frequently critical, but often for different reasons.

A common complaint had to do with relevance. Learning material that you are not interested in just to pass the course can frustrate the student. Andriana sticks to her program but is still frustrated taking an obligatory course which bears no apparent relevance to her future.

*...but after that, you don't really remember much about it, usually. It's one of those things you just remember because you have to, but after that, once it's done then you know you never have to take the class again, you're not gonna remember anything.*

Audrey articulates a common frustration brought up by students about teachers whom she does not consider explain the material well enough or who fall back on forcing the student to work through the textbook on their



own. Especially in the traditionally difficult courses, the rush at the end to cover a mass of unfinished material can be frustrating for her.

*Well, I prefer when they go a little slower. Like, but some of them end up having to rush for some reason, like at the end. Either people aren't doing so well in the test, so like they have to explain stuff over and then by the time the end comes...like I think it's really a matter of the fact of time, so at the end when they're rushing, they don't have all this time and then at the end everyone wants to come to them for help, especially when they haven't come to them for help all year and then they want all the help at the end. Like it's gonna do a whole lot for them. And, uh, but sometimes they're not detailed enough in their teaching or they just want you to look at the book, and the whole reason of a teacher is to make what's in the book clearer. Like, you're supposed to have a teacher and a book so that you have different options of understanding it...*

*...but sometimes they want to go exactly by the book and you're going exactly by the book and if you're going exactly by the book and don't understand that, what am I supposed to do...?*

Tefanny was in Social Science by default and was doubly frustrated at having to take courses she didn't want with teachers who couldn't explain the subject to her satisfaction.

*...Especially with economics it's hard, cause it's not very interesting to me and the teacher is like the least helpful of all. And she asks questions that aren't understandable and then she doesn't necessarily want to help people find the answer, she just wants the answer and then she's like easily frustrated if you can't get it quickly and all that and I don't find that very good...*

Audrey, with her hearing disability, was doubly frustrated by teachers who didn't explain things clearly for her.

*...some of the teachers explained things but they didn't explain it in a good way so it was hard for me to understand what it was about, especially Math, I had a hard time with Math in high school...*

Sebastien is a motivated, strong student who feels he can pass the course regardless of the teachers' styles. He is still frustrated by teachers who talk a lot and appear disorganized.

*...Cause, the teachers don't really...I mean it has to be a really bad teacher to make me get bad marks. Cause, it's also the student, but, as long as the teacher...I don't know. I go to class, I pay attention, I...what can I say? Teachers have got to be organized. I mean, I see some teachers, they are not organized...and they do a lot of talking and sometimes it might seem like they are off track or off topic. And then, later on, they might call you on that, when it wasn't, you know, not written down anywhere or what not, you're not too sure if that's gonna be part of the class. Something you should know. You know, even, like I'm participating and stuff like that, talking, asking questions or what not, but, it's kind of hard for that, all going into your head, I mean, we talk a lot faster than we write.*

He is one of the students who likes a well structured content-oriented course where the expectations are clearly laid out.

*...Science teachers pretty much know. I mean, Science teachers are kind of impressive that way, where, they come in without a book and they, like, ok, where were we last week? All right, and then they go on and write on the board and they just write up the whole theory and then they do an example, and then they write up another theory and they do an example, and so...cause they got, I guess it's easier also to do, to teach Science, because something like Math, because there is no misleading, wondering if it's gonna be in the test. You got your course outline and it says, Ok, we gonna learn these, and the teacher comes in and he just writes it on the board, you just type the theory down and then you start doing problems...*

On the other hand, he found English a lot harder. The introduction course spent time focusing on the writing process, but the second course was much harder without that kind of structure.

*...That's why I liked the first English a lot better, because, there was a bit more teaching the answers of how to write. That's the thing about the other class, like I'm writing. I have a paper due this week, a critical essay on a book that we read, and I don't really even know where to begin. Meanwhile, in this first English, they kind of lay it out for you, where to begin. You know, kind of come up with a thesis...and then map it out, do this. Then how to build each sentence...my first English [teacher] said I tend to make things a little bit more complicated than they have to be, when I'm thinking them out. So, maybe, I don't know,*

*that's why I like to have a little bit more structure and that. Because English, I kind of look at, maybe, I might want to write things eventually later on. But it's just hard. Like I think English and writing is just organizing your thoughts.*

For Sebastien, Science was fun because he treated it like a game.

*...Well, I have fun. Actually, when you start getting Math problems, or Physics problems, you know, you're kind of happy with yourself. You know, it's like, Oh Yeah, I got it! It's a game. Let's see the next one...*

Like many other students, Sankara appreciated the teacher who was fun and treated the class with respect and took the time to explain to everyone.

*...Well, 'cause, uh, they were quite like, uh, they were, uh, their humour...they got a sense of humour and uh, well, when you're studyin' with them, they, it's like they ready to answer all your questions and go through all your problems with you.*

Thomas' weak marks out of high school and the high expectations of family and friends in the private schools and professional circles gave him a sense of inferiority and reinforced the notion that without Mathematics and Science, one was certainly inadequate.

*We liked to study, we liked to study. We'd find challenges, you know. Hey, I got a better mark than you in this class. No I got better...you know...Oh, there's always competition. Now they're better than me. They are in Pure and Applied [Science].*

A good understanding of one's learning style can make a difference for a quick learner like Sebastien, who made his program choice accordingly.

*...I have always been pretty good at school. Like I don't know, I have always felt like I was a quick learner. I know, I find that the trick to succeed in class is to know what the teacher wants. That's why I have a bit more trouble in English type programs, because writing papers, it's not cut and dry. That's why, that's also another reason why I wanted to go into Science. Because Math, I don't get homework. I mean, there is tests and so I know how to get ready for a test, I have to know that material. So, I am better suited to multiple*

*answer tests. And, I just don't like writing too much. Like I mean writing is all right, but I find it's hard. I have a hard time doing it. It takes me a long time to write papers.*

He is one who found his stride at the college level of study.

*Oh yeah, it's been great, it's a lot easier than high school. Like uh, it's a lot less stressful, except for exam period, like now. But, on the whole, it's been a lot better. The teachers are more, like, they relate to you better, because you pick the topic you want to be in, what class you want to be in, so, you're more interested and...teachers are more interested. It's not like you go to Math 'cause you have no choice to go to Math or...*

Manon is another one who blossomed once she got to Cegep, mostly because her teachers were able to acknowledge her talents.

*Yeah, like film critiques and just the way I write, I was getting a lot of feedback last year too from teachers and stuff, I was getting higher marks and people were telling me...like I had a teacher that was really encouraging me.*

Again, the personal touch makes all the difference. Raffi also appreciated a teacher who made the material relevant and who had the capacity to make the student think.

*Well, my teachers know that I like are more teachers that talk to you and they don't preach to you. Like they don't write stuff on the board and go write this down, this is on an exam. Like my politics teacher right now, he's great, cause like he talks about current events. Like he's like, in politics there's this and that, but as you see now in the world it relates to this. He talks to you, instead of like telling you, okay like, I don't know...like, I don't like it when teachers say, write this down, this is on the exam, you better memorize it and write it down. It's better when teachers tell you...like teach you stuff, instead of tell you things, like they try to relate things to real life, they try to not just pack in information, they actually tell you stuff that relates to real life. Like...but...[name of History prof.] is a really good teacher, cause he tells you, he teaches you. Like he's like, I'm not here to tell you, I'm here to teach you things. I'm here to teach you how the world works. So, I like that. I don't really like when teachers just go, okay read the book, chapter one*

*to five, there's a quiz on this and they just do that. It doesn't really work with me.*

And finding teachers whose delivery matches the preferred learning style.

*...Yeah, I pick up better when there's conversation than when there's writing. Like, when someone says something I write it down easier than when I read it. So I'm more of a talking person. If you talk to me, I'll learn better than if you don't talk to me, like if it's just like, chapter one to five, learn. I won't learn that way.*

*...Well essays actually are the best things. I prefer essays over anything else, cause essays give you more freedom, room to breathe. Instead of multiple choice or short answer questions, cause then it's right or wrong. But essays, you could prove your point, even if it's not exactly what he asked for, if you prove your point properly, you still have a chance to get it right. So if you have a good enough argument, you have a good chance of passing the assignment.*

*...Like politics, humanities, I'm always happy to go to it, cause I'm like, yeah. Like history, like it's those classes where I like, classes where I can argue basically, like argue a point of view.*

*...Like usually high school like, I'm more of a guy who, how do you say it, like I don't have to study, like if I listen in class, like during a test I would remember. Like what the teacher said and everything of what I wrote down.*

*...A little bit of both like I think is necessary, like some...a part lecture and a part like giving notes. Cause like taking notes, during the whole class, like I really don't like that, cause I can't really listen at the same time as I'm taking notes.*

Also making a match with the method of testing...

*...Tests, test systems are fine as long as they're multiple choice. It's just that when you're writing down your thoughts, it's kind of hard to think. If it's facts, I can do it.*

*...I think next time I have to write an essay in class, I'm going to ask the teacher if I can put my diskette on. Because in high school I tried that and they wouldn't let*

*us. Maybe it will be different here, because they're a lot more lenient [in Cegep].*

The astute reader will note that this is pretty much the opposite of what Sebastien was looking for.

One wag in the Sample48 gave a somewhat unflattering view of the teaching professional.

*...Like a lot of teachers I think are smart people and...like weird, but smart. Cause if you're weird you really don't get fired from being a teacher. But if you're weird and you work at a company, you get fired.*

And...

*...So, I'm confident about that one but, Psychology I failed last semester and I'm probably gonna fail it again. Cause like I had a bad teacher, I had a psycho teacher who missed so many classes and he'd let you go after half an hour, fifteen minutes, whatever, he'd let you go. And he just cancelled six, seven classes, he just cancelled. And now this teacher, she's going so, like her note-taking method is not working for me.*

The variety of likes and dislikes is testament to the variety of both interests and learning styles among these students.

*...I was always looking forward to my biology class, because I was highly interested in that.*

Students are often confused about how their marks are determined and therefore don't know how they stand in a course, and worse yet, don't know where to concentrate their efforts.

**Shirley** *...We had like some tests, but they're trying to teach isn't sinking in because they're either not putting any effort to make it interesting or they just don't care and they're blah and they really don't...how can you really...like some of my classes don't have textbooks or you just rely on the books and they don't take notes and if you take notes in the class they give you shit for not paying attention.*

*...Oh yeah, like last semester really started off slow, like I went all into mid-term without having assignments or tests or anything in my classes and even some of my teachers didn't want you to take notes. You would get caught writing when they talk and they tell you to stop, to pay attention, all eyes on the teacher...if*

*I don't like...there's no change, like on my finals and stuff, I might be in Review Board this semester.*

The pace of Cegep courses was a problem for Kim.

*Yeah, I have a different one. I thought I was going to get a good teacher, she makes you copy notes off an overhead, she'll take it off in two minutes, she's like, you got to rush, rush, rush. And she's talking while you're writing, I can't basically do...copy that and then hear her talk. So I read the book, but the tests that are in the book and compared to the ones she gives us, no help. It's like the tests, I find the test themselves are extremely hard, I don't understand them.*

Ludmila felt strongly about teachers.

*I don't think it matters. No, I think that, I don't know, your view should be adapted to each person, not the other way around. I'm sure that a lot of teachers have had to make some sacrifices in order to be where they are. It's not the easiest profession per se.*

Tefanny found that she had difficulty obtaining help even when she sought it.

*Yeah, they didn't really want to help out. And another problem is, because I was doing chemistry last semester and when...the teachers only have certain office hours and they have so many students. But then they have a chemistry resource room, but usually it's only one teacher in there and like so many kids trying to get help and it's just...they need more like helpful things.*

William thought a good teacher should also follow up on assignments given as part of their true engagement with the class.

*...Someone who gets involved in the class, actually participates and gets the kids doing stuff, checks the homework if he gives any homework. So someone who, I don't know, cares, I guess, about how well the class does and not someone who just goes in, teaches and just walks out.*

He had been so unused to working on his own in high school and had homework so rarely, that he needed confirmation after its completion.

*...Cause then you're mostly on your own for that, and half the time you don't know how to do the stuff, that's why you're there...Yeah, when I need to do it, I did it.*

*It just took a little effort though because I was used to not getting any homework from high school, so I had to put an effort to do it. But after I started doing it, it was easy, it wasn't so bad.*

Ludmila's idea of a good teacher?

*I guess motivation on the teacher's part. As long as you can see that they try and they talk to their students and they make the effort, uh, I believe that's generally enough. Just taking interest in what the students are learning per se and knowing what they're doing. I had a teacher that taught out of the book for the entire semester and it was a disappointing class. But, I guess interaction on a general level.*

When asked what changes she would make to the education system if she were given the chance, she replied:

*...I would probably increase high school standards, cause that's a lot where the dropping off happens. A lot of people I've known, a lot of good friends, kind of got lost after that. They didn't really know...they hadn't been shown what they could do, so they didn't know where to go. Probably start with that. Definitely better funding.*

*...Yeah, I think that's the hardest part of the job. High school teachers talk often at the students, not to the students.*

Shirley has had good and bad teachers.

*...I've had some really good ones, some that I really, really like and I would recommend, then I had others that I've never seen this type of attitude in my life.*

*...I have some teachers who are really mean and strict and stuff and don't...I had an English teacher last semester, who basically threw me a penny because I asked him the stupidest question of the day. Oh man, I went...*

*...Oh yeah, I went to the Dean, I really...cause he was like, we had a small class and he was like one of those sarcastic, really rude teachers and I mean I asked...like he would throw money if you got the right answer or you asked something really, a good logical question. He said I asked a stupid question, he throws me a penny, not just throws it, but he tossed like...*

This kind of flippancy is really detested by the students we interviewed. They find that it shows a total lack of respect.

*...I think I walked out of that class that day...I couldn't take him. And after that he changed, I think the Dean spoke to him and he changed. But like he was picking on other students, he like, insulted some of the other students in the class and I was freaking out. I'm like, are all these English teachers that bad, the one I had before that was really mean too, before that, and then I come to him, I'm like...this guy's an asshole, I mean this guy's not helping me. It's bad enough I failed a class, like the first time, I don't need to fail his class, I'm going to be stuck in English the whole time at Vanier. I ended up passing with like, a 60, on the dot.*

By contrast, another English teacher really got her excited.

*...But the one I had this semester, oh, I have to find more classes that she teaches. I don't know, but her English one that I took was, Stating Your Case, very debating class, like you get the whole class involved, you do debates and stuff. She's like, for some reason she likes my style of writing, because I passed every single essay, which has never happened in an English course before. I passed every single essay with 80s and then I pass all of her assignments and stuff, like I'm flying through that course with flying colours.*

What does Shirley consider makes a good teacher?

*...When they help more. When they give you office hours and they're always there, not office hours and you can't find them. Or if you try to contact them by e-mail, they always phone you back and they help give you feedback in your work, you know. When they make time out of class and they're in class, then it's good. I had teachers, two semesters ago, who didn't do any of that and I ended up getting really bad marks, I was put on the Review Board.*

For Jean-Baptiste, it was establishing a tone early and being consistent.

*...From the beginning, it starts from the beginning. You present yourself, you present the way that it works in class and because much is like the teacher is like, it's your course, it's your classroom, it's like you have control of it. The minute maybe like the kids find out this teacher is not really good, is not really this, is not*

*really that, the teacher can lose all her students for the whole year. They don't get the respect... Sometimes they say, if you don't do your homework, that happens. If you behave like this, this happens. But if the teacher sometimes comes like during the year and begins to go off the track, sometimes that's when the students don't respect them.*

And patience.

*...Some of them were supportive, not all of them. There were ones who were like, you ask some questions...sometimes there's some teachers who don't explain well. And you ask some questions and they explain you and if you didn't understand like a little bit of what he said, you ask the second time and okay, don't bother me, just try to understand by yourself.*

*...Because they think it's maybe easy for us. Some teachers they think like that. They do think like that. Like it's easy, cause I can do this, there's a lot of my students, they do it, they do it well, why not get you to do this. It doesn't mean like you're a Math teacher, you can do everything, like you know this, you always practice hard. We have to learn this, it's not because you can do it, that we couldn't. It's not because you find it easy that we're going to find that easy and we're going to succeed like well the first time.*

Some part of the miscommunication between teachers and students is simply vocabulary. In the second interview with Felicité, who intended to become a teacher and graduated from Vanier in four semesters, the interviewer asked her, after a full year of college study, what was her concentration, or what was her discipline that she was taking more courses in, she understood neither term.

**Felicité** *I have no clue. Like what do you mean?*

The words concentration and discipline in this context were not part of her vocabulary.

Subject, course, class were familiar words. For students and teachers to be on the same page, perhaps they need also to be using the same words.

## 5.6 The Readiness Factor

### Introduction: Pack Your Bags — Pier 21

Your family has sent you to the New World and like all the rest of the new immigrants, you land at Pier 21 in Halifax, where all immigrants coming to Canada by boat were processed. You have come a long way and all you have is what is in your baggage, so whatever you do not have, you will have to do without, or get it while you are here. This is the image we kept having during the interviews with the students and again when reading over the transcripts. These students have just arrived at Cegep and they will have to make do with the “baggage” they brought or pick up whatever they do not have while they are here. The less they have, the less capable, or ready they will be for the tasks ahead. Every student had a different combination of attributes that would contribute to their ultimate readiness factor and depending on what those might be, their chances of success would also be different. The sooner they would acquire those missing elements, the more quickly their chances of surviving in this ‘new world’ would improve. We watched students make do with what they had and also students who did not. We also watched students get these missing attributes and make the required changes to their profiles in order to accomplish what they set out to do, or change their minds about what it was that they first set out to do.

Witnessing these many different sets of attributes and circumstances made us realize just how complicated their lives are. We hope that laying out these attributes on this Readiness Chart will help to illustrate this as we see it. The motifs are a mixture of direct responses to our questions and grounded analysis, with an overlay of our awareness as to what is needed for academic survival.

The most noticeable thing about the transition for Stephane was the speed with which the courses pass by.

**Stephane** ...*when it came to the classrooms and the way they teach, it's different, it's faster, because in high school you have a period of ten months to learn*

*the subject, here you have like three months, it's more quick...*

Despite a stable and caring family environment, a community of longtime friends, and a culture of expectations of academic achievement, some students just are not ready for college. Their priorities lie elsewhere.

**Roman** *I've been friends with almost the same people since elementary school. I've obviously made new friends over the years and stuff like that, but my closest friends, we all live almost in the same neighbourhood, like, not even a kilometre away, you know, so we all live close to each other and we always hang out together I guess. It's not, it's not really like they took over my life, it's just, I don't know, school wasn't a big priority for me, plus I play hockey... And, uh, well I still play sports, I've been playing ever since I was younger, and like, if I had an assignment to do, I'd be like, my mom's like, "I don't think you should play hockey this year," I'm here, "Don't worry, I'll do it after hockey," then I'd be too tired to do it and I just didn't do it... Yeah, four, four nights a week. It's very competitive.*

That freedom – oh that freedom at Cegep.

*...It was okay. It was just me. I got used to being here. It wasn't different. I just became like lazy and I didn't... not that I didn't want to work hard, but just too much freedom, I guess. But it wasn't really a big transition.*

Legend for the Readiness Factor chart on the next page

The chart which follows is chiefly descriptive and meant to reveal the complexity of the complicated lives of the students in our sample and the unique character of each of them. It is not a device that allows prediction. Rather the chart provides insights into their thinking and the issues they are dealing with. The Legend begins on the page following the chart.

