

# The Schooling They Need: Voicing Student Perspectives on Their Fourth Year in Senior High School

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This study used qualitative research methods to investigate the experiences of students who returned to senior high school for a fourth year in order to graduate. By drawing on student voices, this collaborative research partnership with students revealed that a fourth year of high school led to stigmatization and alienation of students and often did not address students' personal situations, their learning needs, or their need to graduate. Students identified desired changes in three areas: (a) school scheduling, flexibility, and graduation; (b) issues of teaching, learning, and curriculum; and (c) student desires for respect, belonging, and partnership. Implications of these findings for learners and educators are discussed.

Key words: fourth-year students, student voice, youth voice, high school completion, hermeneutic research, strength-based research

Faisant appel à des méthodes de recherche qualitative, les auteurs ont analysé les expériences d'élèves qui sont retournés au deuxième cycle du secondaire pour y effectuer une quatrième année en vue d'obtenir leur diplôme. Les témoignages recueillis auprès de ces élèves au cours de cette recherche révèlent qu'une quatrième année au deuxième cycle du secondaire a pour effet de jeter du discrédit sur eux et souvent ne répond pas à leur situation personnelle ou à leurs besoins quant à l'apprentissage ou à l'obtention de leur diplôme. Les élèves ont identifié trois domaines à améliorer : (a) l'horaire des cours, la souplesse de l'école et l'obtention du diplôme, (b) l'enseignement, l'apprentissage et le curriculum et c) la satisfaction des besoins des

élèves en termes de respect, de partenariat et de sentiment d'appartenance. Les implications de ces observations pour les apprenants et les enseignants sont discutées.

Mots clés : quatrième année au deuxième cycle du secondaire, témoignages d'élèves, témoignages de jeunes, fin du secondaire, recherche herméneutique, recherche axée sur les points forts.

Research studies at provincial, national, and international levels have consistently shown that higher levels of educational attainment – from grade school through post-secondary education – lead to greater attachment to the labour force (i.e., greater labour force participation, lower unemployment), reduced levels of reliance on income support programs, higher earnings, and higher job satisfaction (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008; Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2005; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2009). In addition to labour market advantages, many important societal benefits are associated with having a more highly educated citizenry, such as positive health outcomes, civic participation, and community engagement (Junor & Usher, 2004). Unfortunately, many youth face the possibility of not completing high school because of personal, socio-cultural, academic, and/or economic challenges. In comparison to high school graduates, youth who leave school without graduating are less likely to find employment or to get “good jobs” as determined by such factors as wages, hours, future promotion prospects, work relationships. They are more likely to earn lower incomes and have less secure employment; the stress of early school leaving can also constrain the ability of youth to cope with life stresses and to lead healthy lifestyles (Looker & Thiessen, 2008).

Although the overall high school graduation rate in Canada has increased in recent years, high school completion remains elusive for about one-quarter of Canadian youth (Blouin, 2008). Across Canada, public schooling systems allow students who do not graduate within the prescribed high school completion timeframe to return for one or more years to complete graduation requirements. In the province of Newfoundland and Labrador (NL), many students who do not complete the provincial graduation requirements after three years of senior high school opt to return to school for a fourth year (labelled “Level IV”) in an

effort to graduate. Although scant research evidence or public data is available to assist in identifying the graduation rates specific to fourth-year students in Canada, anecdotal accounts from administrators, teachers, and youth-serving community organizations suggest that large numbers of fourth-year students do not graduate. A review of the research literature yielded few details regarding the experiences of students who opt for a fourth year of senior high (Hull, 2009).

In this study we sought to understand the schooling experiences of fourth-year students at an urban school in Newfoundland and Labrador where school administrators and students identified a need for research into the experiences of students in their fourth year. Because of their concern with the number of fourth-year students who were not engaged in their learning and/or were not successfully graduating, school administrators invited us to conduct this study to examine fourth-year students' perspectives and to inform school-change initiatives. The fourth-year high school students participated in a number of focus groups and other meetings with us (Dale and Morgan) between September 2008 and June 2009.

#### ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

Educators, in their everyday practice, continue to meet with the challenges faced by youth who may be likely to leave high school prior to graduation (Bernard, 1997; de Broucker, 2005; Manning & Baruth, 1995; Willms, 2003; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). Many factors have an impact on students' ability to stay and succeed in school, spanning individual, familial, peer, school, and socio-cultural levels. Curriculum that does not relate to students' lives, ineffective pedagogical practices, disconnection from school culture, interpersonal conflict, and lack of classroom support are some of the variables linked to lack of student success in school, as well as poverty, family challenges, mental health issues, forms of social discrimination, or peer challenges (Donmoyer & Kos, 1993; Hixson & Tinzmann, 1990). Given the well documented negative implications of early school leaving at both individual and societal levels, educators and the larger community increasingly recognize the need to understand and respond to this complex interplay of factors (Audas & Willms, 2001; de Broucker, 2005; Guildford, 2000).