## Elements of the Readiness Factor

Pseudonym	Stimulated by	Dislikes	Why continue?	Orientation	Programme of choice	Reality skills	Reality work ethic	Locus of control	Help seeker	Extra curricular at school	Sacrifice	Current Status
Nasir	computers	non major courses	family project	yes	yes	no	efficiency	external	no	no	yes	Technology
Paula	social	nothing	epiphany	yes	neutral	yes	after epiphany	internal	no	no	no - yes	Grad SS E05
Dimitri	social, money	language	family pressure	no / inverse *	unknown	yes	efficiency	internal	no	sports h.s.	no	Drop out H04
Jean-Baptiste	sports	neutral	fear of street	unrealistic	unknown	no	no	external	no	no	no	Drop out H05
Gino	sports, friends	academic	family pressure	yes welder	no	yes	yes	external	no	no	no	Drop out H03
Michel-Henri	sports	neutral	fear of street	no	no	no	no	external	no	sports h.s.	no	Drop out A04
Luigi	family business	neutral	family pressure	no	no	yes	yes - doesn't try	neutral	no	no	no	Drop out A04
Sebastien	learning	English essays	clear goals	yes	yes	yes	yes	internal	no	no	yes	Drop out H04
Yip	neutral	NA	family pressure	no	no	no	no	external	yes	no	yes	Social Science
Enid	nothing	nothing	mother	no	neutral	yes	no	internal	no	NA	NA	Drop out A04
Mania	going back	nothing	family and bad jobs	yes	neutral	no	yes	internal	no	no	yes	Drop out H03
Mickey	hockey, money	school work	cog diss	no	neutral	no	efficiency	internal	no	no	no	Drop out H04
Manon	art	math science	epiphany	yes	yes	yes	yes	internal	no	no	yes	Grad Comm A04
Stephane	success, sports	nothing	family project	yes	p.o.e.	yes	yes	internal	NA	sports h.s.	yes	Grad Comm H05
Roman	social, sports	school work	family pressure	no	no	yes	efficiency	internal	no	no	no	SS Centennial
Vasilio	social	school work	family pressure	no	neutral	no	no	external	no	no	no	Drop out A03
Gloria	learning	neutral	survival	yes	yes	yes	yes	internal	NA	no	yes	technology
Tiffany	neutral	work, effort	hopeful	unrealistic	no	no	efficiency	external	no	no	no	Drop out H05
Amelia	neutral	neutral	family pressure	unrealistic	no	no	?	neutral	no	no	no	Drop out A05
Martin	sports, music	authority, parents	football	yes football	NA	yes	efficiency	external	no	sports cegep	no	Social Science
Sammi	social	neutral	family project	yes	yes	yes	yes	internal	no	no	yes	technology
Noel-Pierre	sports	racism, system	family project	unrealistic	no	no	no	external	no	sports cegep	yes	Drop out H05
William	computers	failure	family pressure	yes	no	yes	yes	internal	no	no	no	Drop out H03
Vishek	life, learning	nothing	learning, living	yes	yes	yes	yes	internal	yes	no	no	Social Grad A04
Ahmed	easy money	effort	family project	yes	yes	yes	efficiency	internal	no	no	no	Social Grad H05
Melany	neutral	neutral	family project	yes	no	yes	yes	internal	no	no	NA	Social Grad A04
Melissa	learning	marks, bs	personal growth	yes	yes	yes	yes	internal	NR	dance	yes	Grad SS No EEE
Shirley	learning, growing	bs	learning	yes	p.o.e.	yes	yes	internal	yes	no	yes	Social Science
Moses	intellectual stimulation	irrelevant learning	interests	no	yes	yes	no	external	no	no	no	Drop out H05
Jennifer	art	bureaucracy	loves it	yes	yes	yes	yes	external	yes	no	yes	Grad Comm H05
Raffi	intellectual, politics	rote memory	loves it	yes	yes	yes	yes	internal	NA	no	yes	Grad SS H05
Giorgio	music	authority, parents	force of habit	no	no	no	no	mixed	no	no	no	Drop out H03
Felicité	languages, friends	nuns	career	yes	yes	yes	efficiency	internal	NR	no	no	Grad SS A04
Veronique	most subjects	English	family pressure	no	no	no	efficiency	neutral	no	no	no	technology
Igor	technical career	non major courses	family project	yes	yes	yes	efficiency	internal	no	no	yes	Drop out H05
Sankara	hip hop, clubs	nothing	force of habit	no	no	no	no	external	no	no	no	Cont Ed
Ludmila	learning, art	other students	family, learning	yes	yes	yes	yes	internal	NR	yes	yes	Grad Comm H04
Sevrag	music, heavy metal	school	family pressure	no	NA	NA	no	external	no	no	no	Drop out A02
Brent	music, football	rote memory	music career	yes	yes	yes	efficiency	internal	no	music	yes	Music
Homer	neutral	the street	family project - epiphany	unrealistic	no -> yes	no	yes	external -> internal	no	no	yes	Health Science
Jason	NA	feminists, system	family pressure	unrealistic	no	no	no	external	no	no	no	Cont Ed
Raj	social	NA	family pressure	no	no	no	no	external	no	no	no	Cont Ed
Thomas	scouts, social	NA	family pressure	unrealistic	no	no	no	neutral	no	no	no	Cont Ed
Joseph	computers	ordinary school	career	no -> yes	no -> yes	no -> yes	no -> yes	internal	no	no	no -> yes	Comp Sci Lasalle
Briyani	extra curricular	NA	career	yes	yes	yes	yes	internal	NA	yes in h.s.	yes	technology
Didian	sports	NA	fear of street, family pressure	no	no	no	efficiency	NA	no	no	no	Grad SS H05
Jacob	NA	NA	force of habit	unrealistic	no	no	no	external	no	no	no	Drop out H03
Audrey	social, altruism	neutral	family pressure, career	yes	p.o.e.	yes	yes	internal	yes	no	yes	Social Science

## Elements of the Readiness Factor

**Epiphany** refers to a moment or event which provided a flash of insight to the student. Such a flash can lead them to turn many things around so that other elements of their readiness may change during the life of the project.

### Stimulated by:

The factors considered here may have provided intrinsic rewards. They get a certain satisfaction from what they like. This person's excitement may or may not dovetail into a program of study and may be the result of maturity, orientation or just personal quirks. They may still be stimulated by subjects or aspects of school, even though they may have been shut out by the structural offerings in their schooling.

Manon was never a high achiever in the required subjects of secondary school and her artistic talents were never recognised, but upon entering Communications at Vanier she flourished with skills that had been previously repressed.

Mickey, on the other hand, is passionate about sports and making money. He never gave Cegep a chance before dropping out because academic studies were giving him no support for his interests and continuation did not point to future possibilities for him.

Raffi just scraped through most of his high school but met a high school History teacher who turned him on to learning about politics. That provided him with a whole new motivation to stay in school and to begin to perform and study for a career in education.

### Dislikes:

Where the factors that stimulated them often ranged widely across personal interests, the 'dislikes' focused much more strongly on school-related issues.

### Why Continue:

This indicates the reasons they gave to pursue their studies into Cegep. No attempt has been

made to evaluate or assess whether or not the factor is for the right reasons, or by coincidence or other factors. A distinction has been made along the lines of the Lapierre and Loslier formulation of family project as distinct from family pressure.

Family project covers the situations where the priorities of the family are accepted by the student and his goals in school fit the overall plan. Vishek, Nasir and Stephane are all in school since the family plan foresees them being there and they are open to that goal. Joseph had a lot of family support to go to university but after a disastrous semester in the cafeteria playing cards and a semester doing Continuing Education courses, he and the family agreed on a technology program and, lacking the prerequisites to do it at Vanier, they enrolled him in a private college.

Family Pressure occurs when the parental goals for the student are more imposed and the student may have not yet devised a personal path or set of goals. Yip, Amelia and Enid all stayed in school to please their parents even though all of them were struggling with the academics and were not likely to get into the career programs or university paths that their parents had in mind.

Career goals motivated a number of them. Britany was at college specifically to become a social worker, Brent to play football and study music, and Felicité had clear plans to become a primary school teacher.

In the case of four of the Black men, a fear of ending up on the streets figured as a part of their motivation.

### Orientation:

The *Conseil supérieur d'éducation* (April 2002) in its briefing paper, "*Au collégial: L'orientation au cœur de la réussite*" has a section which is entitled "*L'orientation comme une dynamique Individu-milieu*" which explores how students with a career plan and a balance in their lives are much more likely to know how to succeed in college. The *Conseil* uses a conception of academic and professional orientation that includes the idea of an educational process centred on the



development of the personal and professional identity of the student and which is largely conditioned by the school system the student is in. They then spend much of the document examining how Quebec youth are no more or less motivated in their career orientation than any other youth and that there are many factors to consider beyond marks when judging who is and isn't motivated. Our informants in the Sample48 cover the spectrum of degrees of orientation towards college studies.

Dimitri was typical of several others who came to please the parents, be with peers and prolong the fun of school. They already knew that college education was not going to be any more fulfilling than their previous school experience and were heavily committed to other projects.

Thomas and Amelia were totally committed to careers that their families pressured them towards in the health field for which their academic aptitudes were just not matched.

Igor knew his capacities and had chosen his technology and would have done very well except for debilitating headaches resulting from a childhood head injury that have plagued him all his life.

### **Program of Choice:**

Being strongly oriented does not always guarantee students that they will get their program of choice. A "Yes" indicates that the students are in a program they chose and in the best of circumstances one would expect them to rise to the challenge and succeed.

Several of our study group were happy in school and graduated because they were in programs they wanted to be in and college studies allowed them to flourish in ways that secondary school could not accommodate. Manon and Jennifer in Communications and Raffi in Social Science are three examples of these.

A number of others, in different versions of Explorations, knew they were going through a temporary situation as they improved their marks or sought prerequisites in order to advance to programs they wanted. Their

program was not a matter of choice, but was a step towards their goal.

Social Science was the default program. This produced a number of reactions which ranged from indecision about continuing, to blind faith that whatever they are in will get them somewhere as long as they stick with it. Mickey and Noel-Pierre could not see the point after a couple of half-hearted efforts in Social Science, and left. Paula, on the other hand, was happy to be in school and worked hard to improve her academic score in Social Science because she knew that it was a university-bound path and that if she did well, she might have a better choice in university.

### **Reality - Skills:**

The informants either have the skills to succeed in the program in which they have been placed or they don't. Our estimation of this factor is based on the reading of their academic record at Cegep and their expressed goal statements or career aspirations. In addition, our connections through the daily life of the college both with the students and with others who dealt with them allowed us to deepen our insight to their abilities. A number of factors were considered when creating this category, including their basic intelligence and skills levels. This factor wasn't a major focus of the study, but became a concern as time revealed the difference between their discourse and performance. In a future study, we would probably look at this factor, especially in the second and third years, to understand how much is a question of impressing the interviewers and how much is a form of cognitive dissonance. Their school of origin and their skills level upon leaving high school partly figured in here. English and Mathematics skills are important subjects with an impact on others.

Family background would be another factor, although simply coming from a home with educated parents did not mean that the informant had a realistic appraisal of his personal skills. Nonetheless, homes where the family does not have an educational background and does not know how to support someone in the process of seeking a higher education, can seriously undermine a student's

possibilities. Here, too, we would have looked longer at the culture of praise. From a very early age, students are praised for the slightest accomplishment and told they can become whatever they want when in fact they may have limited talents in one way or another.

Yet another factor is the way the school system seems to be streamed solely towards university paths of education and students with non academic talents are still pushed towards academics if they want to succeed rather than encouraged to develop the skills they have for trades or sports or music.

A “Yes” here includes students like Enid, Gino, Dimitri and Luigi who very realistically knew they were not cut out for Cegep. They were at Cegep to please their parents and be with their friends, but knew they had weak academic skills and failed as they had expected.

Others, like Jean-Baptiste, just seemed to have no idea that their language skills were so weak that their dream of being a journalist was not possible through the route of formal schooling.

### **Reality - Work Ethic:**

This is an evaluation of how they spend their time outside of class, e.g. doing homework and assignments, and whether they go to class at all. Many of them acknowledged very quickly that they were procrastinators and would put off doing assignments until the last minute or end up not doing them at all. If an informant did not actually use this word to describe himself, we made our own judgement as to whether they fit this description. This may also be evident on a grander scale where they choose to put off decisions or actions that require immediate attention. It would be difficult to ascribe this as a characteristic of underachieving students only, since many relatively successful adults continuously get away with putting things off. The issue is why some can procrastinate and succeed and others cannot.

In addition, we came to realize that many of them had a concept of efficiency which involved getting just enough marks to stay in school without having to put more than a

minimum effort. Their concept of efficiency resembles the definition of the economist who sees it in terms of minimum effort for maximum results rather than the Ministry of Education’s definition of success through pass rates. From all appearances, the minimum effort to get through Cegep is often somewhat greater than in high school. However, to read this as a reason for their being underachievers would be a mis-evaluation of their actual skills level, since even some of the graduates categorised themselves as efficient and procrastinators. This factor may have a range of impacts for different personalities and skill levels.

Martin, the footballer, became an expert at getting 60%. He needed to pass four or five courses each semester to remain eligible to play and he did exactly that and no more.

Veronique has weak base skills and puts only minimal effort into her school and has yet to graduate from a two year program.

Felicité represents this efficiency from a successful side. She had excellent training from the nuns at a private school and the skills they imparted to her allowed her to graduate from Cegep without having to put any more than a minimum effort. However, in her case, the minimum included committing the time without stressing herself.

Tefanny defined the concept of efficiency very articulately in her first interview and still hasn’t finished her program.

Homer has to work hard for all the marks he gets and has struggled to get into Science, so the term “efficiency” is not applicable, but at every meeting he would claim to have time management problems and that he was a procrastinator.

### **Locus of Control:**

It seemed useful to know where the students ascribed blame for their circumstances, whether they assume responsibility themselves (internal) or they project it on to someone else (external). The ubiquitous ‘they’ was very articulately illustrated by one of the professionals.

*...that's their impression, it's the system, you know, they screwed me over, I didn't delete my course on the 20<sup>th</sup> of September and now I have a failing grade, I didn't know... But kids don't think, they come after the deadline and then "they've screwed me over". But I see that often.*

Giorgio, Dimitri and Gino all wanted to be somewhere else and accepted blame for their failing grades as their own. They and several others were extremely realistic about where their problems lay and knew that college wasn't for them.

Tefanny had the system figured out and the problems she faced were all imposed on her from outside, despite her clear understanding and articulation of the concept of efficiency.

Jennifer blamed 'them' at every interview even though she managed to graduate in 6 semesters. Someone gave her bad information, and misguided her through registration so her progress was delayed.

At his first interview, Homer illustrated the classic type of external blame – poverty, inadequate support, obesity – but before the second interview he had experienced his career epiphany and thereafter acknowledged his role in the problems he had had getting through the courses he needed. On the surface, his career choice would appear unrealistic, but with considerable sacrifice and persistence he has passed his prerequisites and is currently in Health Science.

### **Help Seeker:**

We asked the students whether they tried to get help from the resources available at Vanier and recommended this to many of them. Based on our 'deep organic connections' we were often able to determine whether they were seeking help or not. This interface beyond the classroom with teachers and institutional resource people is often regarded as a sign of commitment to the academic process and thus a measure of a desire to improve their performance. Significantly, only four or five of the informants proved to be consistent help seekers, while another three clearly were capable without any need for support.

A very noticeable trend was to get help from boyfriends or girlfriends. It seemed through our interviews that a number of our male informants were friends with relatively strong women who helped them with their difficult subjects.

An interesting threesome of women who became friends outside of the SLHP in their first semester represented the extremes in a continuum of help seekers.

Audrey has a hearing disability and has struggled all her life to keep up with her classmates. She quickly identified the appropriate resources in The Learning Centre or Student Services who could support her needs through the full period of her studies and used them fully.

Her friend, Tefanny, is the opposite end. In addition to being an articulate expert of the efficiency factor, she never sought out resources at Vanier to improve her performance in any of the subjects she took.

In the middle sits Shirley, who has always struggled at school, but who appears too timid to approach any resource person. Rather, she spends many hours in the Learning Centre and she is often in discussion with her friends about school work.

Yip had great difficulties with high school history and his family had to pay tutors to help him pass the provincial history exam in order to enter Cegep. But once at Vanier, we could not find a record of his having called on the free resources that were available, and is still attending in Social Science with numerous failures along the way.

Vishek, on the other hand, who was deeply committed to the family project and getting a university degree, went to the resource centres and graduated in 5 semesters.

### **Extra curricular activities at school:**

We asked the informants about their involvement in extra curricular activities at school to establish to what degree they are engaged with the school. Studies of high

achievers indicate that this sort of participation in school life outside the classroom is linked to successful academics. The majority of our sample have never been involved in such activities whether at high school or Cegep. Sports was the prime motivator for male involvement.

Martin was essentially coming to Cegep in order to play football. He was a practitioner of the efficiency principle, doing the minimum required to remain eligible to play each subsequent season.

Tefanny was typical of many who fled the building as soon as class obligations were over. Long breaks where she was obliged to wait between classes actually distressed her.

Britany had been a very involved student during her high school years but family and personal issues caused her to withdraw and focus purely on her academics in a demanding technology program.

Brent had the best of both worlds. He was an accomplished football player and a dedicated guitarist in the Music program. In both functions he was acquiring skills and involved outside the classroom in Vanier's student life.

### **Sacrifice:**

Over the various interviews, we were able to talk with the students about the different things they do with their time and who they spend time with, in order to ascertain what their priorities are. We did not see this factor in other literature and yet it seemed important to us as a measure of whether they valued the education enough to pay a price for it in some form or other. This allowed us to ascertain whether they were giving up anything in order to accomplish what was needed to succeed at school. It was hard to determine based on the first interview, but over time, through observation, interviews and subsequent interactions with them, it became clear if they were giving up something or not. The high rate of drop outs in this quintile attests to their lack of commitment and therefore where their priorities lie.

Sankara, Jacob, Giorgio, Dimitri and others just weren't able to adjust their lives to accommodate the sacrifices required.

A stellar example of sacrifice was Sebastien, an older student, overcoming a tough family situation and a disastrous early educational career, who started attending secondary school adult education while working full time. To begin full time Cegep, he had to reduce his work and reconcile with his father to be able to get the support he needed as a high achieving science student. In the end his career was cut short in the third semester by forces he could not control and we lost contact thereafter.

Paula started school with many of the bad habits of high school. A healthy relationship and a Review Board after her first semester led to an epiphany and she forcefully wrought the changes needed to get to a career that she discovered she wanted. She consciously rejected a circle of old friends who spent their time playing cards in the cafeteria and began to apply the discipline needed for successful studies.

Brent sacrificed his social life to single-mindedly pursue his twin passions of football and music. He refused to let anything distract him from excelling in both. Finally he even made a decision to drop football so he could dedicate even more time and energy to his music.

Joseph gave up his social life and fun times in the cafeteria after a disastrous first semester. He couldn't get into the technology of his choice at Vanier because of his weak academics, but he and the family agreed to pay the fees required to go to a private college so he could make a new start.

### **5.7 The Educational Culture of the Sample48**

Underachieving students who arrive at Cegep do so with an acquired educational culture from high school which does not adequately equip them for successful academic performance in Cegep.

At a psychological level, they have a deeply imbedded notion that to continue in education is to make them better people, that they will become somebody of greater significance with a post-secondary education. Though the specific implications of this commitment may elude them, the most straightforward statement of this motivation revolves around getting a better job and making more money. Self-worth seems to be invested in attaining higher education even in the absence of a specific goal related to a career and is sometimes driven by a 'fear of the street.'

At some point in their educational path and possibly more than once, a crisis may challenge their performance and further progress until it is resolved. Each student has a different set of parameters that will be at play in this demise. Some will resolve or deal with the crisis better than others; some will never get over it. We call this 'the wall.'

The social life of this cohort is held pivotally in its educational environment. The content of the courses is secondary to the people in the courses and the fun they can have with these people. They gravitated toward 'their own kind' but also chose social networks and formed social groups around common interests. However, not all the social interactions are positive. The boys, for example, are typically disadvantaged by the lack of a dynamic pedagogy centred on experience. This social focal point is not being serviced, nor are the teachers using it to their advantage enough to suit the students.

The family structure is important, though it may be either supportive or destructive. Family is important to these students for many different reasons. The struggle with the transition to adulthood lies primarily in their willingness or reluctance to assume adult responsibilities, and many of these growing pains occur in the family arena.

Some students are putting off the ramifications of an intimate relationship either because they have witnessed the unfortunate experience of others, because of their own ill-fated attempts at relationships, or because they are preoccupied with other time-consuming

and often self-absorbed pursuits. Some are in relationships that are not only positive for their personal satisfaction but supportive toward attaining their academic goals.

The structure of their lives has its chaotic and oppressive elements. Many have been repeatedly dislocated, attending different schools in different locations and languages. Many mother tongues are third language while the students have been educated in French or English. Language issues slow the educational process and also frustrate and discourage. Racism is alive and well. They live in a sea of fluctuating family structures and changing financial status. The structure of their formal education exacts unavoidable impositions and demands conformity at levels beyond their sense of reasonableness; they must toe the line.

These students are active members of the general economy. Paid work is a fact of life beginning in high school. It represents independence and provides an introduction to adult roles in the real world, and for some, survival.

Patterns of accommodation represent what the students are willing to do in order to get through the educational process with minimal effort, even though they may demonstrate little if any insight into exactly what compromises they are making that affect their chances of fulfilling their existing or eventual dreams and ambitions that require higher education. Unfortunately, their perfection of minimum input for maximum return enables these students to bypass the pedagogical practices or exercises that could hone the skills and discipline which might enhance their capacity to exceed at the Cegep level, which they would so much need in order to fulfill their dream.

The lack of relevance in course content stands out throughout high school and Cegep. In addition, there were many comments about teachers who were unwilling to explain or who gave limited explanations of the course material. Many students were stuck in programs taking courses unrelated to where they eventually aspired to be, and often did not even have the vocabulary to explain what that was. It takes time to catch on to college speak.

Often the preferred learning style was ill matched to the teaching and testing style. Students continue to look for teachers who are available, fun, patient, know their material, take control of the class, are respectful and provide positive feedback on work well done, while not being harsh when work was inferior.

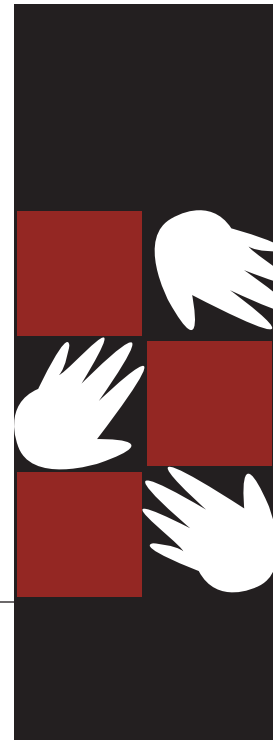
In spite of all their shortcomings, these students are determined and relentless in facing the daunting odds of their success in an unfriendly and alien system. Unfortunately, many of these students are in over their heads and will not realize it without trying repeatedly to perform up to standard in Cegep studies. They have issues with the reality which they deny. These students arrive at Cegep with different levels of readiness to cope with college studies. Much of their medium-term success in those studies, and often, in their life trajectory depends on their degree of readiness. In the eye of the storm, these are the students stating: “Storm? What storm?”



# Chapter Six

## The System: The Other Side of the Gulf

### 6



### 6.1 Focus Groups with Scholarship Students

The key subject of this report is weaker students. It may not be self-evident to readers why one would include interviews with strong students in such a report. Ethnographic studies of delinquent gangs need not give equal time to police officers, each village study does not need to have a counterpart urban study to counterbalance it, women do not need to be understood through men, etc. Nonetheless, we felt that it would help to identify some dynamics of weak scholastic performance if we also examined the patterns of those who succeeded in the same realm. Technically speaking, the high-performing students do not serve as a control group as we have not consciously introduced an experimental variable with the bottom quintile, nor may the two groups align in other relevant respects.