A plethora of school-based strategies have been articulated to support students who may be likely to leave school before graduation (Ackerman & Gibson, 1997; Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2006; Wang & Reynolds, 1995). These strategies, ranging from remedial to prevention-based approaches, promote a wide array of program initiatives such as individualized student learning plans, after-school homework clubs, diversity awareness programs, strategies to improve family involvement, breakfast programs, and student counselling support. Unfortunately, many of these strategies are not implemented in high schools. Further, many high schools fail to create and implement interventions that have been proposed for youth who are experiencing personal, socio-cultural, academic and/or economic challenges (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2006; Dei, James, Karumanchery, James-Wilson, & Zine, 2000; Thomson & Holdsworth, 2003). Given that youth who may not graduate are a heterogeneous group (de Broucker, 2005; Manning & Baruth, 1995), the creation of globalized, top-down, decontextualized responses needs to be questioned. As educational researchers, we felt it was important to do research with students to learn their specific perspectives about what would be helpful in the particular context of their current program.

#### A FOURTH YEAR OF SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL

In instances where students do not accumulate the minimum number of course credits to graduate after three years of senior high school, some enrol in a fourth year of senior high school. In other cases, students return for a fourth year to complete prerequisite courses for post-secondary programs or to improve on their cumulative average. As Hull (2009) points out, this group of "late graduates" is largely overlooked in educational research. In his analysis of graduate outcomes, Hull observed that, compared to students who leave school without graduating, fourth-years fare better in terms of their academic and employment outcomes. They also tend to have healthier lifestyles and to be more involved in civic life.

Although statistics of enrolment and graduation for fourth-year senior high students in Canada are for the most part unavailable and lack consistency when they are provided, indications suggest that students in

a number of jurisdictions pursue graduation through the fourth-year option. For example, in Ontario, where the optional "Grade 13" existed until 2003, students who returned to school for an optional year following grade 12 accounted for eight per cent of those who graduated in the province in 2008 (Canadian Press, 2009). One recent analysis of high school completion outcomes in Alberta found that about 20 per cent of students who did not complete high school within three years remained involved with the secondary system for a fourth year; however, only about 25 per cent of students who continued their senior high registration into the fourth year successfully completed high school (Alberta Education, 2009).

In Newfoundland and Labrador, 704 fourth-year students were registered in the provincial school system during the 2007-2008 school year – representing just over 3.5 per cent of the overall population of senior high school students. Although many of these fourth-year students were completing a partial course load, they are actually counted as full-time in provincial enrolment figures and for the purposes of allocating teacher resources to schools (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2000). Although an official measure of the graduation rate for fourth-year students in the province is not tracked by the Department of Education, anecdotal reports from administrators, teachers, and youth-serving community organizations suggest that many fourth-year students do not successfully complete provincial graduation requirements.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDENT VOICE

Although the voices of students are not often included in educational change initiatives (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Thomson & Holdsworth, 2003; Dei, James, Karumanchery, James-Wilson, and Zine, 2000), scholars have reported benefits when students' perspectives are included (Bolmeirer, 2006; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2006; Gardner & Crockwell, 2006; Nygreen, Ah Kwon, & Sanchez, 2006). Student voice initiatives have led to new educational policy, structures, and processes (Thiessen, 2007); improved teacher practice (Rudduck & Demetriou, 2003); fostered youth agency, belonging, and competence (Mitra, 2004); enhanced student-teacher relations (Prieto, as cited in Thiessen, 2007); and fostered school improvement (Alberta Education, 2009). In lieu of such findings, we

premiered our research with fourth-year students on the commitment that student voice needed to be a crucial element in identifying and addressing barriers to high school completion faced by youth.

The concept of student voice has varied meanings, emphases, and associated practices. Mitra (2007) argues, however, at the centre of student voice work is the “expectation . . . that students are included in efforts that influence the core activities and structures of their school” (p. 727). Moreover, there is an understanding within student voice initiatives that “students provide important insights into the classroom and schools they experience” (Thiessen, 2007, p. 40). Significantly, youth can and do know what they want and what they need to succeed in school (Cook-Sather, 2007; Gardner, McCann, & Crockwell, 2009; Gardner & Crockwell, 2006) and thereby offer valuable expertise to educators and the educational change process.

Student voice-focused research and initiatives (related to educational change) are aligned with a range of practices such as (a) providing venues to genuinely listen to student perspectives; (b) actively partnering with students in the processes of dialogue, reflection, and decision-making; and (c) serving as youth allies to student-led initiatives (Fielding, 2004; Gardner & Crockwell, 2006; Gardner, McCann, & Crockwell, 2009; Mitra, 2007; Thiessen, 2007; Thomson & Holdsworth, 2003). In our research we sought both to listen to and partner with fourth-year students. As researchers, we aligned ourselves with Thiessen’s (2007) assertion that “students have both authorship of and authority in their lives at school” (p. 40). In this vein, our student-voiced research provided openings to explore with fourth-year students how they “construct their subjectivity or lived experience” (Smyth & Hattam, 2001, p. 402) of schooling within the specificities of their particular educational context.

Our qualitative study provided an opportunity for university researchers to partner with students to examine their perspectives on being in fourth year. The objectives of the study were to explore and describe student experiences of and perspectives on

- barriers and challenges they encountered in progressing to high school graduation,
- opportunities and support needed for high school graduation, and

- strategies and responses they would like to see put in place to support their success in school and help them to graduate.

#### STUDY METHODOLOGY

For this study, we used a qualitative research approach to understand and describe student experiences. We chose this methodological approach because it enables researchers to “stress the socially constructed nature of reality” and thereby “seek answers to questions that stress *how* social experience is created and given meaning” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 10). Here emphasis is placed on seeking rich accounts of subjective experiences and points of view with the goal of honouring and representing the complex and changing landscape of their internal and external contexts (Denzin & Lincoln). In keeping with this philosophy, we used a qualitative research approach because we believe that students’ experiences are best understood and interpreted through an approach that centres on their individual frames of reference.

Within this qualitative paradigm, we drew from participatory, strengths-based, and hermeneutic perspectives. Participatory research is conducted with, rather than on, participants (e.g., students) (Torre & Fine, 2006). With this method, students are viewed as knowledge producers and agents and co-collaborators of change rather than as passive recipients of educational research, programs, and school reform (Heron & Reason, 1997; Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Torre & Fine, 2006). This perspective guided our efforts to position fourth-year students as active partners in the research process. We used strength-based perspectives in this study, which attend to students’ capacities, resilience, agency, and “funds of knowledge” (see Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005), to honour and validate their expertise, knowledge, and meaning of being in the fourth year of senior high and to contrast deficit-based and problem-focussed perspectives of student returning to complete a fourth year of senior high (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Edwards, Mumford, & Serra-Roldan, 2007; Kim, 2006).

As Friedman and Rogers (2009) state, many participatory researchers “align themselves with [the] hermeneutic point on the essential role of understanding meaning,” which means “understanding the world as the participants have come to understand it, and facilitating their under-

standings and choices about change as well as attempts to create new realities through communicative processes such as dialogue" (p. 33). Consistent with a hermeneutic perspective, we were interested in understanding and describing students' perspectives from their own vantage points, or as Elbow (as cited in Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) states, we were interested in a process "of affirming or entering into someone's thinking or perceiving" (p. 4). In the hermeneutic perspective, the process of active dialogue and reflection with participants and their texts enables a researcher to make meaning of participants' experience (Smith, 1991). In the current study, this observation meant that we actively engaged in collaborative dialogue with students and their recorded texts throughout data collection and analysis. Hermeneutics, as a dynamic interpretative process, strives to be "holistic and integrative" because it "seeks to understand the whole in light of its parts, repeatedly testing interpretations against the available evidence until each of the parts can be accounted for in a coherent interpretation of the whole" (Moss, 1994, p. 8). These interactive and integrative processes, often referred to as the "hermeneutic circle" to denote the "circularity of [the] interpretative process" (Smith & Heshusius, 1986, p. 9), helped us to reveal how students felt about being in their fourth year and the meanings they gave to this experience. They further supported us as researchers to construct interpreted texts of their experience from their point of view and to gain a better understanding of the fullness and complexity of their experience. Ultimately, this collaboration led to a further extension of the "hermeneutic circle" to include how our socio-cultural and ideological contexts shaped student meanings, our interpretations as researchers, and our collaborative (researcher-student) analyses. This expansion of analysis is reflective of critical hermeneutics (Moss, 1994).

#### *Study Site*

We conducted this research at a high school (grades 10 to 12) located in St. John's, NL, with an enrolment of over 750 students. This school serves a catchment area that includes both the local area and a small community outside St. John's. According to school administrators, a large minority of the student population comes from low-income backgrounds and approximately 30 to 40 per cent of students are enrolled in General, as



opposed to Academic or Honours, program curricula. During the year that this research took place, 44 students initially enrolled for a fourth year of senior high. Seventeen of them graduated at the end of the school year – a statistic that is consistent with numbers of fourth-year graduations in prior years.

#### *Fourth-Year Structure*

There was no official fourth-year program or curriculum for these students. Instead, fourth-year students completed a patchwork of courses from other grade levels (mostly grade 12) ranging from a single course to a full course load. These students did not have a home classroom; rather, they were integrated into other grade-level classes by assignment to individual teachers as “teacher helpers.” During any free periods in their schedules, fourth-years were expected to attend the class of their assigned teachers. As a result, these students frequently completed independent work while their assigned teachers were teaching other material to students at another grade levels. No guidance, school, or academic support was tailored to address fourth-year student needs specifically.

#### *Participants*

Of the 44 students enrolled as fourth-years, 31 accepted our invitation to participate in this study. Some students had only a small number of outstanding high school graduation requirements left to complete while others needed to complete a larger number of courses – in some cases a full course schedule – to fulfil the high school graduation requirements. Some of the students had consistent academic difficulties in school because of a variety of personal, socio-cultural, academic, and/or economic challenges. Some students had higher-than-average rates of absenteeism due to health, personal, social, or unexplained reasons.

For many of the students, individual and family finances were particularly challenging and consequential to their schooling. In some instances, students were forced to contend with not being able to cover the costs of their basic needs, such as lunch at school, transportation, or school supplies. Some reported that they did not have sufficient financial resources for school activities and had to work to earn funds to cover the cost of participating in social and recreational events. Beyond basic

needs, many students expressed frustration that they were not able to afford amenities associated with youth culture such as mobile phones and digital music players.