What we have found with the successful students does not necessarily apply, in some convoluted fashion, to the experience of the weak students. As one teacher casually remarked, these students could learn in a paper bag - they hardly even need teachers in order to succeed in their studies. But in the world of post-secondary education the most common metaphor for success is based on surviving in the water. In this context, these successful students are

swimmers. Too many in the bottom quintile sink.

To represent our high-achieving students, we decided to select several who in their first semester accepted Vanier College scholarships based on strong high school grades. We talked to these students in focus groups, led by two members of the research team in each case. The more striking comments from each of the four focus groups follow.

#### 6.1.1 Psychological factors

The challenges they face are no different nor are they any fewer for these students. However, their response reflects a sense of purpose and discipline absent among the large majority of the Sample48.

*...you can block out the distractions and you can just listen to the teacher or go to the front of the class or go talk to her after class or something like that."*

Some of them were efficient about getting assignments done early, while another spoke for a number of them about the advantages of procrastinating until the last minute.

*It goes better when you're at the last minute because of the stress, like I try to do an essay like one week in advance. It won't work because my mind is not stimulating, it's not stressed enough to say, okay you have*



*to think about a story. And by putting it at the last minute, then you have that stress to like motivate you, you have no choice, you know. You're right at the last minute. I find for me it works better. I know it's not okay, and I know that I should be more organized in that sense of starting and reading. But I just find that for me, for some reason, it works better just because there's that stress and you know, it just seems that it's better for some reason.*

Most of them never had to confront the sort of insurmountable hurdles that we have come to refer to as the 'wall' facing many of the Sample48. Two of the students even had a reverse wall.

*Well, when I was young I didn't really like school but it was up until grade 10 'cause at that point we can choose, like science course and don't take history and things like that and it was then that I find out that school can be fun 'cause I can take the course that I like and now it's even more fun 'cause we, we stay in the field that we like.*

*Well, me, it always depended on the environment because, when I was in first grade, I totally hated school because, the teachers, the students, the way it worked, so, but I was good, I always was good but I, basically when you're in elementary school you don't study. It just turned out I was good at learning...*

This group tends to be very competitive. Some consciously thrive on the competition, other individuals are not comfortable with it and prefer to perform according to internalized personal standards, but that performance has placed them in a group where high personal standards are the norm and a competitive edge under-rides much of their school life, whether they want it to or not. Most want to be the best or they want to learn as much as they can.

*Since I was a kid, I always wanted to be the best.*

*That's what drives me too sometimes. I see somebody gets a better mark than me. I'm like, next time I'll kick his ass. (everyone laughs). I don't like being like second or third. I would always be like, you got a better mark, you're going down."*

*Competition. I'd have to say we were six students who really cared at some point and we'd just compete with each other. And it motivates you in a way, because*

*this time you got better than all of them. You don't understand, it's the best feeling...*

*I got better than you, I got...we used to...in each term, the school used to give us a merit, like for the number one student in mathematics, they give him like a kind of certificate...Once you get to that, everyone knows yeah, that guy is smart, this and that.*

Not all of them appreciated the competitive spirit of their fellow high achievers.

*I wasn't just ready for the competition that I would get. I haven't imagined that it would be like this. So, that was the hard part.*

Most of these students admitted that Mathematics and Science come easily to them. Interestingly, several of those who liked Mathematics and science had been bored in elementary school but were pleasantly relieved when they arrived at high school and finally had subjects that they could really 'sink their teeth into.'

*Yah, also because in science it's like for example, the answer is one answer. There's not many answers to it. But like in writing, everyone has his own idea. So that's why I'd rather science, because it's one answer. This one or not.*

These abilities in the academic sphere allowed them to exercise a certain efficiency in the application of their energies to their studies, without sacrificing grades. Working to deadline, maximising their classroom time and retaining confidence in their abilities were all strategies for these high-level students.

*For the subjects that were easy for me I didn't have to study, so it came naturally...*

*I study not a lot but a reasonable time every week and I've always done well at school.*

As with the Sample48, this group has dreams. These scholarship students, however, have a more realistic chance to fulfill those dreams. They have these abilities which appear to come easily, they face their challenges in positive and constructive ways, they investigate the specific strategies needed to accomplish their goals and

monitor their own progress, while in addition the parental support is strong...

*Since I was three I really wanted to become a pilot. My dad is a pilot.*

*Now knowing how the world has become, - more computers, more technology, there's really less inventions to make and if someone has to make a new invention, it's going to be hard and it's going to be teamwork, it's not going to be a lone effort. So I more switched to human sciences, biology, and human biology. I'm more interested in that than in like some kind of medicine and stuff like that. With all the cancers and those stuff, they didn't find a way to treat them yet. Maybe I can help find some ways to treat them.*

*I'm doing Health Science to have all my doors open and if some day I find something that I love, I'm going to follow it, even though I see some people that go into some careers because of the money you gain and I don't see it that way. I see it as I'm going to do something that I love, since it's something that I'm going to do all my life.*

Most students have something extracurricular that motivates them and has a positive influence on their academic performance; they live active, full, busy lives, juggling many different kinds of activities with ease even to the point of complaining.

*I don't have much time, actually. And there's not much time for me to hang out—I'll either be doing homework or at work or at karate or at school... That's my life, pretty tedious.*

They tend to be very focussed on their academic goals and any extra-curricular activities they may enjoy come second to studies.

*For me it's more like there's three separate things: studies, tennis, and there's the pastimes. My tennis is like the studies, it's important for me and it's like the second thing on my schedule and after that, if I have time, I waste it on the computer.*

*Well, playing sports, like I find that with my friends down the street always playing hockey every day and I find that it pretty much takes you away from your studies. You have a time to like actually relax and actually do what... I don't know, there's like studies and there's sports, that for me is like two different things,*

*so I'm totally different in school. When I play sports it's like more competition. But I find I also like... it's fun really, it takes you away from all the seriousness at school and you can go out and you can really have some fun. Even if it's a little bit of competition, it doesn't hurt you or anything.*

*I play for Vanier too. Football, since eleven or twelve now. Twelve, I must have been. Football's complicated if you don't understand it, but once you do. Yeah, honestly it's not just because people see it as just being a physical game, but really not... very mental. And it's also... you actually learn a lot of things in football. You learn a lot of life lessons and stuff like that.*

*Yeah, I'm a hockey player. I don't play anymore, well, I play like once in two weeks in garage leagues. But because, I left out hockey because it took so much time in my life, you know. In high school I played hockey and all my schedule, I had to plan all my schedule in advance because I played like, four times a week and it took a lot of time, you know, we went to tournaments around the province and now, now that I work and I go to Cegep I had to leave hockey.*

### 6.1.2 Social / Cultural Factors

The group of high achievers shared with the Sample48 the same interest in going to school for the social interaction and articulated very clearly how they deal with those friends.

*And you can work at home, so school is people, it's to interact at school. That's why you have to go to school. That's the whole point.*

*That's what I like about public school, it's like the world... no pre-selections, no filtering, it's everyone and you just go through it, you know.*

*Seeing your friends mostly. Like in hindsight, for me, I found there were a lot of classes that were kind of useless. As opposed to here now, like here now, I say I go to school for the classes.*

*For me what attracted me the most was probably seeing my friends on a daily basis.*

*There's no particular reason. I've always had friends—this must be one reason. People who have no friends or no social life I think have more difficulty at school.*

*Friends, seeing my friends, you know, like just being with my friends was so much fun, like I had a lot of my*

*friends in my class, I was in like in the science classes so we were basically one group of people in those for the most part and I was always with my friends and it was just a blast.*

By comparison with the Sample48, the high achieving students of the focus groups are like the other side of the coin. While many in the sample are primarily motivated on a day to day basis by the social life that school provides, the priority of the high achievers is to do as well as they can in their subjects of study. Their friends are important to them, but they select their friends based on their interests and priorities. When forced to choose between friends and studies, studies will always win.

*...my friends, they had good grades, like I hang around with them. And also like, I didn't want to get in the low group of people. You know you get into something, you want to succeed.*

*I don't think that friends really influence, to some extent it does but also how you choose your friends. If you know some people are together often and they're not good at school, for example, it's because they knew each other and found out that they had some common points, one of them being, 'we don't care about school,' you know, basically. There's also this tendency for young people to be part of gangs or movements or whatever, so of course the biggest proportion of people in school are maybe not that good or don't care about school. So, people will have a tendency to join these social groups, if I can say so. And, but it all depends if you're a leader or a follower or a loner, whatever.*

Girlfriends and boyfriends are looked upon in a similar light as any other friends when it comes to studies. Some have had relationships which have interfered with their studies, so the relationship had to go, others have successfully used a romantic relationship to keep their studies on track: by choosing a similarly motivated partner, or by simply having that particular corner of their life organized so that they do not have to waste time socializing.

*...I love it, I feel very happy when someone tells me, oh you did a good job or you're doing good or that someone really cares for me and appreciates what I do...Now, it's...I help her and she helps me.*

*No, I don't have a boyfriend right now but I had one. It was a disaster (General laughter). We didn't have the same view of studying 'cause when I want to study but he doesn't like school. He was so lazy so he always told me that, "Oh, don't study, you're smart enough," so it was kind of a disaster.*

*For me to have a girlfriend was a positive influence, 'cause I was more concentrated going out with her, instead of going out with my friends.*

*Time consuming, very time consuming. (Everyone laughs). It's cool, but too much time.*

*He said the right thing. It takes a lot of time. It doesn't make you lose your time, if you know how to control your time. You know you have limits. It's good, but I don't know sometimes...I never had like a serious girlfriend... we were kids I mean. It takes a lot of time and sometimes it just makes you forget about your school.*

*And if she asked me, if I'd say no, she would understand. But the friends would be like, come on, come on, you can do it, let's go.*

*Anyways, I think like since the semester started, like we're going out more seriously and I think, although I speak with him a lot on the phone and we go out during the week, it kind of motivates me in doing my work on time, for some reason for the first time.*

They were able to shed considerable insight on the differences between boys and girls when it comes to academic achievement.

*What I think, like when it comes to boys, I don't know maybe it's just my group, but like it could also be a fact that let's say, it started off with them trying and they're not doing as well, but I think boys, the patience runs out very fast and then it's turned out into...it's almost funny, cause oh my God, like I failed."*

*I think why girls are doing better because girls maybe are more, not smart, more calm. You won't find a girl wasting her time or something...*

*Here everyone's...you could ask...probably 60% of the population in a school of boys have at least tried weed once. I mean everyone does that...Not 100%, and I believe that boys handle drugs more than girls. I'm not too sure, but that's what I think. And that's*

*probably one of the reasons you see more dropouts. Once it gets the habit you're screwed, basically.*

*Especially with boys that become so impatient or discouraged easily that if they start doing badly and the teacher doesn't help, it will just get worse and continue to Cegep and university.*

*I think guys are more practical. Do something they can see. Mechanics or something you can build.*

*...it's kind of like another motivation for us to continue and be better than the guys.*

*...here in Quebec, it's really like we're...there's like an affirmation of woman and being proud to be a woman and to be able to expose and know that we're worth something. And that's why in universities you see more women continuing education...*

*I find that girls are pushed more to do well. Guys are a bit more laid back, "Don't worry, you're a late bloomer, you'll develop," whatever. But the girls the parents are always pushing, pushing, pushing, especially with the advent of feminism and stuff, it kind of helps a bit and pushing girls to do well.....You don't want to end up being a secretary. You want to end up being the other person on the other side of the desk, you know.*

*I say it, um, like, they're focussing more on the girls, and the guys at the same time, they're saying, "You know, you've been doing well for so long, you know, you'll do just fine, anyway," they're not encouraging as much—they're focussing more on one side.*

*...girls were almost not allowed to go to university so people couldn't see if girls were good at school or not. Maybe they've always been better but if we didn't allow them to go to school they couldn't show it.*

*...guys in general are not as motivated as girls...*

Students have often reported that, at least in mainstream public high school programs, it is not 'cool' to be seen to be a high-achieving or hard-working student. The drive to conform by which even competent students try not to stand out due to their superior academic performance could even be bound up in a form of bullying. Although the student quoted below is a woman, this phenomenon appears to affect boys more commonly.

*Yeah, a lot of people used to tease me and bother me in class and it didn't exactly help out my self-esteem, so, I didn't like, you know, I didn't do as well. I didn't feel like, you know every time I do good on something people would jeer at me and say, "Uh, she's so smart," and you know, point me out and I didn't really want to be noticed, so I'd you know, make sure, I'd try to make myself average and not stand out so much.*

*It's pretty much the same thing with me, like when you went into Secondary I, you didn't know anyone and they just pretty much looked at you and they would call you like a "nerd" or a "geek", this and that. They would pretty much judge you by the way you looked. But then as the time went on, the years went on, you pretty much know everyone, who you're going to graduate with, so it wasn't as bad and with my group of friends, no one really said anything to us or anything, but I know that there are some individuals who would say something behind our backs. I would not start anything with them. I was okay, fine with them, in my head it's like you know they are a bunch of...yah.*

*What did I not enjoy? Uh, I got harassed a lot, actually. It doesn't mean that they depress me because they're attacking me, I just don't like them. I'm going to go to school, I'm going to be surrounded by morons. That's what I think.*

Parents and family play a huge role in the lives of the high achiever. For the most part, these students recognize and appreciate the support from their parents and family. They have had ample opportunity to witness the effects of careless parental guidance or a family of origin which does not demand or expect high academic performance.

*Well freedom, you know, when you're doing good, your parents, they leave you alone, and you do what you want. Like if you're smart, you know what to do. You get that independence. Because parents, they push you, because they don't think you're capable of doing it yourself. They just direct you, give you direction, they know it and just leave you alone.*

*My parents help me a lot. Especially if there are going to be stages where they could really...understand. They could really teach me...They really like, helped me a lot...especially in math, my mom's getting mad...she used to help me a lot. Like I used to go to school and say to the teacher, what we have to do in class, like and before he explains it, I used to explain it and I think*

*that that part was what made me what I am now, because I got the extra help at home and I got to really understand what to do at a really young age. That's why.*

*Same thing my dad helped me a lot, a lot in my life. I was really, really zero in my marks. He just helped me, keep on begging me, every night staying like five hours non-stop math and despite all the slaps that I got and everything, he screamed at me and got mad at me, sometimes really made me feel bad. Now I really know what was the result, it's really good. My mom helps me a lot in French, but the biggest part was from my father. I mean, it was really good. He sometimes helped me in physics, but the biggest part was in math.*

*I guess my mother influenced me a lot, just because, aside from her work, she did lots of volunteer work and everything. Like she was like the scout president...and, you know, like now she's like the chief for the elections and everything. And I always saw her moving, you know. Always doing something...And I think that pushed me to be like always putting my bar really high for some reason. But yeah, that influenced me a lot and the fact that I had two younger brothers and a younger sister and like we always had this like closely family aspect and everything. And so, my mom, especially, my dad's like a trucker so he's always gone. But, you know, we always helped each other out and everything. And I think my mom, she influenced especially my marks, just because you know, I would get 85 and she would say something like, just that, you could have achieved better and at one point I got a really nice mark, I think in history or something, like 95. And then, she's like, you could have got 99, you know.*

If this is not the case, influence and pressure is applied through the 'family project'.

*My parents make sacrifices, they're not in their country, not with their families or friends. I have to show that they did the right thing.*

*I wanna do really well, why, for myself but also so my parents are proud of me.*

*We moved into a house, cause we're five in the family, so that each one gets his own room, each one has his own desk, each one has his own light over the desk. And like after school my mom would be like, everyone to his room, go study. But she wouldn't tell me that anymore, cause I'm in Cegep. I told her like, I know when to study, but she forces the little kids now, do your*

*homework. Or sometimes she leaves them after school, cause there's a program, the teachers they help them do their homework and stuff, so she picks them up at 6:00 o'clock.*

The strong student can become part of the family pressure on the weaker student in a family.

*I have my brother, we are three boys in the family. My middle brother, I don't know what's wrong with him, he hates school, he hates everything. I always try to encourage him to study, "you know what are you going to end up doing, opening a depanneur or something. Wake up! What you're doing. Wake up! What you're here for, because I mean we came for our education here, we came for our future, like wake up, just try to study"...and day by day he realizes what's the reality.*

The social pressure to succeed in school comes from the larger society in some countries and the attitudes bred elsewhere carry over after immigration to Montreal.

*Besides, we were living in Lebanon, school was something important. It was really something important there. I mean, if a guy drops school in Lebanon it's a shame for his parents. I mean, all the neighbourhood will talk about it. Oh you know this guy in the neighbourhood, we saw him drop from school and oh, what a shame. Look at his father, he's the biggest doctor in the country, he's the biggest engineer, his son is dropping school. When you start to grow, I arrived at a stage where, "Dad can I do this?"*

Many have very educated parents that serve as role models.

*Obsessed, I know. ...there's doctors in the family and I want to do medicine, but it's just that...and to get into Med. School, it's really hard. So you always feel that pressure...*

*My parents are both chemists. My mom has a Ph.D. in chemistry and they were top of their group all the time and now they're working in chemistry in drug companies, so they're really, really happy about it. And like that's what pushed me to Health Sciences, cause like, they're both scientists. Me too, I like Health Sciences also and they're both no good in like English or writing essays, or whatever, because they're both logic and I'm logic too.*

*My dad was in engineering in petrol and my mother she studied Ecology. All my uncles are either engineers, architects or doctors, so that just makes...I just want to be like them. I don't want to just don't have a degree at the end of...engineering and all that. I just want to be like them.*

The parents of others are more working class and their children strive to fulfill their parents' dreams.

*My dad is a carpenter and worked like on a farm all his childhood and my mom was a waitress. So they are not very educated, but they are like intelligent. It's not because they are not educated that they are not smart. So they couldn't have the chance to go to school as they wanted, so they, not pressure, they encouraged me to continue in my studies and that's why I'm here. I do that for them, in a sense, cause, I don't know, I want them to be proud of me.*

*I know none of them have a university degree. I know my dad he didn't finish high school, though he wanted to do a technic...he's electric technician, something like that. It's something that he loves and so I think that's something that I got from my parents.*

### 6.1.3 Structural Factors

They come from other countries, change schools, curricula and language of instruction, yet still manage to maintain their focus on academics. Such dislocation may be profound – one case in a focus group where the father of the family has continued to work for several years at a full-time job half way around the world. Still, they found ways to adapt and find a niche.

*One of the things I found hard to compare to high school, was all the travelling I had to do. Being stuck in the traffic in the morning. Also the fact that it's English. I've always been to French schools. Also I felt the cultural shock. It was hard the first week.*

*In my high school there was only one black people and I never went to school with Asian or Indian or other cultural people. It was all Quebecers from the same town and that's it.*

*Coming from high school to here, then, what sticks to you most is the fact that it's a really mixed population*

*and you didn't have any other problems getting in or getting organized or...*

*Yeah, and everything. It just made me switch. Like I don't know...I don't feel happy as I did there. Well now it's getting better, it improved. But the first couple of years here, I didn't know anyone. We just came here, we had no relatives, knew no one. We just came for my sister's university. And yeah, it was very tough, but now the thing that helped me the most was playing hockey. I didn't even know what the game was, didn't even know how to skate, didn't even know nothing... Yeah, I feel like sports really helped me.*

The views were very split about work. Some avoided work altogether because it is a distraction and another group viewed it as essential in order to learn life skills.

*And then you have the stereotype of cars in this country. I know this kid who dropped school three times,[so he could work] like he came back and dropped and came back, just for a stupid Honda and it's ugly on top of that. No, I mean, cars are a huge obsession here, I don't understand. The amount of time...*

*When you work half a day and you come back home and you want to study, you wasted all your energy working. I experienced it. I mean, I worked, not during college, during Christmas break, I mean, I wasn't even able to sit and watch t.v., I was watching t.v. and sleep. How could a guy that works and comes back home and study. It's impossible.*

*Okay, at the age of 15 I used to go to school full-time and also work full-time. And I still...my grades were amazing.*

*I agree. It's a good experience. Especially if it's a job... even working at MacDonald's...I find it motivates you more to get a really good education sometimes. You realize that you don't want to be there for 30 or 40 years. But it's the experience too, it gives you experience in life. You'll go somewhere and you'll know something, not just about school or sports, like you can relate and you get some money too and it's starting like your own independence in a way...*

*But overworking yeah, that could happen too.*

### 6.1.4 Individual Patterns of Accommodation

This group was very articulate in describing the transition to Cegep. The big difference from the Sample48 is that these students immediately recognized that the newfound freedoms of Cegep were bound up with responsibilities and acted upon this recognition. On the whole the transition was an expected and often welcome challenge.

*I think in high school the teachers really cared about you, but here's it's like you're on your own, they don't care if you do well or you don't do. If you need help you have to go and ask them, but they don't really push you to do well."*

*But here, I mean, if you miss something, you've...done and it's hard to recover where you missed.*

*...like I tried every exercise teachers could give me and on the lunch time, I could go and see my teachers and I did this, because I didn't want to fail a course or anything like that. So for some subjects it was more easy, for others I had to work more hard.*

*I don't, oh my goodness, no. Uh, the biggest thing I found was really hard from the change between high school and Cegep was I had suddenly all this freedom, I mean, teachers didn't care, they didn't badger me like they did in high school, you know, "Do your work, you know you should do it, you want to do well," and it's so, I found it to be very impersonal, like, instead of teachers that wanted to know me, it's like, oh, you know what, we'll take the class as one big unit and teach it all and you know, if part of it breaks off, oh well. I felt a little like, that's why when I started, when I go to a classroom the first thing I do is I try to familiarize myself with the teacher so the teacher knows who I am and you know, I don't care. Just make any comment every once in awhile because I don't like being a nobody.*

*'Cause when you're going to Cegep you choose your program actually. You know what you're going to learn because that's what you want to learn. High school, the only options I had was like, secondary V, three options—dance, history, three options like that.*

These students are persistent and determined. They understood that their natural abilities alone were not enough and that they needed

to crank up their effort if they expected to accomplish the marks they liked to get.

*I have to study more than...I didn't study that much in high school and in elementary but now I have to study. I can say that I spend, you know, they say that if you have five hours a day you should spend five hours studying but I don't think I spend that much time...*

*...now that I work and I go to Cegep I had to leave hockey.*

It took us off guard when a couple of them had this to say when asked what they would have done differently if they were to go back and do high school again.

*I'd go back and fool around more. (Everyone laughs). I thought high school was serious, but it's really nothing compared to what we do now, so I mean I would have more fun. I'd do the same thing in class. I'd like get teachers pissed off and I'd just want to make it a hard time on them so that now I could get serious.*

*That's it...and you tell everyone...like my friends in high school now, I tell them, you fool around now, you should like, have fun, 'cause those are like the best times you're ever going to have. Like now, it's just all serious work and this.*

### 6.1.5 Teaching and the classroom

In the high school classroom, where there is turmoil and the teacher has lost control of the whole group, those who would rather socialize than pay attention to the lesson will drift to the back of the room to 'carry on,' chatting, goofing off, even playing cards, while these high performing students will be found at the front, engaged in the academic conversation.

*Oh if there's distractions and you really do want to learn, you know, it won't get to you, that's the thing. You can't take it like, if you're not learning, and you're going to blame the others because of that, you can't do that.*

They watched their peers not do as well as they did, struggle, get frustrated and even drop out. They even witnessed the frustration of the teachers, some identifying as much with the teachers as with their fellow students.

*You can't teach someone that's not willing to learn. So I think it's too bad for them. You know, you can try, but if they don't want to learn, it's their decision. They are not mature enough to know that learning is going to pay off, but yeah, I understand teachers sometimes when they get fed up, I understand and if you don't see a light at the end of the tunnel, how do you want to go on, if there's no goal. It's not that the information wasn't available. If they're not listening, you can't do anything, especially in a big school. You can't, case by case, you can't do that.*

*A lot of people were careless about their studies, but there was still this group that really cared, especially in the science courses.*

They saw how the teachers were talking to the students at the front of the class and writing off the students at the back.

*...but they were focusing only on people who listened. The teachers, they would have no control over the students and they were maniacs pretty much.*

*They only care about the ones who are listening. The ones that are playing around in class they just forget about them and they fail.*

*And also, what I find is some teachers classify students as like, either lost cases and they're just discouraged with the students, so they don't try to continue helping him, even though they know it won't give anything to continue and help them...there's lots of teachers...everywhere that say, well there's nothing to do with that student anymore, so what the hell, I'm going to focus on the students that do understand, that do want to succeed and leave that student just hanging there and...*

Even the high achievers can find problems with the system. They will come to the defence of their counterparts at the other end of the scale. They were also keen observers of teaching practices.

*I just felt that everybody should get a chance, even though it's not maybe evident that...I don't know that's my perception of life, everybody should get a chance, even though they don't look as if they want to, and teachers should fulfill their duty, in other words, of teaching to help like the students understand.*

*I had a physics teacher who had hair everywhere and red hair, like curly, oh, she was nice. She was nice, but no*

*plan in teaching. Just like giving information. She'd start somewhere, goes everywhere and then goes back to point B. Sometimes she'd start saying stories...*

Some of them were also bored with school.

*Something that I didn't like? Let's say we are a class of 30 and the teacher explains something and you understood right away, but there's like 20 people who don't understand and perhaps they'll never understand, but you have to follow the class and spend like three weeks on the same subject and just fall asleep. That's what I didn't like.*

And like their peers in the Sample48, they too had a teacher that made a big impression on them.

*...it was really just one teacher that influenced me, it was my Math teacher, cause he used to work with me a lot and I really, really do like Math and that's what I want to be when I'm older. So he really modeled how now I take courses seriously and this and that.*

They appreciated a good supportive learning community.

*I went to private high school. I liked it a lot. I agree with what you said, like everybody knew each other. It was bigger, like we were 1,000 I think, but there was still this feeling of everybody knew each other and you could rely on the teacher if you had problems. I liked this feeling of being encadré, like being surrounded by your teachers.*

### 6.1.6 Summary of Findings: Focus Groups

Scholarship students face many of the same challenges as do the students in the Sample48, but in most respects their response is very different. To begin with, their personal lives were well organized. These students could tell us within seconds of being asked on the telephone whether they were available for a meeting. Without reminding, they showed up punctually. Focus groups were conducted as scheduled and most participants were off to another scheduled event; their lives were full. This skill of operating according to a planned agenda separated these scholarship students from many in the Sample48.



Yet these students still admitted to procrastination, some had encountered rough patches in their studies and some needed to work hard in their studies in order to maintain their standing. Most were quite ambitious and expected to complete at least a university education; many fully intended to become professionals. They had every intention of becoming somebody, though none of them put it in those terms.

Social life was also very important for these students. They were usually very active in extra-curricular activities, some had a boyfriend or girlfriend, and their friends tended to be other high performers. They were quite aware of the 'geek' or 'nerd' appellation, and some had had to deal with that. Perhaps most importantly, they were often extremely competitive and realized that in order to succeed, they needed to make sacrifices, sometimes of time-consuming activities, or if necessary, of friends.

Some of them worked in part-time jobs, but if so they controlled the time and commitment so that the job did not interfere with study. They had supportive parents, to the extent that one family even bought a house with the children's study needs in mind. Their competitiveness entered sibling relationships, which drove them to even higher levels of performance. Contrary to the stereotype, these students did not all come from privileged or even highly educated families, though of course some did.

Some of these students apparently had active, able minds which operated with easy success in the educational system at the high school level, and chose an academic path because they did well in school and liked it. These high performing students had little to say about individual patterns of accommodation as their standards and educational world view were essentially consonant with the system in which they were succeeding. They want to be challenged in their learning, so had little patience for environments where they could not do so unimpeded, yet were critical of high school teachers who allowed the chaos of a classroom to excuse them from working with all the students.

They had lots to say, and in their own fashion were quite capable of also contributing to the chaos of such classes. These students were less likely to cause trouble in a classroom as existential symptom than as planned interventions to combat boredom. If they could go back to high school, they would have more fun.

## 6.2 Teachers: What They Say

Four years ago the project proposal which initiated this work painted the classroom as the site of student / institutional interface where underachieving students, in particular, confronted the gulf between themselves and the "system." Consequently, it seemed important to get the teachers' version of what the sample group were telling us about their school experiences. We assumed that having all been highly successful students themselves, that most teachers would find it difficult, if not impossible, to deal with students who, for whatever reason, had failed to join the academic conversation with the same commitment as themselves. We were impressed that this proved to be true in only a couple of the 15 interviews we undertook with teachers. By and large, the teachers we spoke with were extremely committed to the students and to their vocation as educators and very sympathetic to the life dilemmas facing the students. If there was a gulf, it was often between them and the institution which did not recognise or support their efforts or even complicated their task with burdensome bureaucratic demands.

What follows is grounded in what we learned from our teacher respondents and reported as much as possible in the same format as the student analysis in Chapter 5 by reviewing Psychological issues, then Social/Cultural, Structural and Accommodation. However, since this led to situations of us looking through the microscope as researchers at them looking through the microscope as teachers, the lines between these categories were somewhat harder to maintain. Needless to say, the perspective presented to us focussed on the major concerns of the teachers, which were classroom behaviour, student readiness,

pedagogical approaches, grading and ministerial objectives. As a consequence, it is also normal, but nonetheless instructive, to note that several areas of major concern to the young people we interviewed were largely, if not totally absent, from the responses of our colleagues. As professionals, they are experienced speakers and the interviews with them provided extremely rich treasure troves of insights which can only be partially reported, given the limits of the study and space in the overall report.

The sample of teachers was drawn from the full-time teachers in the winter semester of 2002. This already meant that a large number of the teachers who had yet to attain this status were excluded. On the list there were two teachers in pre-retirement mode, and one on sick leave. Since then several from the original pool have also retired. Consequently, the majority of the teachers we met were senior members of the staff. Only three could be considered “new” teachers and none of them were young and straight out of university.

The different points of view of the teachers meant that they had a variety of perspectives on the cultural universe of the students, all of which were distinct from that which we derived from the students themselves. The teacher respondents often referred to the students in aggregate terms and many statements painted the whole student population with the same brush. When students were recognised individually it was often because of unique circumstances: hard work, help seeking, tragic story, brilliance, bothersomeness.

As the number of teachers is relatively small and those from individual fields might be rather easily identified, we are presenting the comments by teachers as a composite, organized by general theme. If it appears as though teachers do not speak as one voice, the reader might be reminded that departmental meetings are notorious affairs in which the wording of one inconsequential motion may preoccupy the consciousness of otherwise sentient beings for an entire afternoon. Working with teachers is never boring, if only because they rarely agree.

The interviews began with the question “How have the students changed?” The responses were varied and ranged from the time-worn classic,

*...They are not as good as they used to be...*

to:

*...I look at it this way. It's not a question that they're not as good, they're different and that's it, that's all it is. And so, I feel that I'm learning about them in the same way that they have things to learn as well. But I'm learning about them...*

Many of the teachers reflected on the way the students have changed and yet not acknowledged that they themselves have changed in significant ways:

*...Yeah, so I enjoyed those days, cause I had a lot of interaction, friendly interaction with students. And in those days if I had parties, I would invite students and stuff. Now I wouldn't even think of giving a party for Vanier students...I mean at my house or anything...*

Other teachers indicate very clearly that they have changed at least in terms of enthusiasm.

*I'm not as keen as 20 years ago, to be honest.*

### 6.2.1 Psychological Factors

The teachers, quite naturally, view the students through the filter of their own experience as former students who successfully achieved within the system and through the lens of their vocation as educators. Without exception they view education as the route to self-fulfilment, status, and recognition in society. Given that this belief set underpins their understanding of the wider world, it is somewhat surprising that they almost without exception did not recognise how the same belief set deeply permeated the thinking of the majority of students, including the underachievers, who have for the most part accepted that education is the road to success. Moreover, there was very little acknowledgement that it takes considerable persistence to stay in school despite one setback after another. Only one teacher admitted to having been an academic

underachiever and assessed his colleagues from that perspective.

*...Most of the teachers at Vanier are "A" students and are high achievers, you know. They don't know what adversity is, a lot of them.*

At least one teacher warned against using one's own life experience as a point of validation for everyone else's life:

*...I think it's a real mistake for the teachers to think that they've got it made and the kids don't...*

Nonetheless the majority of teachers bring to bear a vision based on their own education and teaching experience. The question then was how to react with this understanding. Quite naturally, they find the majority of students weak and underachieving, and yet, on the whole there was considerable sympathy for the underdog student. Several teachers had crafted their teaching to accommodate the everyday struggles of students overcoming their backgrounds, skill sets and the process of growing up.

*...Well, I think that because our field is education, like I've been modifying all the way, all the way along, my teaching methods all the way along, to kind of suit the kind of students that we have. And so, and I think from one year to the next and even from one semester to the next, it's different, you know, based on what the students are doing...*

They were also conscious of the transition from high school to Cegep being a special hurdle for many students. In many cases it was defined as becoming more responsible for their actions.

*...there's a real step that has to be taken from high school to Cegep, which for me is just part of the growing process. They have to understand that as they progress in education, they have to assume more responsibility and this is what I think we try to do here in hopefully not too violent a way, but sort of ease them into this idea, you know, that you really have to start accepting the consequences for your decisions. I think it's very important that they do that...*

In interview after interview, the teacher respondents made clear that many of the

students arrive from high school unprepared for the next step in their education. The common feeling was that they need more pre-College time in the real world or in extended high school to prepare for higher education.

*...I mean, there's no point in teaching this material, there really isn't. I mean, what they really need is high school extended by another ten years or something, I think...*

According to one teacher, young people take longer to figure out where they are going.

*...because the society is going that way, so apparently we don't need, it seems, or actually, maybe, they would start going into this later in life. For example, it used to be you're 18 you finished high school you can do a lot of things. Now you are 28, now you can start going to university...*

This is also reflected in how the students may change programs several times before getting on with their education.

*...And after you've been through either two or three, changing programs, quitting school, getting some jobs, coming back to university and then just start over and learning...*

Several of the teachers indicated that as the student population changes, so we need to change to deal with the new complexities.

*...But to me it's not the question of lowering, it's a question of realistically what they can gather meaningful learning from. And I don't think that the capacity has gone down for that. I think it's more teachers. It's the attitude of teachers that has to change. It's not the attitudes of students...*

*...But if you're really going to be in a partnership with some of the students, let go of some of that control, don't lower the standard, still set the limits, it's still your class, you're still accountable for what happens in there, but at the same time, be a little more open minded about how you can do this. Because these kids, they're used to being listened to a lot more than we did when we were young, so you're going to have to change your methods a little bit. But also not feeling threatened by that...*

It may be a form of cognitive dissonance or it may be that students truly believe there is a connection between success in life and academic performance. Even among the students who dropped out of school, this was a common refrain, despite it being a rather ineffective motivator to academic success for someone who has never joined the academic conversation and often negatively reflected itself in behaviour, attitude and performance appropriate for the required success. Nonetheless, it was not clear that any of the teacher respondents acknowledged the students' commitment to their education nor that the third time effort to pass the English introduction course or a Mathematics prerequisite demonstrated a degree of persistence and determination to get through this stage in their life.

Ironically three English teachers portrayed the different sides of what we have come to call the 'Wall' - that point in time, or a course or an event which is the opposite of 'epiphany'. Introductory English is traditionally a make or break course for many first semester students. It has a very high failure rate and could be viewed as part of the elimination system which forces a number of weaker students out of school. The English Department has made great efforts to support the students in this first course with the largest percentage of the first year courses now dedicated to remedial reading and writing and English Second Language.

One of them recognised how easy it was to push the underachieving student out of the system.

*I had the feeling some of them were very marginal, they could be lost really, it doesn't take much to break that little thread...oh I could put my finger on three or four, just in this group, that I think that's why they were able to make it through. Maybe had I been more stringent as some of my colleagues, they would have been gone, those kids. I can tell you two girls right off the bat that hit me in this situation...who could be lost, gone...*

And one was very cognisant of the fact that what happens to the weaker students creates a spiral of underachievement with devastating consequences for a student's self-esteem and morale.

*...it's classic, they walk in they sit at the back. And I can tell you it's the students at the back every time, are the ones who fail. And I tell students this, I say you know, you're self-selecting, what I'd like to do is have as many of you sit in the front as possible if you have concentration problems. But I think we spend a lot of time humiliating those students in the back row and that's why they sit there. And that's why they don't buy the books, so that they're not confronted with what they cannot do...They don't get involved.*

On the one hand, there is a tremendous desire to give the students a break and work to keep them in school, even if it means a certain gamble. Even this compassion is based on the teacher's belief set that success in school and success in life is a black and white relationship - do well in school or end up working at McDonald's for life.

*...And, so I sometimes feel you have to make that judgment call and I've never been the kind of person that you know, 10 minutes and you're out or, you know...but I think that you also have to realize sometimes you have to take the high road and that it's a gamble. And I'm very happy at the end, when I see the gamble pays off and they, you know...because I think that like this, they're moving on, they're trying, they're in the game and as long as a person is in the game, you can potentially reach them and something good...you know, they can find something in themselves that's going to move them forward. But if you kind of dismiss them off the bat, if you're a little too rigid...you also have to realize not everyone is coming with the same particular sort of background. I know that, especially in a group like this, they perhaps have not had the same advantages and they don't have the same stability in their life. So if you're going to be a little too rigid at certain points, they're gone, you lose them...And then they're doomed to flip hamburgers at what, \$6.00 an hour...*

Another English teacher saw it as part of the rite of passage where the students finally confront something they have to work for and overcome their aversions to:

*...Now, the other thing we can say and I'm not totally against this, is that okay they have to get through the 101 to get their DEC, so it may take them two or three tries, but eventually they'll get through. As I say, this may seem like a pedagogical heresy, but I do think that there is a whole step that they have to make*

*between their attitude, whether it comes from high school or elsewhere and the more adult attitude that just causes them to say at some point, okay I may not find this easy, I may not like it, but I have to do it and so...*

Yet another saw it very clearly as getting into the game or dropping out.

*I think I'm known, in terms of grammar and homework to be very, very strict and inflexible. If something is due, it's due. If you miss it, you miss it. So you missed your bus, that happens, you get a 0, but what I usually do is say, you have five assignments worth 5% for a certain component of the mark; I'll give you six assignments, drop the lowest mark or the one you miss. But I don't take things in late as a rule. I don't listen to excuses and stories and a lot of students aren't used to that, because in high school the teachers will run after students to get work, so that they can pass these students. I won't do that. I keep telling them they're in college. So I lose a lot of students because of that tough attitude... And the fact is that I don't think we should be spending a lot of time on those students... not academically. Those students need life skills lessons.*

In an effort to articulate more clearly what the wall could represent for different students, we developed the concept of the Readiness Factor and defined a number of variables of which it is comprised which characterise the likelihood of students to move forward in their educational careers. Time and again, the teachers reiterated the idea that the students were not ready for Cegep or that they lacked the skills or the attitudes to continue with further studies. This idea was so prevalent that rather than considering this lack of preparation as an intrinsic personal weakness, this must be regarded as structural.

There was the oft-repeated mantra that they have short attention spans and cannot focus on a task in any sustained manner.

*...Yeab, like they say, like when I'm teaching at 4:00, like around 5:00 o'clock everyone says, well I think it's time to go sir, it's 5:00 o'clock already. And I'm like, well this class lasts until normally 5:30, but I just say 5:15, cause I found that trying to make classes go more than an hour and quarter it's just beating your, yeab...so I say, well we still have like 15 minutes to go and, you know, towards the end, like around 5:10,*

*it's like people are starting to pack up and they're just ready to go.*

*...Again, I don't think the skills are there as much now as they were then. Attentive span seems to me something that really has gone down as well. When I look even now, you can see them maybe after 45-50 minutes, some of them are gone, you know, they're not there...*

Several teachers felt that skills were a general issue.

*...Yes, definitely in the writing skills, reading skills, attention skills, probably about any skill you can mention, you can see that there has been deterioration...*

Help seeking is generally considered to be a sign of individual recognition that there is a problem to be solved and of having the maturity to act upon this recognition. Time and again the teachers felt frustrated about the students' lack of initiative even when they made themselves readily available.

*The other kids, the vast majority, will only come to seek help when they think they're failing and even then some of them don't bother coming. But in this class, to take an example the 101-31 that I have this semester, I've had I guess probably half a dozen of those kids come up and ask me questions about their marks, or what they have to do to pass. Now, but that's not really help, okay. That's important, make that distinction, for them I think it's asking for help. I think for a lot of them they will...it's interesting the phrase they'll use, they'll come up to me and say, what can I do to pass?*

*...I do give availability because I feel it's a moral obligation and this way they can't use that as an excuse, and but they don't seek help that much.*

While many present their help as a purely take-it-or-leave-it offer, others recognise the reluctance and drag the weaker students and push them and pull them.

*...I don't find enough of them as help-seekers, quite frankly. That's an interesting issue. I have to grab them, as it were...you know, they're showing up on my radar screen, because of course I see that, and I want to give them the push, the pull, you know, sometimes put some dynamite under their rear-ends, pardon the expression.*

One teacher saw the reluctance to seek help as a problem needing a pedagogical approach to overcome.

*...Anyway, I think that part of the problem is, is still being able to get students comfortable enough in a learning situation to be able to say, I have no idea what this means. Somebody explain to me what this means. Students still do the same thing where, especially in the chalk and talk kind of, more courses, you know. They'll sit there, they'll take the notes of what seems to be important and then they'll go home and they'll try to figure it out. They don't come to your office hours or they ask some of the other students or something like that...*

The low achieving student has made a practice of scraping through with the bare minimum and is satisfied with getting just enough to stay in the ball game. One teacher spoke of how the students have come to expect so little from themselves. He saw it as his job to help them overcome these low expectations.

*...They're weaker and their expectations of themselves is less. Their feeling of being able to do things is less and they're not expecting much of themselves. I mean this most that I get, I normally get the first-year students. I keep telling them, do not underestimate yourself...*

The frustration is in trying to reach out for students in the subject area, but not having the tools to deal with them.

*...The most frustrating for me is knowing that I cannot deal [with] the problems [they] bring to the classroom, because they're not simply lacking of knowledge...These are structural problems because these students haven't got the basic skills, haven't got the self-confidence to be in college yet...*

When others saw this weakness they saw no point in retaining failures.

*...Cause a lot of it is simply...I think if there's too much molly-coddling, it just gets worse and that if the person maybe has failed a number of courses, they should be told automatically,...okay you're out of here for a semester...*

An English teacher framed the behaviour issues of weaker students as one way they cover their weakness.

*...I would say the boys are often extroverted, playing out their idiot persona. If I can't win it academically, I'm going to win it as a moron...*

The idea of needing time out of school to mature or gain skills came up with a number of teachers.

*...I wish we could fix it, but those students shouldn't be in 101. They should be doing a year of pre-college life skills.*

### 6.2.2 Social/Cultural Factors

Nowhere was the gulf between students and the institution more obvious than in the teachers' perceptions of the social world that forms such a large part of a young person's ambient universe. The teachers were not asked to address these issues directly, but by induction a set of attitudes and expectations were gleaned from the interviews. While many responses were offered as sweeping generalisations in the context of questions equally sweeping in scope, it is nonetheless remarkable that the responses came so freely as answers. These are clearly issues of concern that have been much reflected upon. This gulf was at its largest in the apparent lack of understanding of the peer and family context within which the majority of students function.