We partnered with students as both participants and student researchers. As participants, they explored the topics and themes of the research study through group discussions and individual reflections. In their role as researchers, which evolved over the course of the study, students were involved in analysis and validation of data.

#### *Data Collection and Analysis*

The primary means of data collection involved a series of 14 focus group sessions with fourth-year students. We held all focus group meetings during the regular school day between October and December 2008. Participation in these sessions was voluntary with the number of students varying from meeting to meeting – averaging about 10 students per session. The focus groups took place in two phases: a data gathering phase (8, 1-hour sessions) and a data analysis phase (5, 2-hour sessions), and followed a process that was essentially iterative and evolutionary.

Our field notes and the students' notes were the primary means of recording data during these meetings. We regularly asked students to respond to questions on feedback sheets that we provided. We transcribed this written feedback from students following each meeting session. Although the primary role of the students during the data gathering phase was that of research participant and, likewise, their primary role during the data analysis phase was that of researcher, a degree of overlap occurred in student roles throughout the research study.

Throughout the research, we subjected the data that students contributed to an extended period of analysis that involved individual and cooperative reflection and joint construction, validation, and confirmation of key themes, issues, and concerns emerging from the data. Following the focus groups with students, we subjected the data to an additional layer of analysis. Specifically, we reviewed all the data within identified themes and categories and subjected them to further scrutiny. The students reviewed the identified themes with us to ensure that they accurately represented their perspectives; subsequently, we undertook additional analyses to identify sub-themes within each theme. This addi-

tional layer of analysis played an important role in making visible further complexity and diversity among and across students' perspectives.

#### STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON BEING IN "LEVEL IV"

We organized student perspectives into three broad categories of findings: (a) student perspectives on course/program scheduling, flexibility, and graduation; (b) student viewpoints on issues of teaching, learning, and curriculum; and (c) student desires for respect, belonging, and partnership (see also Gardner & Kirby, 2009). We identified and described a variety of themes and sub-themes within each of these categories of findings to provide a rich and multi-dimensional understanding and portrayal of fourth-year students' experiences.

##### *Scheduling, Flexibility, and Graduation*

Concerns and issues raised by students regarding scheduling, flexibility, and graduation were associated with the scheduling of their classes, course load and selection, the absence of flexible options, and/or alternative arrangements for completing their senior high school graduation requirements. A sampling of student comments from each of these themes is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Scheduling, Flexibility, and Graduation

Theme	Student Voices
Partial course load scheduled over full year	"Finish school in less time so we can figure out our future."
	"Make it a shorter year – semesterize the year!!"
	"I only need 4 credits, and I don't like the fact that I have to stay the whole school year to get them. It's only 2 classes, and I think I should be able to get them done within the first semester of school."
Class scheduling	"I think they should try and get 4th years out as quick as possible."
	"Having 2 or 3 free periods between classes is not a good thing because it makes us not want to wait around for class." "The only thing I would rather is if all my classes on my

Full course load not always needed	<p>schedule were closer together. Where I'm only taking 3 courses, 2 are together, say, in the morning, and my last one isn't until the end of the day and I don't like to wait with nothing to do for 2 or 3 periods."</p> <p>"There are times I sit at [a coffee shop] for 2 hours because of free periods."</p> <p>"If our schedules were morning classes, we could work part-time to pay for whatever books or school stuff we needed."</p> <p>"I'm back for my grade 12 math. I'm getting As but still I'm in classes I don't need because they don't want me to have an empty schedule."</p>
Flexibility in course selection	<p>"I don't need a full course load. I am doing courses that I already got my credits for. I am doing useless courses that are not going to help me with what I want to do."</p> <p>"I'm re-doing courses I already have the credits for, so it's pointless for me to have to stress to get good marks in courses I already have."</p> <p>"[The school] needs to reorganize the way people graduate. Right now it is much harder and more of a struggle to graduate with these unnecessary courses that should not be a requirement to graduate."</p>
Alternative high school completion options	<p>"We should be allowed to challenge requirements because we really only want to do what we need and get out . . . Students should pick their own courses because we are going to do what we need/want and what will help us in our career."</p> <p>"It would be a lot more convenient to be able to finish in half the time so they can get out and go to university or college."</p> <p>"Summer school was better because I only had to focus on one subject at a time. I could concentrate."</p> <p>"Phases of the school year are a problem. How about a couple of months in school, then a short break?"</p>

*Partial Course Load Scheduled Over Full Year.* Many participants had already successfully completed a number of the courses required to graduate. However, because all course offerings in the school calendar ran from September to June, students needed to attend school for 10-months to complete required courses. In some instances, students reported adding additional, unneeded courses or courses that they had

already completed to avoid a partial load. Frustration with the current model was particularly evident among students who required just one or two courses to graduate. Students pointed out that a semester system or other compressed course/program format would be preferable to the current option because it would permit them to complete required courses in a shorter timeframe.

*Class Scheduling.* Because class schedules in the senior high school were designed to accommodate students who are completing a full course load rather than a partial one, it was not uncommon for our fourth-year students to have lengthy breaks between their scheduled classes. Students reported that long breaks between scheduled classes in the morning and afternoon provided a disincentive for them to attend all their scheduled classes in a given day. Working students in particular experienced difficulty establishing and accommodating regular work schedules with employers because class schedules were often spread across a school day with long breaks in between. To alleviate these problems, students recommended that efforts be undertaken to schedule fourth-year students' classes back to back and/or group their classes in either the morning or afternoon.