In a study done by a consortium of high schools and Cegeps, (Waller et al., 1990) newly accepted students revealed that one major concern about leaving the security of their comfortable high school surroundings and entering the unfamiliar halls of Cegep was how they would make friends as fast as possible. Time and again the students reinforced what we already knew of the centrality of their social life. The students were remarkable for their consistency - friends were such a central part of their adolescent years that many only found value in school as a place where they met their peers.

*And I find a lot of students, especially when they first come to Cegep, they're not adjusting yet to a higher*

*workload, they're still pretending they're in high school and their priorities seem to be social life and everything.*

Apart from this single comment, no teacher ever brought up this aspect of the student reality. Consequently none indicated that it was a factor that could be taken advantage of in the classroom and exploited as a pedagogical tool. Through experience on the registration floor, we have all seen the struggle many students went through to gather at least one friend into each course they took. There is no reason to discount the existence of this phenomenon since the advent of telephone registration. Rather, there were numerous observations about the back of the class sitters and the annoying people who chat during the lecture, without recognising that at least some of this kind of behaviour is part of a continuum and a central focus of a young person's life.

A similar gulf exists with the lack of recognition that family is a very high priority in the lives of the students. Many students attributed their being in school either to the commitment to the family project of common socio-economic advancement or to family pressure from parents and siblings. This was rarely mentioned by the teachers.

Instead, family was often cast in a negative light. One teacher spoke of the negative consequences of over-inflated self-esteem promoted by a life-time of family praise:

*...They bring it in, "Sir can I have a 90."*

*I go, "Okay why would you get a 90 for this piece of work, Billy?"*

*"Well, I finished it."*

*...What's remarkable is they think...their mom's been telling them all their lives how wonderful they are, and so you've got to reach to them...*

As a classic put down of larger male students whom he classes as annoying, the same teacher threatens to report them to their mothers. He respects their rights and never does that but he feels the students know they are being reprimanded for being childish when he uses that line.

Very often the Sample48 spoke of their brothers or sisters being the ones to pressure them to be in school and both in the interviews and from our personal insights, we have learned that the older sibling and even sometimes the younger, is an invaluable proofreader of essays, or tutor in Mathematics and Science.

One teacher reflected upon a *deus ex machina* intervention of a parent as an example of positive parental pressure:

*... "I remember I had a woman last semester, she wasn't doing that well and her mother got all concerned and called up, she was a modified science student, and called up and talked about her and everything and I just had the feeling well like...you know, initially she was wearing a nose ring and had coloured hair and then her mother got on her case and then all of a sudden the hair became normal and the nose ring disappeared and her grades went up a little bit. But I wasn't sure if that's what she really wanted or whether it was like, well the pressure from my mom is becoming great enough that I guess I'll just succumb to that.*

All the student respondents had views on the boyfriend /girlfriend relationship. These ranged from a distraction in their social life to major motivators. Sometimes they kept the student in school. Other times they helped with proofreading written work or tutored Mathematics and Science. Occasionally from Review Board hearings we learned of the tremendous emotional upset caused by difficulties with partners. It is another example of the gulf between students and the institution that not one teacher at any point brought up the role of a male or female partner.

Perusing through the teacher interviews, a picture emerges of the teachers' perspective on the student cultural universe. There are some fairly common patterns.

Entitlement and rights:

*So that kind of entitlement, sort of, kind of entitlement where they feel that they have many rights and if you... Because these kids they're used to being listened to a lot more than we did when we were young,*

Demanding and ready to challenge the grade:

*...Some students are more aggressive. If I use the word more aggressive, in marks or hungry in marks and they will come and argue and they say that, why not this, why not that.*

Less respect for listening:

*...And I guess...you know people talk about this short attention span and everything and I definitely see that...*

Less respect for the teachers:

*...when I'm teaching I find that the students have intrinsically a lot less respect for just listening to the teacher than I felt I did when I was a student...*

*...whereas when I started, students were much more likely to be respectful in class and not be late. A lot more people are late now...*

Efficiency and short cuts:

*...I'm saying that the student has this view of shortcuts in everything, in life in general, they want instant result. Like you say, go and study history or learn history and they say, what for, when am I going to use that. ...they're in science program, they don't think because they're not in chemistry as specialization, there's not need for that. And it goes for the physics, the same thing. Math, the same thing, I'm not in math. And therefore it's like nothing, so what is science...*

*...you give them homework, you say this is the homework on what we're doing now, really the best thing for you to do would be to do this homework like this weekend, because we're going to have a quiz on it next week. But then a lot of them are like, well, you know, I'm not ready to worry about chemistry yet so I'll bomb a couple of quizzes, it's not really going to matter.*

Less interest in extra work:

*...And pretty much everybody agrees that about five or six years ago, I mean that's not an exact kind of time frame, but that students started to be a lot more demanding, a lot less...they took less initiative in terms of doing homework, doing extra work, going the extra distance. Some of the things that we talk about in terms of that, is that, for example, they would not spell check or make an effort to have proper spelling inside their papers and things like that. And then they would*

*say, well sir you didn't tell us that we were supposed to...spelling counted, you know, kind of thing...*

*...I have one student, particular bright, and he wants to go home...like he comes to the lab, he's bright, he finishes the work in let's say half an hour, and the next guy he finishes in three hours, but he wants to go right after half an hour. I say okay, where is it that you want to go? I want to go to sleep. I said, okay, you did the work in half an hour, I can give you more work. And he goes, why should I do more for the same mark? Now, normally in the old days, everything that you do and as soon as you finish, this is done, give me more. It's not like that anymore...*

Laziness:

*...Yeah, I mean, I think superficially, the most obvious explanation is that they're lazier and they're more insecure and they're not interested in ideas...*

Lack of inquisitiveness:

*...the inquisitive type of students are getting less. You only see them on the higher level course. Sometimes you see one or two of them, but the really outstanding ones are getting rarer and rarer...*

Virtual World:

One Communications teacher articulated the most succinct vision of the student reality being formed through television, computers and electronic media. Rather than real experience, the students were used to pure stimulus rather than actual learning.

*...they live in a much more, I hate to use the word, but they live in a kind of virtual world, a virtual cultural world that we don't. We're more physical. We travel more than they do. You know, the idea of going to India, for us, is kind of exotic and exciting and maybe we'll go and save up our money and we do. They don't think that way any longer, they want to go to New York, maybe. But they don't travel, they don't read books...*

Not readers:

It was common currency that very few of the students do not read for pleasure and as a result don't get the material they are being presented. The ones who read and appreciate the readings are notable:



*...Few of them do and it's always the weirdos. I mean, like the...I think our kids...we have a group of kids that are kind of literate and curious kids, the kind of the nerds, you know, the Goths and all those kids who read books and, you know. It's silly stuff, but they're active, their brains are active...*

*...One funny looking girl in the back of the class, falls in love with Jane Eyre or something. I said, why not you guys, it's marvellous, it's like going to the movies, it's a great thing to know how to do, to love a book or to love...you know, they don't have hobbies, they can't do things with their hands, they don't build, I mean...*

Cultural illiterates:

*...they don't know who the Prime Minister is. You know what I mean. So, I'm forced to sort of change my classes and tune my classes and it's a lot more important to me to give them a basic cultural literacy, you know, show them that there's a world out there and it's full of interesting people.*

For the Communication teacher, this cultural illiteracy prevents them from moving forward in the field.

*...what's happened, instead of teaching this class in a very typical, formal, academic way, I'm forced to really educate them, about culture and about human events and about critical human ideas, or personalities. In other words, in order to teach the class I'm supposed to be teaching that's on the book, I have to go back and retool them, because when they reach me, they have no idea about...I give them what I call an IQ test and it's just a kind of cultural literacy test, you know, where's this city, where's that city, where does that language come from, who is this person and 99 times out of 100, they fail and every semester I redo the test, thinking I'm making the test about me, I'm being unreasonable, the way I've designed the test is affecting their ability to answer it, right. So I ask people, give me...like one of the questions might be: where would be find a bassoon? Right, that's the question...but none of them ever can answer any of the questions. So what's the point of me teaching them the class if it's re-teaching them?*

### 6.2.3 Structural Factors

While many teachers could recognise that many students were subject to forces beyond their control, many seemed not to recognise that times and circumstances had changed since

their experience as students. The gulf was revealed time and again, sometimes unwittingly, otherwise without due consideration. At this point the priorities of the teachers around pedagogical issues came to the fore and a dichotomy emerged which was based on a student-centred approach versus a teacher-centred one.

It was easy for all to agree that the transition from high school to Cegep was one of the more problematic situations the teachers face with the students. The high schools have not prepared the students with adequate skills, language abilities and attitude to participate in the Cegep academic life.

Students carry a heavy load.

In addition, several teachers recognised that many of the students carry a heavy load when all areas of their life are combined – family, work, relationships, consumption. But on the whole, students were expected to be dedicated full-time to their studies and anything that distracted from school success was extraneous and unproductive. One was very impressed with the efforts of the older students in her technology program.

*They're busier. It used to be that their main job was to go to school. Now it's secondary to and they either... some of our students are parents, they have...most of them have to earn their living, few of them still live with their parents, but they work, they have a very busy life. So, I think it has an impact, they don't maybe dedicate as much time to their studies, you know, but on the other hand, some of these people have strength because they manage with such a busy schedule. I don't know how they do it myself.*

#### School work load

Many teachers noted that the heavy course load, especially in the technologies, placed a heavy burden on the students. Sometimes it was because the technology itself has evolved over the years and material has gotten denser.

*...The other thing which sometimes I question myself is, in our field every year the material just piles up, there's more to do in our field. When I was going to school, let's say first-year university in electrical*

*engineering, the material something like 20 years ago, since the last 20 years, how many...technologies has come to computer and we expect them to actually learn all of that before they leave, so that's the other part. That part, I can manage to understand that, okay they can't handle all of that...*

Another teacher minimises homework in recognition of the heavy course load along with outside commitments that burden so many students.

*...I find that it's better for me and for them to do as much work in class as we can. Again, a lot of them, I think, already have a lot of homework, so I try to make them understand, you know, I understand their situation and I'll try to reduce the homework as much as possible. And so, really most of the homework they have is reading.*

### Languages and Inter-culturalism

This is a prime focus of the English teachers and they are enormously preoccupied with it. On the other hand, some teachers do not even acknowledge language as an issue.

*The most obvious thing, obviously is that percentage of students whose second language, in some case, third and fourth language is English, has increased remarkably...Number 2, as well, the number of diverse backgrounds which we are seeing in our students. We can no longer count on a more or less homogeneous high school preparation. It really is a patchwork...We get such a wide variety of students, some of whom have done schooling in other countries and have very recently arrived, or they have been doing...you know their cultures and their sort of learning habits, and I guess their preparation, it really is very patchwork. It's very diverse. I'm seeing even within a class of let's say 25, these sections are normed at 25, you can see easily 5, 6 or 7 areas of the world represented and so even their background training. Some students actually come with a sense of grammar, because for example if you're getting students who, let's say, originate from India or south east Asia, grammar, in fact, they have a kind of inclination perhaps in their education training, to attack grammar almost in the way that they would excel in Math; so that they can learn rules, spit it out, apply it, let's say, on grammar tests, we'll see that that part of their component tends to be high, yet on the other hand, when it comes to the writing, you know, there's a disconnect almost. You also see students...from*

*other areas, where they don't seem to have that kind of an organized approach to learning. Perhaps in their background or in their culture, I'm only speculating here, but it's...when we do teach them grammar they're really fumbling around, as it were, because they don't seem to bring that kind of organized sort of looking at structures. They almost seem unable to conceptualize in that way, so they have a whole bunch of other weaknesses....*

*...So these students do have more vocabulary. Some of them actually, again, will be fairly fluent. In other words they'll speak the language. They'll speak street language and they'll be fairly fluent, but in terms of their writing, obviously they don't really have much sense of grammar. Except the students who tend to come from south east Asia. They have the grammar and very often don't have the fluency. They're very quiet, very reticent, as it were...*

Most teachers appreciated the effort that many second language students were willing to put into their work. In particular, the immigrant students who had been educated in school systems elsewhere before arriving in Canada were seen as keen.

*...They will be in your office as much you are willing to allow them to seek help and they're very hard workers. What happens...so you spend a lot of energy there, but it's energy that's rewarded, okay, because you really get the impression that these are kids who want to learn, they're motivated and you're helping them to do that...*

A more subtle reflection of cultural differences was noted by a science teacher who saw a serious lacuna in the composition of his higher level courses.

*...Well, in pure science, especially in Science Plus, I've been teaching that for 14 years, and in 14 years I have had precisely a total of two black students — that's gotta say something. I don't know what, but I'm just telling you. On the other hand, you look at the class, it's about 40% Chinese — that's gotta tell you something. Now, somewhere, certain populations are not getting exposed to mathematics and are not being motivated in science because, I mean statistically, all groups I think are equally capable, you know, just from, well, just what I said, so somehow there's something there's something that's not being triggered there and I don't think it's socio-economic because I mean, there's no, I don't think, correlation between math ability, for example, and you*

*know, the way you're brought up, I mean math is to a certain extent an innate thing which is simply not being recognized in some people and hence not being fed or nurtured...*

### Dislocation

The students frequently mentioned how a move of one sort or another had a major impact on their progress through school. For some, it was the adaptation imposed by moving from another country and the dislocation and identity issues implicit in the immigrant experience. For many it was tied up with language issues and being placed in the French school system. For yet others, even the move from lower elementary to middle school and then to high school was enough to disrupt their progress. Apart from the transition from high school to cegep, the consequences of dislocation were never once mentioned by the teachers.

### Transition – High School to Cegep

Many teachers mentioned that the students arrived out of high school inadequately prepared for Cegep work. Only one was able to put his finger on at least one important curriculum-driven difference for this lack of preparation. He was a Mathematics teacher who had sat on working committees dealing with the high school – Cegep interface.

*...things...have changed in high school; like the curriculum at lower levels has changed and this has had an impact on the preparation they've had for a curriculum that by and large has not severely changed here. Now we've had to modify our curriculum to some extent, but I don't think we acknowledge how different those students are as they come out, as much as we should and as a result the fit between students coming out of high school and the courses that we offer is probably not as good now, as it was 30 years ago. I think thirty years ago, the two were dovetailing very well and I think they're very much out of sync now...*

### Paid Work

The factor that Roy (2005) identifies as a consumerism which permeates the lives of the students with brand name clothes, cars, electronic devices, and the credit system which

underpins it, serves to complicate the lives of many students who have no choice but to work to cover the cost. The majority of teachers seemed to see this as a lifestyle choice of the students and compared it with their own experience as students when their focus was on school first and foremost.

*...So they work long hours to maintain whatever it is they think they're maintaining. I don't think they know very often...*

Nonetheless, a number acknowledged that times have changed.

*...I think student lives are far more complicated than they were when I went to school. When I went to university I was one of very few people who had to support herself...It's not that these are middle class kids who went to university. They didn't receive the, you know, the genteel miss class...but there wasn't the sense that you had to have a cell phone in the car. No one had a car. Not everyone even had radios...Yeah, and it's put pressure on kids. We now have to have these cell phones and pay for the cards or the calls. They have to have a car so they need a job. Jobs pay \$7.00 an hour. That's not very much...*

The students are concerned about their money and don't waste it frivolously. Attempts to be economical may even be disruptive of normal class behaviour.

*...Oh yes, definitely. I mean we had no worry about paying our cellular bill. We had no worries paying our...right, gas, tickets. I have a student in the middle of the class, I have to go, why, change my car the place, the parking spot...Now, normally a student is supposed to be free of all those obstructions...*

They park their cars on the neighbouring streets to avoid the college's parking charges.

One teacher expressed her desire to have students who focused on school as a first priority by having a somewhat dramatic if not radical solution.

*I think that Cegep should only be available full-time to students who contract not to work more than 10 hours and that financial aid is given by the government for the difference. I think you want a recipe for success...*

*Freedom from work, absolutely. Make it illegal to go to a Cegep and work more than 10 hours.*

Teacher’s Perspective - Pedagogical Practices

The teachers commented extensively on pedagogical styles, strategies, and practices to reach out to the students or get their message across in the classroom. Two different tendencies became apparent. What follows is not an attempt to promote one style or another, but merely an indication of the dichotomy that became apparent after many readings and re-readings of the teacher interviews.

<p><b><u>Student Centred</u></b></p> <p>Process oriented</p> <p>Process is practical</p> <p>Deep learning</p> <p>Teaching learning (lifelong)</p> <p>Focus on the person</p> <p>Entertain</p> <p>Adapt to the students</p> <p>Experience based</p> <p>Flexible materials, varied and easily followed</p> <p>Continual change</p> <p>Spiritual</p> <p>Integrative</p>	<p><b><u>Teacher Based</u></b></p> <p>Teacher as dispenser of knowledge</p> <p>Content</p> <p>Material</p> <p>Quantity</p> <p>Standards - won't change or lower standards</p> <p>Academic</p> <p>Rigorous</p> <p>Challenging</p> <p>Formal</p> <p>Result oriented</p> <p>Rational</p> <p>Courses + disciplines</p>
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Standards versus Process

In many ways the dilemma was discussed as a balance between maintaining standards and ensuring that students are learning to learn. Even within one department the polar sides of the debate could be reflected. As one teacher, very committed to process and experiential learning, put it:

*...teachers are always talking about the dilemma of saying, hey, covering content, or making sure that there's deep learning in your student...*

There are the teachers who regard any change as a watering down of the standards.

*...I think there [are] some teachers that have this idea that the course is the course and they don't care who the students are, they're just gonna teach it the same way...*

An English teacher laid out a view from the process side that defines the difference.

*You know there's two ways of looking at Cegep education. One, they need it to get into college or to get a job and it's very practical or utilitarian point of view. The other is, I'm going to learn as much as I can, we'll see what comes out afterwards. So there's either the result-oriented kid, or the process-oriented kid. The process-oriented kid is usually more spiritual or more integrative and that's rare [in] the result-oriented, because results [aren't] enough to motivate your kid, because a lot of distractions will get in the way. For*

*example, they'll get a job and they're making money for the first time and say, oh who needs school?*

A newer science teacher succinctly summed up his position on the dilemma about defending standards against erosion.

*...And I think I instinctively feel like you always have to teach to the level of students and I guess I don't feel...I think some teachers feel like there's this whole question of standards and the government wants us to pass students whether they deserve to or not and academic standards are gonna plunge. I guess my attitude is, well we need nurses and either we're gonna like get them here or we're not gonna have them. Would you rather have a nurse in a hospital that maybe passed a chemistry course that was not quite as hard as the one 20 years ago, or would you rather have hospitals without nurses. You know, we still need people to do things and so I guess I don't feel the same idea that somehow we're defending standards and we have to worry about standards sliding. I think that standards are always changing, I mean, 100 years ago people used to know Latin and Greek, you know...*

Another teacher who is a trained educator put the issue of process learning in context and emphasised how the teacher has to be prepared to change.

*...But to me it's not the question of lowering, it's a question of realistically what they can gather meaningful learning from. And I don't think that the capacity has gone down for that. I think it's more teachers. It's the attitude of teachers that has to change. It's not the attitudes of students...Well, I think that because our field is education, like I've been modifying all the way, all the way along, my teaching methods all the way along, to kind of suit the kind of students that we have. And so, and I think from one year to the next and even from one semester to the next, it's different, you know, based on what the students are doing...*

According to him there is a serious problem with an approach that overemphasised content.

*...I thought, you shouldn't be concentrating so much on these abstract concepts even though they're somewhere important. My vision of it is more, it should be a very practical job, so let's teach them how to do the job in a very practical sense. Keeping in mind that there's lots of stuff to learn, that you can churn all of that stuff in three years and then...*

For the same educator, it was clearly a question of making the information useful enough for his technology students that they could actually use it when they were in the field dealing with real life situations. In this regard the reality of technology teachers varies considerably from those in the pre-university programs. The priority is to prepare a student who is shortly destined to join the workforce.

*...part of the problem here is transfer, right, transfer of information. I can cover all these things in my class, I can give them an exam, but the real test is, when they go into the field, can they use that stuff. Otherwise, it's a waste of time. It's a waste of their time and it's a waste of my time.*

Process learning was also associated with teaching the whole person.

*...I was very intellectual when I first came to Vanier, lectured a lot, da, da, da. Maybe thought this is what I was supposed to do, make everybody into a little budding English teacher. But now I'm connected to the human being and I'm asking...I'm probably applying all my smarts and all the things I've learned to draw people out and become who they could be, if I can get to them. I use English as an excuse to get to the person and it's beautiful in my subject...*

For one teacher, learning had to be very practical and referred to the fact that often students forget within weeks or even days much of the material and abstract learning.

The content side of the coin was articulated by several teachers, but summed up neatly by one of the Mathematics teachers.

*...I give assignments and encourage them to say, if you do this, I give you bonus mark here, do that, give you bonus mark. Try to help them to pass the course as much as possible. Without really lowering the high...I have this attitude, I said to make things so easy for you, it does not make much sense.*

In his view the students must learn the discipline and be prepared to work for it.

*...Okay. I mean, 20 years ago if they asked me, sir, can you stay till 5:00, I said no problem, as long as you're willing to learn. Now, I say, no, I give you four hours that you can come and ask me, plus the universal*

*break, if you want to ask me, you can come and ask me. But when they...when my lecture is finished, I'm not gonna stay one minute later. So in a way I told them, they have to come up to do something and if they want to ask, they can come up here. Usually I will stay a little bit later, if they want to ask me. But I don't want to let them have the impression that I'm here, I mean, all day long they can come whatever they like. And one more thing is, I say, I'm on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor, if you want to come ask me, make a special effort. This is good thing about having the office on the fifth floor...*

One teacher who emphasised content described the effort that he had put into making the material accessible and more easily digested by the students.