*Full Course Load Not Always Needed.* Despite needing to complete less than a full course load, many fourth-year students noted that they had to enrol in a full slate of courses nonetheless. Some students were completing courses they did not need for graduation while others were taking courses that they had already successfully completed. A number of students indicated that they had decided to take on a full course load because they could not otherwise justify returning to school for a full year to complete a partial load. In some cases, students felt that their successful completion of graduation requirements might be compromised because they needed to devote attention to unneeded courses. Unless they explicitly expressed a desire to complete additional courses, students suggested that fourth-year students stick to only those courses that they need to graduate.

*Flexibility in Course Selection.* Consistent across all students' comments was the desire to have more input and decision-making power to determine their course selection. Where they had options to choose between non-mandatory courses, they wanted teachers, guidance counsel-

lors, and administrators to offer advice and support but not make decisions regarding course selection for them. Many fourth-year students expressed their desire to graduate as soon as possible because they were anxious to gain admission to post-secondary education or to enter the workforce. Having to complete elective courses in areas such as art, enterprise, or physical education for example, which did not move them explicitly towards their career path, was frustrating for some students. Several students wanted to focus exclusively on core subjects because they felt school was not a positive experience for fourth-years and they wanted to be finished as soon as possible.

*Alternative High School Completion Options.* Fourth-year students expressed an interest in policies to enable them to complete graduation requirements in a timelier manner. Students suggested that additional options for high school completion be developed within or outside of the current school structure. For example, students indicated that they would like to have an opportunity to complete high school diploma requirements outside of the traditional school environment and/or to be provided with a form of high school equivalency testing comparable to the General Educational Development (or GED) test.

#### *Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum*

Reflecting on their school experiences and knowledge of themselves as learners, students expressed their desire for more student-centred teaching, learning, and curriculum. Students suggested that their success as learners would be improved with the following changes: (a) active, collaborative, and inviting learning environments; (b) curriculum that was relevant to their lives and goals; (c) more academic support; (d) choice and flexibility of evaluation; (e) respect, partnership, and equality in teacher-student relationships; and (f) a youth-positive school culture. Table 2 provides some examples of student comments corresponding to each of these themes.

Table 2: Students' Comments on Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum

Theme	Student Voices
Active, collaborative, and inviting learning environments	<p>"Classes need to be fun . . . more relaxed and informal . . . less tense."</p> <p>"Some people work better by working with others and doing hands on."</p> <p>"We need more productive dialogue and to have conversations."</p> <p>"Everyone should jointly teach and learn together, students and teachers."</p>
Curriculum relevant to students' lives and goals	<p>"Curriculum needs to be more relevant and real to life and interesting."</p> <p>"We should definitely have a course by itself that teaches about sex, drugs and diseases because I don't feel we are taught enough about it in biology. It is something that we need to be educated in so that we don't go out and get pregnant or get a preventable disease."</p> <p>"We need to be able to devise curriculum together."</p>
More academic supports	<p>"There is inequality because some students get more support."</p> <p>"I agree with having individual attention, because we all have needs. If I need help with something I don't want to be getting help in groups."</p> <p>"With more support we as students could possibly have more learning capability and actually exceed in marks."</p> <p>"Should have someone to check up on you and make sure everything is going well, and you don't need anything."</p>
Choice and flexibility of evaluation	<p>"Some people do great on exams and some don't. There should be an equal grade for exams and assignments."</p> <p>"Supplementary should be able to be taken anytime, as long as you feel ready and that you studied enough."</p> <p>"I think exams should be 50% of the course, because if you miss a lot of classes, and tests, and assignments and you're failing, if you study enough and know the material, then that means there's still a chance that you can pass the course."</p>
Respect, partnership, and equality in	<p>"In school, everyone should be on the same page. No one should be better than anyone else. Everyone should show respect."</p>

student-teacher relationships	"Relationships with teachers should be compromise/give and take."
	"Some teachers joke around with us, but other teachers take it too far and don't even care about it. Then people's feelings get hurt."
	"Teachers want us to act like adults but treat us like children."
A youth-positive school culture	"Students should feel very comfortable when they come to school, instead of feeling weird about coming."
	"Socializing is very important in youth's lives. We need to interact with other people."

*Active, Collaborative, and Inviting Learning Environments.* All the fourth-year students commented on ways to improve their learning environment. Some students felt challenged and frustrated because they were returning to the same school learning environment that had not been effective for them in earlier grades; they wondered how they would succeed this time. Students pointed out that their engagement and learning was better supported by learning environments that connected to "how they learn" and "who they are." Students expressed a desire for (a) hands-on and activity-based learning, (b) smaller, multi-purpose classrooms, (c) respectful teacher-student partnerships, and (d) learning through open dialogue and group work.

*Curriculum Relevant to Students' Lives and Goals.* Overall, students viewed curriculum as something that should connect to their lives and envisioned curriculum changes to better meet their needs and interests. Students generally accepted they had to take core courses (e.g., mathematics, English), but many expressed difficulty in maintaining interest in school curriculum that did not connect what they were learning to their lives and/or future goals. Students suggested (a) the addition of a course to address issues essential to student well-being and wellness (e.g., sexually transmitted diseases, drug awareness, budgeting, cyber-bullying, relationships), (b) the creation of specialized courses in areas of student interest, (c) and the option of not taking elective courses unrelated to their goals. They recommended that students and teachers partner to devise curriculum together to better connect courses to students and their interests. Students also asserted that every student has individual



learning needs and challenged a “one-size-fits-all” approach to teaching and learning.

*More Academic Support.* Participants felt strongly that more academic support in grades 10, 11, and 12 would help students avoid ending up in a fourth year. They contended that fourth-year students often did not get the level of help they needed to succeed and complete school. Some participants expressed the need to advocate on behalf of themselves to get the support they needed to do well in school. They also observed that some students got more support than others and in some cases “struggling students do not get enough help.” They recognized the need to embrace learner diversity and suggested the implementation of a combination of both individual (e.g., one-on-one support during and after class) and group support (e.g., tutorials, homework clubs, peer supports).

*Choice and Flexibility of Evaluation.* To facilitate their needs and success in moving towards graduation, students indicated that they required more choice and flexibility in evaluation, especially in instances when they were absent from school for personal or family reasons. They contended that students should not fail a course strictly for poor attendance due to personal, health, or family issues. They suggested the need for flexibility to allow some exams and tests to count for more of a course grade and for opportunities to make up for missed evaluations. Students offered a number of recommendations for changes in final and supplementary examination policies including additional opportunities to write supplementary exams and the possibility of completing final examinations worth 100 per cent of course grades.

*Respect, Partnership, and Equality in Student-Teacher Relationships.* Students placed a high value on good student-teacher relationships and appreciated teachers who listened, cared, had a good sense of humour, and were respectful toward them. By and large, students wanted a greater balance or equality of power in student-teacher relationships. They believed that they should be treated with more mutuality and partnership in light of their abilities, age, and maturity as young adults. Students highlighted (a) the importance of interacting positively (e.g., using positive tones, body language or words), (b) hearing both perspectives (e.g., for teachers to hear and understand their perspectives), and (c) possess-

ing the right to disagree respectfully and/or challenge when they felt they were being “wronged.”

*A Youth-Positive School Culture.* The fourth-year students spoke of the need to create and maintain a school culture that was positive towards youth culture and realities. Here students highlighted the importance of feeling that their opinions and views mattered, having a sense of school pride, spirit, and being involved as well as being able to have fun and find school interesting.

*Respect, Belonging, and Partnership*

When asked how they felt the fourth-year experience could be improved, all students agreed that fourth-year students should have a homeroom as students in other grades do and most expressed interest in additional guidance services. They spoke of improving the fourth-year school experience by building a culture of greater respect and positive regard towards fourth-year students and having school rules negotiated between students and teachers and administrators. Examples of student comments relating to these themes are provided in Table 3.

*Homeroom and Lack of Physical Space.* Students strongly recommended that fourth-years have a sense of space, belonging, or “home” at school, and all expressed concern about not having a fourth-year homeroom or a designated physical space in the school for them. Students who were not completing a full course load noted that they had no place to go in school between classes. Most students expressed frustration about this reality and felt they were more likely as a result to be in conflict with school rules when not in class (e.g., being at their locker or in the hallway when not permitted). Not having a homeroom or a designated physical space to go to when they did not have class meant that some students felt forced to leave the school grounds. They felt the need for a positive and productive place to wait, study, get help with their school work, and/or interact with other students who did not have class.

Table 3: Students' Comments on Respect, Belonging, and Partnership

Theme	Student Voices
Level IV homeroom and lack of physical space	<p>"We don't have a place to go for extra study or to be during a free period. We have to leave the building which is unfair."</p> <p>"We are told we need to be role models but they don't give us any options or space to spend our time creatively or productively."</p> <p>"They should definitely have somewhere for us to go (our own room) when we don't have a class so that we would be more inclined to actually stay in school to go to our next class."</p>
Guidance and support	<p>"Ever since Level I, I haven't been on the right path. In the whole time I have been in high school, I have never picked my courses. Someone always did it for me, and they never did look at what I needed . . . we should get more guidance on courses we need to do for what we want to do when we get out of high school."</p> <p>"It's my last year at trying to graduate and there isn't much support to helping pass classes that I struggle in."</p> <p>"There is a lack of support. Whenever you have a question the answer is always 'this is your fourth year ; you should know this'."</p>
Respect and positive regard	<p>"People think that because you are a 4th year that you are bad because unlike everyone else you didn't finish school in 3 years."</p> <p>"We should get respect for coming back to get credits."</p> <p>"We shouldn't be treated like there is a debt we have to pay."</p> <p>"Teachers look down on us as 4th years. We are treated like lower class."</p>
School rules	<p>"They need to celebrate students who come back."</p> <p>"Many rules have been formulated to deal with 'worst case scenarios' students. Most 4<sup>th</sup> years do not fit this stereotype."</p> <p>"We can't join in any extra-curricular activities or sport teams or go on trips. We can't join student council."</p> <p>"We should be able to listen to MP3 player when doing independent study."</p>

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“We should be able to use our cell phones when we don’t have a class.”