*...What I've done is that I've probably reduced the content, I wouldn't say by a great deal, but what I've done is that rather than maybe concentrating really in three or four areas is to use the same, maybe in a chapter, just go the half of the chapter and then maybe go into another two or three chapters and bring the parts in from there that relate to the first two. So they're doing the same amount of reading as far as the content but they're getting it in different areas and this has worked out, and again, especially if I get them into areas for courses that we offer in the second and third semester to generate some interest hopefully...*

Many teachers especially in English and Mathematics are concerned to cover their material so that subsequent teachers building on the base learning of foundation courses won't find the student wanting. So they are obliged to strike a balance between engaging the student in the process and ensuring that enough material has been covered.

*So, despite all this kind of, what I guess what we've been talking about, the human interaction and the kind of understanding, nonetheless there are skills which have to be mastered. This is made clear to them and there are issues which have to be covered in the content of the curriculum, this is made clear to them and so in the end, I don't really find that I have that much difficulty. All the way along, they're either fulfilling or not fulfilling. I'll give them a chance to rewrite. Sometimes it's a lack of clarity and they don't understand or they really have to grapple with fulfilling the skills.*

### Grades and grading versus learning

A major concern related to standards that was repeated from teacher to teacher was a concern about grading. A number of times teachers mentioned that the student's aggressive desire for grades, in some cases, was not based on doing any real work for their marks.

*...Yeah, I've dramatically reduced my expectations and dramatically reward them, almost in a very childish way, when they do well. I've definitely changed, it's become like a comedy routine, really, like a Vegas show, you know. If they do something well, I give them stuff, I give them money, I give them goofy presents, I make them stand up and so they're really rewarded for something which was pretty typical for us when we were students. We wouldn't get rewarded, here's your 80. And they all expect an 85 if they breathe. They expect to pass my class if they come to it. Like what the f...are you talking about, of course you come to it, you pass if you do something in it, not because you come. Where does this notion come from and they all expect an 85 because they have a pulse. To me an 85 is a remarkable grade, a grade of achievement and excellence...*

In order to give the students a chance to recuperate from a bad start in the semester, many teachers have devised flexible methods of assessment that accommodate the students' needs.

*...We're not obliged, in English, to let them rewrite essays, but some of those choose to do that as a pedagogical method and so, I do, I give them chances to improve their work and a lot of them are grateful for that...But what I do is, I intentionally leave a large part of the mark until the last few weeks of class, because what happens, inevitably, is that these kids, a lot of them will sort of wake up towards the end and realize, okay I'm failing a course, I don't want to fail. And so for those kids, I'd like to leave them that chance and again that's fairly effective...*

One teacher in a technology where internship (stage) work is very important noted that grades were not even the priority in her field.

*I don't look at grades really, cause I look at attitude.*

Another technology teacher felt that the grade was much less important than the possibility

that the student was learning something, regardless of where, when or even how.

*... Basically my own idea is, it really doesn't matter what you give them, 60, 70, 50, whatever, what do they get out of this by the time they leave? And it's never too late to learn. On the exam if there's a chance that he learns something right in the middle of the exam, I'd rather he does it there, than not doing it at all. So, I am, in that way, the way I see it is, really when they leave, no matter how they learn this, even if they learn by (I don't want to say this on the record) but even if they learn by cheating, it's better than not learning at all... Yes, for me it's really important that we learn something no matter the circumstances...*

### Teachers workload

Many teachers noted that their workload had increased over the years and it is our observation that it was particularly teachers who are process-oriented observed this phenomenon more frequently.

*... "because you obviously need to spend more time with the second language kids and you do more correcting, because you obviously, you know, for those kids they will all have to redo essays quite extensively and you obviously have to correct all of these and these kids will come for help..."*

### Elimination system

The first English course can distinguish the committed student from the ones not ready to make an effort. One student's readiness to proceed is balanced against another student being eliminated from the system. The students who arrive with a high school attitude often find that the English course is the one they can't get by. They have to change their attitude and adopt a more adult approach which involves gritting their teeth, bearing the course that they don't like.

*... Now, the other thing we can say and I'm not totally against this, is that okay they have to get through the 101 to get their DEC, so it may take them two or three tries, but eventually they'll get through. As I say, this may seem like a pedagogical heresy, but I do think that there is a whole step that they have to make between their attitude, whether it comes from high school or elsewhere and the more adult attitude that*

*just causes them to say at some point, okay I may not find this easy, I may not like it, but I have to do it and so... because I find, you know, once we get past the 101, immediately the attitude changes for our 102's, 103's in the B block. The kids by then have accepted, okay, this is English, it's not important, I don't like it, but I have to do it and so they do. What is unfortunate and I'm sure it's a real problem or headache for the administration as well is that, a lot of these 101-31's do spend a couple of semesters, you know...*

### Lack of support

In many cases, there was a very real frustration with the outside interference and impositions of ministerial rules and regulations.

*... I guess my attitude about the ministry is, if the ministry were to disappear that would be a good thing, cause I, like a lot of teachers, feel like I don't know anything good that comes from the ministry. Like we're trying to teach and then this... for example, there's these new integration objectives that they want us to teach. I teach a chemistry course, you know, and they want us to show the connections between chemistry, math, physics and biology in some explicit way that they can document...*

In fact rather than support, the top down interventions are often seen as unproductive interference.

*... No, there's gotta be a sort of mix 'cause I mean there has to be room, and I say that certainly for universities, for ideas. If you don't have new ideas being born, your society's going to stagnate. And if you're chained to some kind of competency-based system then your teaching is going to be geared to that and you're not going to be looking at new ideas or innovations and so on 'cause you're sticking to the nuts and bolts — you'll never have an evolution in teaching or a subject or whatever. You stifle originality. Aside from that, it's the time it takes is distracting from more productive activities...*

### **6.2.4 Individual Patterns of Accommodation:**

Over the years most teachers have developed a variety of methods of reaching the students pedagogically and maintaining their motivation.

*...I guess some of the ways I may have changed is in the way I do some of the assignments. To relate assignments to something very practical so that the concept might clarify itself just by virtue of thinking of it in the context of a situation or a case study with children...*

Continually trying to adapt to the students can be a frustrating experience.

*...That is...it's hard to explain and as a teacher... then you realize, what am I gonna do. I have two choices, close the classroom or reduce expectations or just try every day to come up with somehow bringing the different topics into what I'm not supposed to be saying, but I have to, 'cause I can't carry on...*

Many situations that students present teachers can be far beyond their capacity to deal with.

*...What else might have been going on, that I don't know. One of them did come and talk to me, she told me she had had an abortion, she was away for weeks. So I told her you know, you could get a medical incomplete. I sent her to [the Dean] and I said I really don't know what to do in this situation and I said but I'm sure that the College will want...I don't even know if what she was telling me is true, I can't tell. And I really...this particular girl wasn't around enough that I could have a sense and I said why don't you get some medical documentation. So then she told me something else, she said, well I wasn't even using my medical card, I was using someone else's. So I said, look I don't know if we should be going there even, you know. So that's why she claimed that really she wasn't aware of the fact that she was doing something fraudulent. So she said, that's why she didn't go to the College. So I said, look, I said, really I don't want to go there with you. If you feel you have something to say, I referred her to [the Dean]. I don't know what's happened since...*

Another teacher summed up her frustration at not being able to teach her subject at a level she enjoyed and being continually confronted with attitude and behaviour problems.

*...I can't take them and deal with those emotional problems, I have a skill...I have my knowledge, I have the expertise and that's not my job. So in a sense, I used to be angry about this. I'm not anymore.*

There is still much satisfaction to be derived from teaching, despite the weaknesses of

the students. One teacher, in his struggle to reach the students, now views teaching as a performance.

*...I've learned to be funny and I've learned to lie to them and play with them in the classroom and because of that we're able to do a lot more. But if I'd maintained the typical sort of approach I had, which was to sit at the front of the class and use a lectern and go through the material in the textbook and yada, yada, yada, forget it, it wasn't working. It looked like it was working, but...[it wasn't]...Right? So what I do, is I'm forced to go back and kind of, you know, we go over the industrial revolution, we go over the scientific revolution, big ideas, big human activities, big wars, big characters and then I teach them my course, because if I don't, they just sit there and watch me fifteen weeks and then they go home, right and...that I tell them to write and, you know, okay...I mean they're not interested in the material, so I'm forced to kind of cajole them and tell them tales and stories and...it becomes a performance as much as a class, right and, I don't know...I love teaching. I never thought...I guess for the last five years, I've really, really enjoyed teaching. I think it's because I've relaxed and because I'm interested in the material that I teach and I find it exciting and it amuses me, because I'm like that, I'm able to do that, it carries, I think, into the classroom and I enjoy teaching a lot more than I ever have.*

On the other hand, dealing with recalcitrant and resistant students was not how some had planned to spend their work lives, and it had become very frustrating.

*...I can't do this. I can't continue to do this. I'd rather teach in a private high school than do this for thirty years...I'm not sure I can do this until I'm 76, which is when I can retire with pension. We'll see.*

### 6.2.5 Summary of Findings

In interviews with teachers, we expected to find some intolerance of student habits, some frustration with their skills and level of commitment, some impatience with their attention spans as well as their capacity to learn and understand course material. We did find that in abundance.

There is a litany of complaints about poor attitudes among students: they are lazy and demanding, lack respect, are not inquisitive,



they don't read and are culturally illiterate. On top of that, teachers feel that too many students have a sense of entitlement by which they expect to succeed in school simply by being present.

On the whole, however, we were impressed by the caring and dedication of teachers, their imagination in finding improved ways to get through to students, and their willingness to sacrifice considerable personal time and effort in the pursuit of better ways of reaching the student more effectively. Most of the teachers were very thoughtful in their manner of addressing problems with weaker students, and generous with their time for us, several of them spending more than an hour in taped conversation.

With only a couple of exceptions, the teachers were extremely sympathetic towards the underachieving students. They really appreciated the students who make an effort and try to get into the academic conversation. They were especially sympathetic for the mature students who had returned to study after some time out of the system. These students typically carry a significant 'life load' which is then complicated by a heavy course load. By contrast, they were also very frustrated at not being able to reach those students who refuse to respond.

But the grounded analysis of the responses from the teachers reflected a vision of the students operating as autonomous actors bestowed with free will, rather than acknowledging the multiple forces vying for the students' time, energy and intellect. We did not ask teachers about the non-academic lives of students, but neither did most volunteer many comments about the complex demands of their lives.

If we are to go by what they said to us, teachers had little awareness of the intensity of other demands on the students' lives. Teachers hardly spoke of how the students' families play such an important role other than spoiling them. Nor do they acknowledge the primal importance of siblings and girlfriends as tutors, mentors, motivators and role models. Similarly, paid work and complicated educational history

were rarely mentioned by teachers, except for that history which is directly attached to language and ethnicity.

Teachers did recognize that students had a profound need for skills development, and some wondered if they did not need even more time to prepare for college study, an idea also being suggested in pedagogical circles as 'slow school.' Some teachers feel that a large number of students are not ready for Cegep and need more time to prepare.

There were numerous observations about the students at the back of the class, the annoying people who chat during the lecture, and students who missed assignments or passed them in late. They demonstrated very little patience with these patterns and other indicators that student social life and life demands co-existed with their studies.

Teachers did demonstrate a number of forms of accommodation to this new reality. Some now emphasize process learning and the teaching of the person more than the covering of content, some now give more in-class assignments as well as seminar format instruction, collaborative and group work, and one-on-one time. Some allow more re-writing of assignments and other elaborated forms of continuous formative assessment.

Several departments and programs, including English, Humanities and Nursing have developed remedial courses, special streaming or elongated programs of study to accommodate students who had difficulty accomplishing the objectives of existing courses or programs.

Teachers remain challenged by the need to incorporate social process into the curriculum. Rather than letting the social needs of students remain an impediment to the completion of their studies, it appears that pedagogical strategies need to be developed which could incorporate elements of their social reality into the curriculum.

Finally, teachers are, somewhat predictably, wedded to the idea that formal education is the route to success. Though some have admitted

that certain students might be more suited to a non-academic form of training, little in what they say or do demonstrates much respect for those options.

### 6.3 Focus Group with professionals

As part of the college view of the changes in the nature of students over recent years and the college response to those changes, we interviewed three individuals together: a counsellor, an academic advisor, and a recruitment officer. Their view of the scene included a perspective on both students and teachers that was not rooted in the classroom dynamic nor in academic performance as such. Their insightful comments revolved around their everyday contact with prospective students as well as many members of the college community.

The three frontline professionals who were interviewed revealed other aspects of the gulf that exists and a perspective on the students and the teachers and the interaction between them. Two of them had previously been support staff at the college and echoes of their former careers made themselves known. They were particularly critical of the administration for lacking imagination and not enforcing performance standards for classroom teaching. Teachers were seen as having great freedom and not all pulling their weight, especially by comparison to the load carried by the support staff. They were very conscious of the dialectics of every situation they described, for every statement produces diverse reactions.

They, too, agreed that the students were significantly different today from the past. The respondents felt that the socio-economic situation imposed many constraints on today's students not previously faced by Vanier's population.

*And I think the other difference...the number of working students. I don't know...when we do our Explorations, we generally ask them if they're working part-time, it's so...I mean if you look back 20 years ago, that wasn't the case. And I think back then, you know, the line was, well you shouldn't be working more than 12 or 13 hours a week, but that's not reality.... That and Vanier used to be the Cegep*

*of first choice and the kids who came here had many more...they came from middle-class and upper middle-class backgrounds. I'm generalizing and of course they're, you know...But I have the impression that the average Vanier student comes from a less privileged background than they did 15 years ago, which could translate into things, like working more, contributing to the family, less time, perhaps less support, perhaps fewer resources, things like computers at home, I don't know.*

Like the teachers they observed the remarkable difference in language skills.

*One of the things that did change were language skills. Like this used to be, you know, a wasp, Jewish, Italian, Greek school and everybody had fairly strong English language skills, and that changed...I would say, the biggest difference in terms of how they relate to us, is they're less articulate...there's such a difference in the language level or proficiency of the students we talk to.*

In addition, the culture of expectation is very different today. This appears on two levels: one is the elite students and those from privileged backgrounds who expect to become lawyers and doctors; and the other is the expectation in the form of confronting the system when they don't get what they expect. They discussed the advantages which private school students have growing up in a milieu where they were expected to achieve academically, since they were bound for high paying professional circumstances.

*One of the major differences (in private school) was just the culture of expectation. She associated with people who took it for granted that they were going to be doctors and lawyers...the culture of expectation that existed in the private schools and that the kids were inoculated with...But I think what you're observing, as you said before, is they come from a certain socio-economic background where the expectations are there. There's a value to education and that comes from many of our students. So I don't know that it's the private school, but it's the group and the families they come from, who obviously put, by and large, a great deal of importance on education and the expectation that you will go on...I don't think I would have ever gone on to university had I not grown up being told that that was an expectation. I really don't think that I'm somebody who pushes hard enough or is, whatever it takes, you know, but it was never a question. It was expected, so I was lucky.*

In addition, private school students received the skills set required for high performance at Cegep.

*It's a common theme I see with a lot of private school kids who come into Vanier. They do wonderfully, because they're in a position where they can take advantage of the freedom that the Cegep system offers, in comparison to secondary school, but they've learned first-rate work habits and discipline in private school, so that they put in two hours a day that they need to get everything done, to thrive, get strong marks, good R score.*

However, here is where the dialectic appears, since the students from private school can flounder at Cegep when they have had the privileged support system of private school removed and they are faced with the freedom to organise for themselves.

*'Cause we have many students we see from private schools who are lost here, because they flounder. They're used to a lot of coddling, I guess, and a lot of structuring for them and they're just...*

The other side of the culture of expectation is expecting to get what you want and working the system accordingly.

*The kids are also more proficient at working the system too, perhaps before they would have been embarrassed, inclined to slink off, whereas now, I'm not taking this, I'm gonna speak to somebody about that teacher... They don't necessarily take no for an answer as easy as they used to. You know, when we say no, you can't have this phys. ed. course, it's closed. Well, who do I go and speak to, it's not, okay, what else is there, it's who do I go and speak to, I want it... It's definitely a higher awareness on their part on how to work the system... and it was a young girl from the West Island and she said, "I can't have this English course late" and (the clerk) said to her, "I'm afraid that's preference course change." "Well I have to have it, I can't be here late." Jessie said, "I'm sorry, you have to go on Friday." "Well, fuck you," she said. Anyway, so... I'm seeing more and more of that, you know... People are not necessarily taking no for an answer or... Academic Advisors, who are we, ... You're not in a position of authority. I'm not, you know... I want it and so let me see if I can go and talk to somebody who will give it to me. And unfortunately 50% of the time they're right,*

*because they'll go to a Dean or to somewhere and come back with their little note.*

The culture of expectation takes a gender turn in some cases where male and female students react very differently to expected outcomes.

*...girls come to me and "sir, sir, I have an 85% average, do you think I'll get into Cegep?". "I think you'll be okay, kid". And boys come to me, "sir, sir, I want to be a lawyer". "What's your average?" "62". You know, that's one general observation. Girls seem so much more performance oriented and so much more concerned and thinking in advance where they're gonna go. It's a gender breakdown. I don't know why that exists, but given the drop-out rate amongst young men, it would be nice if somebody could figure out why girls are thinking that way and boys aren't.*

Here too the ying of pushy students was balanced against the yang of many students not standing up to the system or 'knowing the ropes'.

*...to come and talk to you. Most of them wait until it's too late, past the 20<sup>th</sup> of September delete deadline and then what happens, their academic record is screwed up for one semester... Well most of them don't have parents who went through Cegep or university and they don't know the survival skills... Some of them got through high school by the skin of their teeth and I think it's because they learned to work the system, you know, like, whatever, but then when they get here and those skills aren't working anymore for some reason, you know, there are more demands on them, you know, in their classes, their teachers have higher expectations and what worked for them in high school, isn't working for them anymore... sometimes it's just that somebody there who can tell them the ropes, teach them the ropes and show them some concern.*

Sometimes the response to not knowing the ropes in a system that doesn't respond to the student's needs is to take a 'victim' posture and to shift the blame.

*They screwed me over. I hear that often... During registration, or what happened with a mark update. So I always say, well explain what you mean by, they screwed me over. Who are "they" and what happened. You know, you need to get to the bottom of it. I think it's an educational thing for these kids, you have to say, well, you know if you would have done x, y and z*

*that you wouldn't have been screwed over. But I think that that's their impression, it's the system, you know, they screwed me over, I didn't delete my course on the 20<sup>th</sup> of September and now I have a failing grade, I didn't know... But kids don't think, they come after the deadline and then "they've screwed me over". But I see that often.*

Finally, amongst considerations implicit in the culture of expectation was the idea that the Quebec Anglophone community sees their children as university bound and anything else is not an option.

*...And it's interesting that, because what we are seeing in some of the research is the kids who are here, who would much rather be off in trade school learning mechanics, hairdressing or secretarial. But, you know, that expectation has been raised and they're here, maybe against their will,...*

Needless to say, this has a major impact on the program offerings at a college like Vanier.

*...Huge problem in recruitment, I'm sure you're all aware that our pre-university numbers are great and our technology numbers are not so great. It's just this perception in the Anglophone community, particularly the Anglophone community, to go into a technology program, it's just a great deal, it's just a great idea. But this perception, you know, it's like taking shop in high school, you're a failure, smart kids don't take shop.*

The professionals frequently came up with the dialectic of the teacher / student interaction. They were often exposed to unprofessional behaviour on the part of teachers and had to cover the consequences, while at the same time knowing of many instances where caring teachers intervene to help struggling students.

*...kids are kids. I get very frustrated when I hear... when I listened to the teachers complaining about how quality of the students tumbled. And I was dealing with these kids, you know, handing them cameras, interacting with them, and I see they're the same sweet kids that they always were.*

*I do get complaints all the time. That some people come out and say, they're stupid, like embarrass somebody in front of the entire class and whatever. How can you be here if you do that. One woman stood up, it was a mature student, and it was Physics 006, I won't*

*mention any names, and the teacher said, how can you be here, you don't know that. She stood up and said, this is a high school course, I don't know it because I've never been taught it and that's what I'm here for, you're supposed to teach me...*

and despite this

*.. I think the majority of the teachers are like that, welcoming to all the students.*

*I heard a teacher quoted the other day and I thought it was great, it was the perennial argument, students aren't the students they used to be. This teacher was going on and on to the effect, look, good students, bad students, I don't care, I'm a teacher, bring them to me, I'll teach 'em.*

At several points during the discussion the teacher's training and expectations were compared to where the student body is today.

*it would behoove the institution, the greatest emphasis possible on teaching teachers classroom skills. Our preoccupation with classroom ability of skills in addition to mastery of the subject matter...*

*I can say like, for example, I can give you an example of Explorations 5, you know how many sections of Grade 10 courses we have. Physical Science, there's five of them, Chemistry, there's five of them, Physics...there are probably about 20 sections of high school courses. When these Physics, Math, Chemistry teachers came to teach at Cegep...with their Ph.D.'s...I don't think that they ever anticipated teaching a Grade 10 course. So, some of the problems that I see from a student's perspective, you know, they're going too fast,...it's a fifteen week semester, they're teaching what they teach in high school over a full year, so the teachers have to teach at a certain speed. But some of them are teaching at a second year Cegep science level, you know, where these kids don't have that background. I have, on occasion, intervened on a student's behalf and gone to the teacher and said, these are the specific problems that the kids are having, you know, and is there anything that can be done, maybe you're not aware or whatever. I think there's a frustration on the teacher's part, they don't expect to teach 10<sup>th</sup> grade courses. And they don't expect to bring them back to teaching in high school. Some of them don't have an education background, they've got a Ph.D. in chemistry, they don't necessarily...they've never learned how to teach.*

### 6.3.1 Summary of Findings: Professionals

As front-line workers, the professionals who participated felt that they were situated somewhere between the students, the teachers and the institution. They freely provided their insights to all three components of the college population as astute yet critical observers.