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*Guidance and Support.* Most students mentioned that fourth-years needed more academic, career, and personal counselling support. They emphasized that school guidance was crucial in helping students complete their required courses and central to their sense of belonging in school. Many felt their needs and issues as fourth-year students should be a higher priority but they often “fall between the cracks” while students at other grade levels received attention. They felt that this additional attention would enable students to better choose courses needed for graduation, and assist them in considering their options for further education or work after graduation. Prominent in many students’ comments was the need to access support personnel with whom they could feel comfortable and who were able to genuinely listen, understand, and help them deal with both school and out-of-school challenges.

*Respect and Positive Regard.* Students felt that, because they were fourth-year students, they were not always treated positively. Several students spoke openly about “making mistakes” and “choices” that had an impact on their schooling and which they regretted; however, they believed that there existed a general perception of fourth-years as negative role models. They frequently noted their concern that fourth-year students were regarded as examples of what “not to do” or “not to be.” Some felt that, because they had not finished senior high school after three years, they were expected to fail, an expectation that created, as one student indicated, a “self-fulfilling prophesy.” Students felt they were demonstrating their determination to graduate by returning to school, and they needed their motivation and effort to be valued and acknowledged. However, some students believed that teachers, administrators, and school staff had “given up on” them because they had already been “given enough chances.” Students indicated that teachers and administrators should never underestimate how important it was to them, as students, to feel respected and to be viewed positively by educators. They expressed a desire to be seen for what they offered the school as individuals and contended that it was important for teachers, administrators, and school staff to have “more trust” and “confidence” in them.

Students often noted that a positive school environment for them involved being seen as full and positive contributors to the school community.

*School Rules and Practices.* Many students felt some school rules were particularly restrictive for fourth-year students. In particular, these rules prevented them from participating in certain school activities. For example, age criteria prohibited fourth-year student participation in intramural competitive sports. In addition, unlike for other grade levels, there was no position on student council reserved for a fourth-year student representative. Students felt that other rules, such as those pertaining to absenteeism, did not allow for flexibility or awareness of individual or special circumstances and needs. In other cases, students believed that rules and practices were based on the premise that fourth-year students were not trustworthy. For example, rules related to fourth-year use of the library or other spaces during free periods were based on incidents involving fourth-year students in previous years. Students also contended that school administrators did not provide sufficient room for their perspective or collaboration in the development and implementation of school rules and policies that affected them. Many students were interested in the notion of negotiating school rules with teachers and administrators. Some felt it was ironic that there seemed to be more rules to burden fourth-year students than in previous years while at the same time many of them were the oldest students in school and often held adult responsibilities in their out-of-school lives. On the other hand, they felt that to graduate they must come to school and face being watched and/or treated "like kids." In their interactions with teachers, they often felt they were treated in a belittling and diminishing way rather than with respect. They felt singled out because they were perceived and treated as negative role models (i.e., "what not to be") and because there were additional rules only for them (e.g., with regard to extracurricular activities, attendance, being assigned to a teacher).

## DISCUSSION

For a considerable number of youth in Newfoundland and Labrador and other jurisdictions, returning to senior high school for a fourth year represents their sole or most viable option to complete a high school dip-

loma. Because of the importance of a fourth year for these students, it is disconcerting to note, as Hull (2009) states, that fourth-year students have been largely overlooked in educational research. This omission is in part because senior high school programs in many jurisdictions, which generally designed to provide the three final years of study in a 12 or 13-year education system, do not attend to the specific needs of fourth-year students. As a result, often little mention of fourth-years appears in the senior high school curriculum and graduation certification documents of school boards and government ministries.

Through their voices in this research, we heard that fourth-year students' academic needs frequently go unmet. Because the school system was designed to graduate students at the end of three (not four) years of senior high school, many students found that their school, and the school system's programs and policies more broadly, were unprepared to meet their needs as learners. At the school site for the present study, the ineffectiveness of the existing "program" for fourth-year students was evidenced in that fewer than half the fourth-year students graduated during the year that we conducted this research. The problem of low graduation rates was in fact one of the primary reasons why administrators at the school saw the need for this research.

The student voices and perspectives outlined in our findings reveal three areas of challenge that impacted their progress and success: (a) scheduling, flexibility, and graduation; (b) teaching, learning, and curriculum; and (c) respect, belonging, and partnership. In articulating their challenges and making recommendations, students outlined, in many respects, their perspective on what a more effective fourth-year program would look like.

- First, this would entail a program that offered fourth-years a home-room setting for their exclusive use. As it stood, the absence of a designated space and a "place" for fourth-years in part contributed to feelings of being singled out and their alienation from the school community.

- Second, fourth-years desired a compressed class schedule, rather than one with large time gaps between classes to make more efficient use of their time.

- Third, they wanted alternatives within and outside the school structure to complete graduation requirements earlier.

▪ Fourth, they felt they would benefit from academic, guidance and career support customized to ensure that fourth-year students receive the help they need with coursework, personal-social issues, and stresses that had an impact on their lives as students, such as balancing their work and school schedule and making the transition to post-secondary studies or full-time employment.