They had enormous sympathy for the underachieving students, particularly the mature students, who struggle to get into school, overcome the obstacles in their background and eventually succeed. They identified in class terms how so many students have to work to make ends meet and stay in school and that the institutional set-up simply does not recognize or accommodate that reality.

Nonetheless, they were extremely critical of many of the newer students who arrive with an overblown sense of self and entitlement. These are the foul-mouthed rude ones who will not accept 'no' for an answer.

They pointed out the difference in the 'culture of expectations' between elite private schools and over-taxed under-funded public schools. Students who come from families of professionals and otherwise successful parents grow up assuming that they, too, will end up as professionals and in well paid careers. As a result they know the price to pay in terms of school work and the standards that must be met. The underachieving student coming out of the chaos of the comprehensive schools may have been much more exposed to an opposed and counter-productive set of values and expectations.

They praised the teachers who took the time to get to know the students and give them a break. They knew the teachers' reputations from reports of the students and from their own dealings with them. They were often caught in the cross fire between unhappy students and the teachers who had been the source of the unhappiness. In the process and over time, they dealt with many 'problem' teachers over charges of unprofessional behavior and complaints about marks. They were also critical of the fact that very few teachers had the pedagogical training to be delivering their

course material let alone dealing with the many issues that arise in the classroom.

They were very critical of management at several levels. In one area, they felt the number-crunching cutback in services and facilities meant that Vanier was not nearly as welcoming a place as it could be in terms of student spaces, resources and cleanliness. They were very critical of management for not obliging a more rigorous respect of the work rules by teachers who abuse their situations. In addition to not serving and protecting the students, they felt that this lack of administrative rigour had created a double standard for employees of the college with support staff getting a very short stick and the teachers a sweet deal. In addition, they did not feel that the administration had taken any real initiatives or been very creative in programming to serve the interests of the diverse population they are supposed to be serving. The overall comment here was that it was a leadership that lacked vision.

### 6.4 Special Programs: The Institutions Strike back

Tinto (1998) estimates that as many as 4 out of 5 students enter American colleges with some form of developmental education need. "In some institutions, 'remedial' students now make up a majority of the entering student body, many requiring 'remediation' in virtually every academic skill area." (p.1) The Quebec government, in recognition of this problem and in order to combat the high dropout rate that occurs near the end of high school has accorded special funding to Cegeps to develop and run *classes d'accueil et intégration* to serve newly arriving students and their perceived needs. The autonomous nature of the different colleges has led to a variety of responses. In our research, these responses included one college which claimed to do nothing for these students because they were not admitted. On the other hand, there are the highly creative and much admired special programs run by colleges like Limoilou's *Session accueil et intégration (SAI)* and Vanier College's *Explorations*.

During the life of the project the research team visited Ottawa and Vancouver and visited high schools and colleges that were grappling

with many of the same issues. The story of Vancouver Technical High School has received much national attention for the innovative way they have responded to the variety of difficult needs they have to serve in a widely diverse student population. From different sides of the continent, both Douglas College in New Westminster and Algonquin College in Ottawa have developed large programs aimed at students who couldn't make the university cut-off standard and who are still attending school to gain academic credits to continue their education. We present some of these here simply as an overview, without in any way claiming to be comprehensive.

### **Cégep Beauce-Appalaches: Support Measures for Review Board Students**

This is for students who failed 2 or more courses the previous semester. The student must sign a contract in a meeting with the guidance counsellor and sign up for at least one of three activities: Weekly Study Sessions; Time Management; Guidance Counselling. The students are also strongly encouraged to take advantage of a number of support services which put a particular focus on the traditionally difficult courses. These include: Peer tutoring in French and Philosophy; French grammar and writing workshops (a weekly 2 hour addition to their French course); support for Mathematics, Biology and English, thematic workshops; mid-semester meeting; group meetings for students with special re-admission conditions or on a second contract. Each activity or measure has a person responsible who forms part of the success team which meets before the semester and at least once during the semester to examine the situation of all the students enrolled in the program. Each student keeps a progress report that is followed up at the weekly sessions. Special commitments include paying the honorarium of the tutor when the otherwise free tutoring sessions are missed.

### **Cégep de Drummondville: Programme d'encadrement particulier (PEP)**

The PEP was developed as an integral part of the Institutional Plan for Learning Aid and Success. Beginning in the Fall 1999 semester, a pedagogical support program was created for

newly registered students of the college. There were three means of selection: analysis of the student file; reference from academic advisors; and a secondary school average of 69% or less. On a weekly basis, 23 volunteer students were accompanied by 12 guides, all members of the College personnel.

Students received one period per week of skills and were partnered in a mentor/ guide relationship with a teacher or professional. All students signed contracts and after each meeting a report was sent to the coordinator indicating the student's progress.

A guidance counsellor planned and coordinated the activities for the whole school year. Other participating services included: *le Centre d'aide en français*, *le Centre d'aide en méthodologie du travail intellectuel* et *le Service de psychologie*.

According to the global evaluation after one year of experimentation, this measure contributed to the retention of the students in programs leading to a DEC (95%). It helped the newly registered student adapt to college life (100%), it increased the following of college studies (100%) and improved the success in courses (90%).

### **Cégep Limoilou: Session Accueil et intégration (SAI) – Un phare pour ton cheminement (A Beacon for Your Path)**

This program resembles Explorations in many ways with a few notable exceptions. The obligatory 'skills' course (360-902-85) is credited as a college complementary. Teachers from different disciplines join the program after having been interviewed and selected based on their motivation to work with this clientele. As regular line teachers, there is no impact on their CI or workload resulting from the smaller groups. The course is structured around modules that have been developed over several years of practice. These include Time Management, Reading and Note Taking, Memory and Exam Preparation, Motivation and Self-Affirmation and ends with a major research project. Students keep a progress report (*feuille de route*) that is maintained in collaboration with the teacher. Activities outside the class include visits to academic

advisors, and counsellors, visits to different departments, and to information and support centres. For each unit students ascribe themselves a mark and the teacher then assigns theirs. A discussion ensues to examine why there has been a discrepancy if one exists. A system of journals keeps track of their skills and their reflections on the skills they are supposed to be developing.

The Cegep Website includes a tool box (*boite à outils*) with a variety of units that back up the course materials.

<http://www.climoilou.qc.ca/fr/fs04/fs04.htm>

### **Cegep Vanier College - Explorations Program**

This program is a group of transition programs for high school graduates and college students whose preparation for Cegep may not be complete. The aim of the program is to ease the difficulty of the transition to college studies by equipping them with the skills needed to succeed in their studies at Cegep, help students acquire missing prerequisites and allow students to explore different alternatives before choosing a program of study. Each program is designed to meet a specific student need by combining a mix of regular program, general education, make-up and compulsory courses in study skills development and/or career orientation. Teachers in the program collaborate with each other and a team of professionals who staff various student support centers designed to provide help in specific areas of their development. Professional counsellors are mandated to provide academic, psychological and career counselling complementary to what is being done in the courses of study, making it a holistic, team approach. It is a one semester program, but an additional semester can be provided when a student has been successful in the first semester and the program of choice is unavailable the following semester.

<http://www.vaniercollege.qc.ca/academics/explorations.htm>

### **Algonquin College - Ottawa**

Algonquin Community College of Ottawa, Ontario has a look very similar to that of Vanier College. Although larger at 13,000 students, they have not left the door closed to students whose academic performance in high school is substandard for admission to institutions of higher education. They provide direct and specific channeling into appropriate programs that are aligned by a combination of assessment of previous academic performance on the one hand and aptitude determined by testing, diagnosis and one-on-one counselling on the other. They offer a one year College Preparation program which is designed to help students who need to obtain college prerequisites, want to refresh learning skills, or need to complete high school. One year certificates and two year diploma are also offered in General Arts and Sciences. Successful completion of the one year program will give the student a certificate and entitle them to continue into the second year of study leading to a two year diploma which then entitles them to continue studies at the university level.

Once the students are enrolled, there are numerous services available to help keep them in good standing and enhance their chances for success. Some particular programs that came to our attention are the following; the Multicultural Buddy Network which links students from around the world, Tragic Event Response Team, a multidisciplinary team of voluntary staff members, a Career Center, a vocational information library which is shared with Employment Services and manned by a fulltime employee, Summer Language Camp, the Language Proficiency (1 year) Certificate Accreditation Program, and College Preparation: a one year certificate program in Basic Training for Skill Development.

[www.algonquincollege.com](http://www.algonquincollege.com)

### **Carleton University – Ottawa - Enriched Support Program (ESP)**

The Enriched Support Program offers students who may not meet traditional entrance requirements the opportunity to prove their

academic ability in the university environment. The program recruits high school students whose grades do not represent their academic potential. It also appeals to adult learners interested in a transition year before beginning full-time studies. In addition, it is aimed at Aboriginal students interested in their transition to post-secondary education.

The ESP makes it possible for students to further their education by offering access to university studies. The students are provided with extra help designed to give them the skills necessary for academic success. For at least two of their courses, students also attend regular weekly, small-group workshops, where they are given extra support and guidance in dealing with the course material. The workshops are designed to develop the skills and strategies necessary for university-level critical thinking, analysis, reading and writing.

The ESP offers the opportunity to take up to three first-year university courses and provides academic support in small, weekly workshops that help one make the transition to university-level work. The goal is to allow the opportunity to qualify for admission to a degree program after one year of study while earning credits that count toward a degree. At the end of their ESP year, students who achieve the necessary grade point average across three courses (70% for most Arts programs) are eligible for acceptance into full-time study in most degree programs at Carleton.

ESP students are fully integrated into the Carleton University community. They attend classes along with Carleton University students and participate in all forms of university life. They are evaluated according to the same standards (without their instructors knowing that they are ESP students). At the end of each course, they are given the same universally recognized university credit.

The credit courses that students complete with ESP will count toward their newly-declared degree program. Successful students have transferred from ESP to degree programs such as Aerospace Engineering, Architecture, Cognitive Science, Commerce, Criminology/Criminal Justice, English Literature, Human

Rights, Mass Communication, Mathematics, and Psychology.

<http://www.carleton.ca/cie/ESP/index.html>

### **Garibaldi High School - Vancouver**

Garibaldi High School is located in Maple Ridge, British Columbia, about 30 km. east of Vancouver. At the time we visited in 2003, it had about 1300 students between grades 8 and 12.

What was most striking to us on our visit there were three things:

- 1) The school was being well guided by one principal and two vice principals with a shared vision; not just by the three, but by the entire staff. Everyone looked and acted like they were all on the same page. The implementation of the plan was being conducted through a common vocabulary that was consistent and positive and rippled throughout the daily routine, discipline and cheerful dispositions.
- 2) Support services included the following: Learning Assistant Credit Courses (grades 11 and 12), Career Center plus Career and Personal Planning courses for grades 8-12, Counseling, Course Programming, Student Learning Center, Aboriginal Support Services, Special Education Services, English as a Second Language Support, Career Preparation, and Community Support Partnerships.
- 3) Sense of Community: Students and staff shared the same goals and ambitions. Respect and fairness was continuously sought after and for the most part accomplished, or at least evident wherever we went the day we were there. There was an institutional sensitivity to the 'transition' phase for 8<sup>th</sup> graders. Older students were trained (not just assigned) as leaders for younger ones. They were capable of acting as one-on-one mentors or teacher assistants in the classroom and/or learning center setting. Peer advisory groups were formed and maintained for 5 years. Teacher teams were also formed and assigned to different study groups. These teams were given common prep times in order



to enhance the team effectiveness. Teachers were encouraged to teach something other than their field of study or expertise in order to gain a broader understanding and sense of the school environment. There was a sense of responsibility to familiarize the teachers with the nature of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> graders for further insight into the incoming 8<sup>th</sup> graders.

Mike Lynch, Coordinator of The Learning Centre introduced us to the ideas of a Vancouver educational psychologist, Dr. Gordon Neufeld who suggests that:

*...learning requires a context – one that is natural and not imposed from the outside. This would become obvious if we could strip away all that is contrived, such as the school that brings teachers and students together under the same roof, the schedule that brings them to share space at the same time, and the curriculum that governs their interaction. It is not enough to put an adult trained to teach into the same room as a child in need of learning and add a plan, a schedule and some materials. What is required is something natural to weave together what the teacher is offering and what the child requires.”*

### **The Trouble With Kids These Days.**

Dr. Gordon Neufeld [www.GordonNeufeld.com](http://www.GordonNeufeld.com)

Herein lies the underlying principles of the mission statement of Garibaldi Secondary. They are responsible for introducing the philosophy of Dr. Neufeld to this research team and they are the ones who come closest to exemplifying this philosophy. We thank them for both.

### **Vancouver Technical High School (VanTech)**

Doug visited NOVA (New Opportunities for Vision and Achievement), a small school within a school, also known as a mini-school. The primary purpose of NOVA is to provide students with an opportunity to complete grades 8 and 9 in a supportive and nurturing setting. Nova’s primary purpose is to work with students who are in danger of leaving school, or who have been out of school for some time, to provide a flexible, personalized learning environment in which they may renew the

pursuit of their educational goals. There is a lot of emphasis on social life skills and field trips that vary from recreation to vocational and inspirational.

The students have had a history of high absenteeism. After grade 8 in the small school elementary environment, students who start high school often find the transition stressful when added to difficult home situations. Absenteeism is one indicator for their dropping out of school. NOVA aims to help them stay and enjoy learning in an environment which provides them with plenty of support.

Two teachers cover the field of academic subjects and a youth worker helps in the classroom with behaviour issues and absenteeism and liaises with the family to deal with outside issues that are impacting the student’s school progress.

At the end of their stay in NOVA, they have three options if they want to stay in school. First is to return to the normal school stream and join the regular classes of Vancouver Tech. The second is to go on to one of several other alternative mini-schools within the high school (Spectrum, Sunrise, Links, Success programs, inter alia). The third option is to stream into vocational programs or, depending on learning abilities, into an in-house academic certificate which provides them with a school leaving certificate.

Funding comes from a special provincial grant for inner city schools and is distinct from the regular school board budget.

VanTech has garnered a very high reputation. It was part of a major study by the Canadian Education Association in 1995 entitled *Secondary Schools in Canada: The National Report of the Exemplary Schools Project* (the principal author was Dr. Jane Gaskell) which intensively studied schools once considered to be problems or in difficulty that turned themselves around to become models for others.

Another study is excerpted below:

*“[Vancouver] Tech has implemented a schools-within-a-school approach, which serves high academic achievers*

as well as those “at risk” of dropping out of high school...Parents, students, and staff alike say that Van Tech’s success derives from meeting the diverse (social, emotional, health, and intellectual) needs of students through its special programs and minischools. Diversity has been balanced by efforts to create a sense of community across the whole school (“Tech pride”). With some notable exceptions, students in most special programs attend four core courses, from grades 8 to 10; they are integrated with other students in elective courses and in grades 11 and 12. This strategy aims to balance the benefits of smaller, “family-like” environments with the opportunity to form friendships outside the mini-schools. Further, to make teachers in the special programs “conscious of the overall community,” they all teach regular classes, and administrators attempt to distribute resources and time fairly across the entire school. The general hope is that teachers and students will spread the enthusiasm for learning engendered within the special programs throughout the rest of the school.”

#### **“The alternative (dropout prevention) program dilemma**

*The alternative programs at Van Tech (Nova [New Opportunities for Vision and Achievement], Sunrise East, Spectrum, Links) strive to provide caring environments for students who have not, for a variety of reasons, succeeded in traditional classrooms. Teachers sometimes feel they are more successful at improving these students’ self-esteem and ability to get along with others than they are at engaging them academically. These programs provide a safety valve for the main school and a safety net for the students. Teacher efforts to foster pride in the alternative programs as “cool schools” may inadvertently highlight their distance from the mainstream program.”*

### **6.5 The Institutional Culture of Education**

As with most established institutions, particularly those guided by bureaucratic organization, the Vanier College system is one which reproduces itself. Its priorities, rules, delivery of programs and successful participants all espouse a different educational culture from the Sample48. Clearly there are accommodations and explicit attempts to bridge the divide between the college and underachieving students. But the scholarship students, professionals and teachers view post-

secondary formal education from the point of view of successful participants.

Scholarship students have found their stride in the system, like what they are doing, are very organized in the pursuit of their goals, and have grabbed their future with both hands. Their educational culture is that of ‘apprentices’ in post-secondary education and they are succeeding in the system.

Professionals observe that the underachievers arrive under-equipped when they study at the college, not only in their capacity for the attainment of academic objectives but in a number of behavioural expectations. They also note that certain high schools provide a significantly better grounding than others.

Teachers know that the ground has shifted beneath them. Their clientele, the students they face, are often less capable of handling college-level studies in the same way which students of a generation ago were able to do. Some teachers remain pre-occupied by the standards of disciplines and courses, and continue to expect that students who are not doing well in their classes will either seek help or deserve to fail. Other teachers have adjusted their pedagogical techniques. They have sought ways to engage those students who are challenged to succeed in their studies and have adjusted both their teaching methods and the amount and type of course content in their offerings in order to enable as high a rate of success as they can manage under the circumstances. Most teachers show little sympathy for the demands which paid work imposes on their students and are stunned by those who demonstrate little motivation to do the course work in order to succeed. Yet most teachers are also sympathetic to the student who appears overwhelmed by the requirements of college studies and are more than willing to try innovative methods to coach those students into a pattern of accomplishment.

Colleges and high schools in Quebec, Ontario and British Columbia whose special programs we have examined are the tip of a gathering iceberg. They are characterized, most importantly, by a recognition that many traditional institutional programs of study

simply do not work for a significant number of underachieving students. Either those students will continue to not qualify, fail and quit in significant numbers, or else programs are developed which enable access and success for those who are not likely to get there without special help. Those programs which we describe above in 6.4 share some essential characteristics: they provide personal guidance, they require low student-teacher ratios, and they make learning socially meaningful. Some programs also involve peer teaching, dedicated spaces within the institution, special certification and a deep involvement of non-teaching professionals.

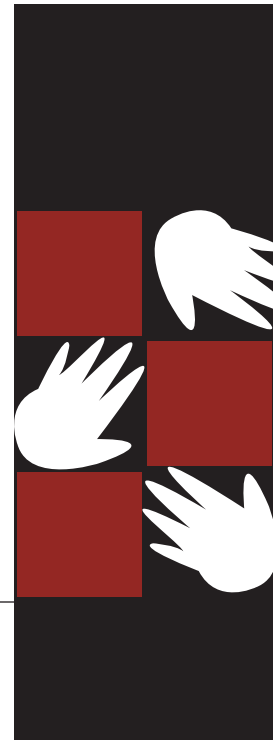
The institutional side of the gulf, then, presents to the underachieving student a consistent face of achievement and accomplishment, a rarefied set of behavioural standards. The Sample48 are foreigners in this territory. Their occasional successes are exceptional. Ultimately, the difference between the experience of the Sample48 and those who are a part of the system is under-ridden by a class structure which has traditionally protected higher education for the children of those who already had acquired it or could afford to buy it. The profound democratization of post-secondary study through the creation of Cegeps has brought some chickens home to roost a generation after their creation.

Mesdames Lebel and Belair very succinctly described the impact of this process of democratisation in their article “Transformer pour évaluer”.

*De fait le projet de démocratisation de l'enseignement et particulièrement l'accroissement des cohortes hétérogènes qui s'en suivit ont graduellement mis en exergue l'importance pour le personnel enseignant d'adopter des pratiques pédagogiques aptes à mieux rejoindre les nouvelles cohortes des élèves... plusieurs élèves arrivent désormais à l'école sans nécessairement maîtriser les codes et les normes implicite de la culture et de la réussite scolaires, un situation pouvant, dans bon nombre de case, nuire à leur acheminement académique.*

# Chapter Seven

## Conclusion: Complicated Lives, Complex Institutions



### Sources of Data

The findings of this study are based on five sources of primary data: interviews with the Sample48 of underachieving students conducted over a three year period, the Stonebanks Report from two feeder high schools, four focus groups with scholarship students, interviews with fourteen teachers and a focus group with three non-teaching college professionals. The secondary source of data is the academic records of the bottom quintile for the A02 cohort and for the Sample48. Information has also been gleaned from personal visits to and/or extensive investigation of seven secondary schools, colleges or universities with special programs for underachieving students. Finally, we have drawn both information and understanding from our Deep Organic Connection, which includes an intimate knowledge of the Explorations 2 program at Vanier College.

Each of these sources has provided a particular view of the process by which an underachieving student adapts to the challenges of Cegep study and of the educational cultures which operate in post-secondary institutions. The findings from each source are summarized in the appropriate sections of the report. What follows are general conclusions which flow from these summaries and general recommendations based on them.

### 7.1 The Gulf between Educational Cultures

This study clearly delineates two educational cultures, what might be called, had Hugh McLennan's coinage not already become clichéd, two solitudes. On the one hand is the institutional culture which has been the basis for secondary and post-secondary education as long as anyone can remember, what might be called school culture. On the other hand is an educational culture which has been created by a generation of underachieving students who have had difficulty meeting the minimum requirements for advancement in the system and whose connection to educational institutions is tenuous. Of course, there is a large middle ground not addressed in this study, that of the typical student who succeeds in college study earning average marks, and graduates from Cegep in three or four years (in two and three year programs!).