Fourth-year students in this study held complex understandings of their strengths and needs as learners seeking graduation. Their perspectives relay a keen awareness of the discrepancies between the kinds of academic and socio-cultural school practices that support student success toward graduation and what they felt they received as students. It is noteworthy to recognize the level of congruence between students' recommendations to improve school completion rates and current research and educational theorists' understanding of effective teaching and learning practices (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005). For example, the students expressed a desire to engage in group work and to have opportunities for active learning, for more student involvement and leadership opportunities, for a greater sense of belonging for students, and for positive attitudes and responses towards students instead of deficit-based interactions.

Fourth-year students felt they deserved added respect and positive regard because they had the courage and drive to return to high school – a decision that, for personal, social, and/or economic reasons, was often difficult for them. Unlike peers who left school following grade-12 graduation, students who returned to school for a fourth year found themselves in an uncomfortable place that was inconsistent with the dominant cultural narrative regarding school success and completion. Moreover, upon becoming fourth-year students, they found themselves facing a school context that offered them less status, respect, and positive regard. They endured feelings of deficiency because their reality did not align with the existing cultural and educational expectations. In effect, the fourth-year students, regardless of their reasons for returning to high school, felt that as a group they were perceived and treated as negative role models – as examples of what “not to do” or who “not to be.” They were disappointed that they were not allowed and/or encouraged to participate in certain school activities, and that some school rules were par-

ticularly restrictive for fourth-years. They questioned whether being assigned to a teacher as a “teacher-helper” instead of having a homeroom was of real benefit to their learning environment and school experience. They shared personal experiences that suggested that fourth-year students often “fell between the cracks” and did not have access to positive, sensitive, and non-judging support persons. These experiences stood in conflict with their strong desire to be perceived and treated with positive regard and fairness. Through these revelations, this research demonstrates how becoming a fourth-year student can serve to reinforce rather than help to address the inequities associated with fourth-year students’ individual and collective challenges.

Many fourth-year students in this study strongly contended that they were considered and treated unequally in comparison to students in other grade levels. Indeed, some problems identified by students were rooted in differential application of school rules based on their status as fourth-years. In some cases, such as the question of a homeroom or other designated physical space for fourth-years, equality of treatment of students would suitably address the identified needs of students. However, treating fourth-years in the same fashion as students in lower grade levels would not sufficiently address many of the issues raised. The roots of fourth-year problems lie, in many instances, in the equal treatment of unequal students. If the intended aim of the school system is to enable all students to achieve the same quality of school outcomes, then educators need to address the particular issues of fourth-year students to recognize and attend to their particular realities and needs. In the instance of class scheduling problems, for example, the most straightforward path to resolution would be to deal with fourth-year scheduling on an individual student basis. Likewise, the need for more academic, personal, and career counselling support must necessarily be attended to at both a collective and individual student level (i.e., on a case-by-case basis).

Although some of the identified issues could be dealt with at the school level, other issues, such as the question of alternative completion options (e.g., compacting curriculum to shorten the school year), are more complex, implicating the whole school system. Resolving issues of this type would require school reform that is comprehensive and collaborative across the school system as well as innovative enough to effec-



tively support the successful graduation of fourth-year students. One means to address the strengths and needs of youth for further schooling following grade 12 is to expand the adult education and upgrading programs already in place. In addition to expansion, these programs would require reorientation to support the transition of students departing directly from the grade school system.

Another high school completion option for students who are not suitably accommodated by the formal school system model and/or face barriers to complete senior high in three years is to establish publicly-funded alternative schools. The Edmonton Catholic School Board, for example, has recently proposed to establish a "High School Completion and Upgrading Centre" to provide students who needed an extra year of school with access to wrap-around support, career planning services, as well as additional facilities (e.g., public library, recreation center) in a campus-like environment (O'Donnell, 2009). The other outstanding questions in the fourth-year equation, particularly those related to the perception and treatment of fourth-years, are yet more complex and illuminate hidden inequities. These problems are unofficial and are reinforced by social expectations and cultural attitudes toward formal schooling, student-teacher relationships, and what is commonly accepted as constituting success in school. Change here requires solutions that are systemic and societal – the sort of fundamental change that is often elusive in and out of the education system.

Participatory forms of student research are crucial to the study of expanding student success during the fourth year of high school. Our participatory research initiative enabled us to engage students' voices in ways that were flexible, meaningful, context relevant, and emergent. This method, in turn, fostered rich, nuanced, and complex insights into students' experiences and perspectives and illuminated the multidimensionality of needed educational change. Clearly, a better understanding of such complexities can assist the educational community to plan interventions that more appropriately address the issues and concerns of students and support their success towards graduation. Moreover, students who participated in this study often demonstrated an understanding of the challenges and double-binds of schooling and the education system. They were cognizant of and sympathetic to the pressures, stresses, and

challenges faced by teachers and administrators. In this way, students demonstrated that their concerns were not just about individual teachers, administrators, or staff, but were often connected to the larger school system. As the findings indicate, the perspectives and concerns shared by the fourth-year students represent an intricate web of inter-related factors that span all aspects of schooling. They reveal the interconnectedness of school issues such as pedagogy, assessment, treatment of students, or school rules. These often implicate all levels of decision making within a school system from the classroom to governmental levels.

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