The culture of educational institutions and its successful participants, namely the teachers, professionals and high-performing students, are embedded in an ideology of education which is content-based, formal in its definitions of requirements, and meritocratic in its performance standards. This institutional view has academic objectives, measures performance by standard numeric indicators and operates as a gate-keeper over entrance to its own

programs and to other desirable futures which require formal credentials from post-secondary educational establishments. Most of those who represent the institutional side of the gulf have had personal advantages as a result of their success in the system and they support and respect the values and rules by which that system operates. With the exception of the scholarship students, our informants from the institutional educational culture have enjoyed relatively comfortable and rewarding careers in the educational system. Teachers and professionals are largely devoted to helping those who have difficulty meeting the standards of the institution, and work to provide supplementary help and encouragement to those who do not succeed easily.

The culture of the underachieving student is a system of values and norms based on life experience in a school system which has rarely provided either intrinsic satisfaction or academic success. Though many of the students in the bottom quintile of high school graduates have 'succeeded' in their secondary school studies, our research has shown that such success usually has little connection to a pattern of academic qualification to perform adequately in a Cegep program, particularly a program of choice for the student. These students stumble into Cegep largely unaware of the institutional expectations and often flounder in an academic world which is unfamiliar and mysterious, seemingly unsympathetic to the plight of a young adult who wants to get ahead in life while responding to its multiple pressures.

The most debilitating point of departure for both of these educational cultures is that the skill sets which are needed for effective performance in college study are neither provided in secondary school before their arrival nor effectively taught in the college. In addition, the high school educational culture, along with motivational, emotional and adaptive baggage which has accumulated during the high school experience, serves as an impediment to the kind of direct commitment to post-secondary study which colleges require. A further barrier for such a high school graduate is that the format of college

offerings provides very little 'wiggle room' for those students who want or need to carry on their responsible adult life, primarily paid employment, while studying. The intersection of these two cultures of education, then, is a quagmire of frustrations and disappointments on both sides of the gulf.

As this report is being finalized in January of 2006, it has been reported that from the autumn semester of 2005 at Vanier College, there are 962 'Review Boards,' i.e. students who have failed to meet the minimum requirements to remain in college as a student in good standing. With a full-time student population of just over 5600 students, this number of failures, at 17% of the total student population, is frighteningly close to a quintile. Neither college employees nor the nearly 1000 students who go through this process feel rewarded or validated when failure meets failure and the essential institutional response is to 'carry on.'

## 7.2 The Educational Culture of the Bottom Quintile

High school students in the two schools studied in 2004 showed an intense attachment to social life with peers at school and little interest in academic subjects. The teachers whom these students liked were those who respected them, focused on individual needs yet taught to the whole class, and were confident in their subject matter. The over-riding element of their daily life at school was stress derived from the social pressure of peers, the demands of school discipline and performance, as well as the threat of imminent expectations from the next step in their 'academic careers' - Cegep. Daily life in high school was primarily characterized by their ambiguous status as adolescents, caught between childish ways and adult responsibilities.

The Sample48, who had graduated from high school with grade averages under 70%, also report that their high school day was driven by social life with their peers. Many had developed coping mechanisms which had sufficiently served them that they passed through high school without incident, despite very little stated interest in the subject matter. A significant minority, however, had lost interest in school at one point and made some serious

adjustments, such as attending an adult centre or alternative high school in order to complete their Secondary V. Many had been buffeted around through several schools and languages on their way toward a high school diploma. Most were not active in extra-curricular activities, but were deeply tied to their families. Most had rewarding positive relationships with only one or two of their teachers, again those who took a personal interest in them. Several described chaotic high school classes in which teachers addressed a captive audience of good students at the front of the room, while the bottom quintile (at least) languished in the back.

For these students, almost to a person, school is primarily social life: In both high school and Cegep they went to school to see their friends. They usually claim to be deeply committed to their families, and are sometimes attending college due to parental pressure, yet are withdrawing from the more quirky or oppressive demands which their families sometimes impose. Many of their families are also challenged, troubled or divided, complicating the students' 'rite of passage' toward adulthood. Most of these students have studied in more than one language and many have grown up in immigrant families. They are often 'first generation students,' i.e. have become more educated than their parents by coming to college. Some have encountered exclusion, marginalization or racism, and several have lived in serious poverty most of their lives. Most of them work, many more than twelve hours a week. These students are usually living the full social and economic lives of young adults in addition to attending college full time. They are straining toward independence while still enjoying many privileges, but also some stigmas, of youth.

The educational culture of this bottom quintile is generally one governed by efficiency, i.e. maximum output for minimum input. They want to validate their place in society by attaining post-secondary diplomas and degrees, but are only rarely motivated by the subject matter of courses. They sometimes come up against a personal 'wall' of dissipation and indifference with respect to their studies, and

when they do, either find it difficult to resurrect any commitment to school, or occasionally encounter an epiphany which turns them around toward a pattern of accomplishment. They often have a poor estimation of their own academic capabilities and frequently do not understand the criteria of college grading schemes and therefore are often only dimly aware of their standing in a course. They do not respond well to many traditional forms of classroom teaching, are often resentful of content-based courses, and insist that what they learn be relevant to their lives in ways which they can immediately comprehend. Many of these students are simply not ready to fulfill the requirements of the program in which they are enrolled at college. Some of these students give up quickly, failing in their first semester and discontinuing their studies. Others persist almost beyond comprehension, singularly devoted to a dream of their future, even though they might be well into their twenties before they complete a Cegep program.

### 7.3 Structural and pedagogical challenges

It would be folly to suggest that, based on the results of this research, specific programmatic solutions could be recommended. However, certain patterns emerge in the contradictions between the institutional educational culture and that of the bottom quintile which suggest fruitful avenues for an accommodation by which more students in this cohort might succeed in achieving their educational aims or pursue suitable alternatives which allow them to take a productive and rewarding place in society.

#### Work and Study

It is imperative that these underachieving students be given the opportunity to study toward their college diploma at a pace which is appropriate in the context of their life demands. Most directly this means that the system, and ultimately the Ministry of Education, must discontinue the practice of financially penalizing those students who cannot afford, in their finances or in their life priorities, to study full-time. Tuition is waived only for those students who enrol on a full-time basis and succeed in most of

their courses. Those who must work while studying at a slower pace must pay tuition and often also accumulate significant debt while studying. The Ministry in addition places strong pressure on the colleges to graduate students in the minimum possible time, expecting them to meet unrealistic targets in this respect and putting pressure on students to race through their program as full-time students with burdensome course loads which virtually guarantee high failure rates for those with other heavy responsibilities, such as extended hours of paid work, as well as a large debt.

#### Learning Styles and Teaching Practices

The traditional delivery of college courses through 'chalk and talk,' i.e. the lecture or magisterial method, does not generally serve students in the bottom quintile well. The social nature of these young adults suggests that innovative pedagogies which employ their social desires as teaching tools could help to involve them in the academic conversation. Specific techniques of this type might be more commonly developed if college teachers had some form of teacher training.

#### Content and Process

The singular focus on course content which is emphasized in most college courses needs to be moderated toward a processual model which enables a student to commence his or her learning from a place in their experience which they can recognize. Put another way: it is one thing to deliver course content, it is another for a student to learn something. Teaching through process will normally also require a higher quotient of individual attention in the instructional strategy, and therefore more favourable teacher-student ratios as well as highly developed supplementary learning services.

#### Gatekeeper Courses

Certain courses are mandatory pre-requisites for programs at college and university, and therefore careers, or are absolutely required for graduation from a program, yet often

failed by students. These courses have served as stumbling blocks for many students who arguably could be capable of attaining the competencies of the program proper, and might well practice the occupation or profession admirably. Two generations ago, one could not be expected to teach English literature unless one had studied Latin or ancient Greek. Today one cannot qualify for entry to many programs without a certain level of Mathematics or Physical Science, or a minimum level of performance on a standardized test. Other programs have bottlenecks at the exit end of the program, such as the Integrative Project course in Social Science. Special effort needs to be made to assure success in such courses through earnest effort, appropriate help, carefully selected or specially trained teachers, favourable teacher-student ratios, or perhaps an adaptation of course material to honour its service function more than its disciplinary parameters.

#### Transitional programs

The bridge between high school and Cegep needs to be a 'covered bridge' for the bottom quintile. A successful program needs to address both the academic needs of the institution and the educational culture of the students. Such a program must have a comprehensive orientation early in the first semester, individual 'tracking' for at least two semesters, a complement of non-teaching staff which includes specialists in social helping fields, and uses teaching practices which are appropriate, conscious and coordinated.†

#### The Trades and other Practical Pursuits

Many students arrive at Cegep and aim for university study even though they show little enthusiasm for any program of study in this stream nor aptitude for the kinds of learning activities which will be expected of them. Often these individuals have not been made sufficiently aware of other forms of career training which can provide a rewarding career and less frustration. The generalized paradigm which underscores university study as the only appropriate avenue which can lead to

† The research team has extensive experience in this area and has formulated other program proposals.

a respectable career needs to be publicly re-examined.

#### Final Note

All of the essential data for this research was gathered at Vanier College. It should be noted that the student population at Vanier is highly heterogeneous, multi-ethnic and urban. Our students are approximately 40% anglophone, 40% allophone, and 20% francophone. A total of about 80 languages are spoken by our students. We are a rainbow of ethnicity with many skin colours and lots of people whose parents came from some other part of the globe. We are a bit of an exception in Quebec. Our 'complexion' is shared only by two or three other colleges in 2005. By 2025, given present demographic trends, most large colleges in Quebec, perhaps 20 in total, will look much like Vanier does today. The kind of complicated lives which we describe here may well be shared by many other young Quebecers.



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INTERVIEW SCHEDULE  
INTERVIEW GUIDELINES

<p><u>Family</u></p> <p>Description of family</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Demography</li> <li>Socioeconomic factors</li> <li>Extended, nuclear, single-parent</li> <li>Ethnicity and language</li> <li>Parents' background, language, education, employment</li> <li>Values</li> <li>Family dynamic</li> </ul> <p>How much freedom did they give you?</p> <p>What were the limits they set?</p> <p>What kind of pressure do you feel they put on you?</p> <p>What kind of time commitment does your family require in a week?</p> <p>How does your family contribute to your education?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Homework?</li> <li>Books in house?</li> <li>Reading habits?</li> <li>Language skills?</li> </ul> <p>Are you close to your peers within the family?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What is their attitude to school?</li> <li>How do they influence your attitude to schooling?</li> </ul>	
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<p><u>Religion</u></p> <p>The role of religion in the family? In your life?</p> <p>Impact of your religious beliefs on your daily decision making?</p> <p>Role models from church?</p> <p>Religious school?</p> <p>Time commitment?</p> <p>Social outlet? Clubs? Trips?</p>	
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<p><u>Girlfriend / Boyfriend</u></p> <p>Did you have one during high school or prior to Cegep?</p> <p>Do you have one?</p> <p>How long?</p> <p>Are they at school?</p> <p>What is their education?</p> <p>How do they influence you with respect to your education?</p> <p>Values? Motivation? Education?</p> <p>How do you feel you influence their educational career? Do you help them?</p> <p>Do they help you with your homework?</p> <p>Are they a distraction or do they aid your focus on school?</p> <p>What kind of time commitment does your girl/ boy friend require in a week?</p>	
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Pastimes

When you leave school, who do you hang out with?

How much influence do they exert over your school environment?

What is their attitude to school?

What are your pastimes outside of school?

Sports for fun?

Pool?

Car? Is it essential?

Games? Video?

Music?

Computers?

Television?

Telephone?

Exercise - Jogging? Training?

Hobbies?

How much time do you spend at it?

Are you obsessive about any of this?

Do they help with school or distract?

What role do you see with this / these pastimes in the future?

Community

Describe your local neighbourhood and childhood friends?

Do you have a peer group outside of school? Who are they?  
What is the composition of the group?

What is their attitude to school?

How do they influence your attitude to schooling?

Did you belong to local groups or organisations?

Which ones? Scouts, Guides

At what age?

When & why did you leave?

What did you learn from them?

Did they reinforce your school learning or distract from it?

What is the role of sports in your life?

How do sports and school intersect in your life?

What sports do you play?

What are your long term goals in sports?

How often do you play?

Are there any role models in sports for you?

How have your coaches influenced you?

How have your team-mates influenced you?

Do you volunteer to help coach sports or in scouts?

<p><u>School</u></p> <p>What kind of school did you go to? Name? Public or parochial?</p> <p>How did you get to school?</p> <p>What was the physical environment? Facilities? Books? Libraries? Labs?</p> <p>What was the environment in the classrooms?</p> <p>Recreational facilities?</p> <p>Extracurricular clubs and activities?</p> <p>What were/are your non academic pastimes at school?</p> <p>Describe your peers at school. Who are they?</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">How much influence do they exert over your school environment?</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">What is their attitude to school?</p> <p>Teachers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Who was good and why?</li> <li>- Who was bad and why?</li> <li>- What makes some better than others?</li> <li>- Are there any teachers that inspired you or serve as role models?</li> </ul> <p>Subjects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What subjects stimulated you? Why?</li> <li>- What subjects bored you? Why?</li> </ul> <p>Educational Career / Path</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Describe your educational career to date.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">What were the highs?</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">What were the lows?</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Were there changes in your progress? What? When?</p> <p>Why?</p>	
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<p><u>Work</u></p> <p>Are you working?</p> <p>    Paid or unpaid?</p> <p>How long have you worked?</p> <p>What do you need the money for?</p> <p>How many hours a week?</p> <p>What kind of satisfaction do you get from work?</p> <p>How do you rate your work ethic on the job?</p> <p>Do you have friends at work?</p> <p>What are your relations with your workmates?</p> <p>What are your relations with your boss?</p> <p>Do you see a career for yourself in this work?</p> <p>Is your education helping you with your work?</p> <p>How has your work influenced your education?</p>	
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## Teacher Interview Guide

## H03

Students today

Has there been a change in the students over the last couple of decades or in your experience?

What are you witnessing?

What is a strong student?

What is a weak student?

What is your experience with the students?

Do you feel there is a crisis?

How relevant do you think the students find the education we offer them?

How receptive are they to what you are teaching?

Do the students seek help?

How does your experience confirm or discredit the media reports about boys falling behind the girls in school?

Classroom:

How has the new student influenced you and what you do in the classroom?

What are the strategies you use because of the students we have, particularly with weak students?

What does the new student mean to your teaching style and delivery in the classroom, particularly with weak students?

- Your content?
- Your motivation?
- Your attitude?

Are you covering the same quantity of material as in the past?

Do you give extra help to weak students? And how much time do you spend with them?

Do you feel sucked into spending more time than you would like to with weak students?

How do you deal with weak language skills? How does it affect your delivery? How much extra work does this involve?

What tools or methods do you use to evaluate the students today? Is that different from in the past? Do you accommodate late submissions? ESL issues? Weak writers?

Strong Students

Do you have different standards for the strong students?

More lenient or tougher because they are strong?

Will the rewards for a strong student differ from those given to weaker students?

Are they encouraged more to achieve than weaker ones?

Do you remember strong students more often than weak students out of class?

Ethnic and Cultural Diversity

Do you have a good idea of the ethnic make-up of your classes?

Does this knowledge affect the way you teach?

How do you avoid being unfair?

When grading, do you consider the student's knowledge of English?

Rapport

What is the atmosphere you try to create in your classroom?

Are you strict or easy-going?

What kind of rapport do you try to build with individual students?

How do you think the students view you in terms of:

- Demands you place on them?

- Strictness?
- Friendly?
- Funny?
- Interesting?
- Stimulating?
- Boring?
- Expertise?

### General

What has been your most frustrating teaching experience?

What has been your most gratifying or satisfying teaching experience?

Role models as teachers?

Why?

What techniques did you admire?

Do you emulate?

### Background

Family - class and ethnic background?

- influence of you family in your educational career?

- role models?

- education of parents?

How long were you in school?

What degrees have you acquired?

What is your world experience outside of the education system?

How do you compare the standards imposed on you as a student with what the students of today have to live with?

## STUDENT LIFE HISTORY PROJECT

*The Student Life History Project is a study financed by the Ministry of Education. The purpose of this research is to help Cegeps respond to the needs of students. We want to identify the learning styles of students and to provide the tools for teachers to better serve their students' needs. It begins with the students describing their experience in the educational system up to the time when they enter Cégep. We hope to learn how they define success – the high points of their education as well as the lows. We are also interested in any other aspects of students' lives which affect their academic performance.*

\*\*\*\*\*

### CONSENT FORM

I understand that I am being asked to participate in a study of the educational life history, feelings and attitudes of students arriving at Vanier College in the autumn of 2002.

I understand that I will be interviewed three times during a period of three years, and that these interviews will be recorded.

I understand that the researchers will have access to my student records held by the Office of the Registrar.

I understand that my participation in this study is confidential and that whatever I say will not be linked to my name for college authorities or in published results.

I understand that I may ask for information about the research project at any time, including full access to the final published results.

I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time.

I understand the above statements and agree to participate in the study.

---

For clarification or further information

please contact the Principal Investigator:

Dr. Jock Mackay      Sociology/Humanities/ Explorations

Vanier College      G230 / A404

Phone                (514) 744-7218 / 7854

email                mackayj@vaniercollege.qc.ca

**Name**

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**Signature**

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**Guardian signature (if required)**

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**Date**

## What does it involve?

Over the next three years, you get to tell us your story three times.

Year one: Bring us into your history up to now.

Year two: Renewed perspective and update.

Year three: Final update and last word.

Together we can arrange the interviews at a time and place where you feel comfortable. The interviews should last no longer than an hour.



## What does all this accomplish?

The purpose of this research is to be better able to prepare students for Cégep study and provide the tools for teachers to better serve their students' needs.

### Consent Form

Everyone who participates in the project must sign the Letter of Consent. If you are under 18 years of age and interested in helping us on the project, then you must have your parent or guardian co-sign the consent form.

## Who are the researchers?

The three researchers have extensive and varied backgrounds in the College.

**Dr. Jock Mackay** is the coordinator of the Student Life History Project as well as the coordinator of the Explorations programme. He has taught for many years in the Sociology and Humanities Departments.

**Guy Quinn**, a member of the Physical Education Department since 1976, specializes in Outdoor Education, especially with the Science of Survival course in the Explorations programme.

**Doug Miller** works in The Learning Centre as a writing instructor. He has extensive experience working in multicultural situations and with students who need specialized support.

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# Student Life History Project

Autumn2002



JOIN US!!

TELL US YOUR STORY!

MAKE HISTORY!!



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## What is it?

The Student Life History Project is a study financed by the Ministry of Education. It begins with the students, like you, telling the story of their experience in the educational system up to the time when they enter Cégep. We want to learn about the high points of your education as well as the lows.

To understand all the elements that influence a student's performance at school, we feel it is important to learn about as many aspects of a student's life as possible. This would mean asking questions not only about school itself but your family, community involvement, extracurricular activities, work, etc...

## Who is this project aimed at?

First, it is aimed at the students and teachers who participate in the project. Second, it will help the students and teachers of the future. Third, a report of findings and suggestions will be submitted to the Ministry of Education



## What are the goals of the project?

We want to identify the learning styles of students as well as the methods of teaching which you feel work best with you.

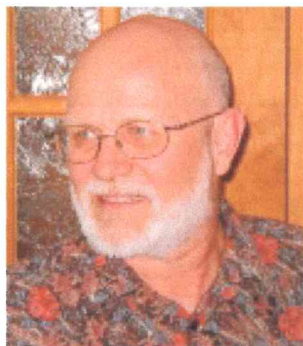
We are also interested in the other aspects of your life which affect your academic performance including questions about your family, the work you do, and the friends you hang around with.



## What is our plan?

We would like to interview 60 students before Christmas to draw a portrait of your educational experience up to the time you entered college. We would interview you again in the Fall semesters of 2003 and 2004 to follow how your story has evolved.

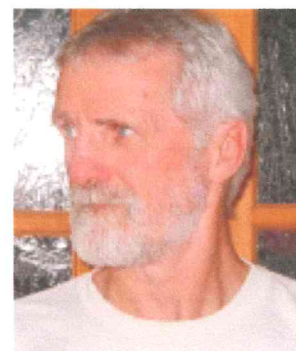
**Jock Mackay** holds a B.A. and M.A. in Sociology/Anthropology from Dalhousie University in Halifax and a Ph.D. in Folklore from Memorial University of Newfoundland. After 5 years teaching in the Laurentian University system of Northern Ontario, he came to Montreal and Vanier College in 1976, where he continues to teach Sociology and Humanities. Since 1995, Jock has directed much of his teaching energy to students in Vanier's Explorations program for weaker incoming students.



**Doug Miller** got his B.A. History at Carleton University and left for Malawi and Zambia, Africa as a cooperant and project officer. He has a *Diplôme en coopération internationale* from the University of Ottawa. In Montreal, he began work in the Registrar's office at Vanier College and for the last 16 years has been in The Learning Centre where he has focused on students arriving from high school with weaker marks and missing prerequisites, and works on issues of diversity. He has also acquired an M.A. in Sociology from Concordia University.



**Guy Quinn** has just completed his 30<sup>th</sup> year at Vanier College in the Physical Education Department and Explorations Program. His main area of specialization is Outdoor Education and Survival. His passion for experiential and holistic education has inspired him as a founder of the Explorations program and numerous double credit courses that cross and integrate disciplines. He has his B.Sc. in Education from Youngstown State University and Diploma in College Teaching from McGill University.



## A Student Life History Project

The statistics about failure and dropouts in the secondary and college levels of education suggest a deep malaise in the system. Teachers and college authorities despair over the weak performance and apparent lack of interest or motivation among so many of the students at this transition to post-secondary study. Facts and figures provide substance to the problem, but they explain very little about the human individuals at the centre of the issue, the students themselves. Mackay, Miller and Quinn followed 48 lower-achieving students for 3 years from the time they arrived at Vanier College in 2002. *Complicated Lives* depicts the conditions, attitudes and feelings of these 'underachieving' students and points to a gulf between their educational culture and the expectations of the college where they study. This holistic account of their lives uses open-ended techniques to put flesh on the bones of arid statistical accounts.