

9-2011

## High school dropouts returning to study: The influence of the teacher and family during secondary school

Robert Whannell

*University of the Sunshine Coast*, [rwhannel@usc.edu.au](mailto:rwhannel@usc.edu.au)

William Allen

*University of the Sunshine Coast*, [w.allen@ecu.edu.au](mailto:w.allen@ecu.edu.au)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte>



Part of the [Educational Psychology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Whannell, R., & Allen, W. (2011). High school dropouts returning to study: The influence of the teacher and family during secondary school. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 36(9).  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2011v36n9.3>

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.  
<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol36/iss9/3>

## **High school dropouts returning to study: The influence of the teacher and family during secondary school**

Robert Whannell  
William Allen  
University of the Sunshine Coast

*Abstract: This study investigated the influence of the teacher and family relationships during secondary school for 18 to 22 year old students who had dropped out of secondary school and were attempting to gain access to tertiary study through a tertiary bridging program at a regional university. 144 students from two student cohorts completed a questionnaire intended to facilitate an understanding of how social context influenced secondary school attrition. It was identified that students who had not completed secondary school reported significantly lower levels of emotional engagement with school and poorer relationships with teachers. The study concluded that the residential situation and the quality of student-teacher relationships influenced the quality of the academic outcomes achieved in secondary school, with the student-teacher relationship being the dominant factor. It was also concluded that, while secondary school completion was significantly lower for students who did not reside with both parents, the family situation was not predictive of school completion. Rather, it is hypothesised that the wider contextual problems associated with family dysfunction which manifest in a poor school experience were the cause of the failure to complete secondary school. The implications for secondary school and tertiary bridging educators are discussed.*

At a time of increased emphasis on young people gaining accreditation and qualifications for entry into work (Bentley & Gurumurthy, 1999), the problem of students dropping out of study programs has engaged researchers (e.g. Cairns, Cairns, & Neckeman, 1989; Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, & Teremblay, 1997; Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000; Rumberger & Larson, 1998). At the macro-level, governments are increasingly concerned with the stock of human capital in the economy (Kennedy & Lee, 2008) while at lower levels communities are concerned with the impacts of under-qualified young people. In 2008 a report commissioned by the Australian government (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008) nominated a target for the Australian tertiary education sector of 40% of 25- to 34 year old Australians to possess at least a bachelor level qualification by the year 2020. At the time the report was produced only 29% of the target group was possessed of such a qualification.

The study reported below is in part a re-visitation of the topic of high school drop-outs, but from a different perspective. It seeks to add to the literature explaining the reasons for students dropping out of high school, but from the perspective of a student cohort who have made a decision to return to study, in this case by applying for entry to university through a special preparatory course. Opportunities to collect a group of high school drop-outs for research purposes are rare, and therefore valuable. The findings can be propitious, in that they help to understand why students drop out of school and suggest, importantly, what conditions need to be in place in tertiary preparation programs to prevent a recurrence of the phenomenon, and a positive educational outcome for these young people who are re-committing to education.

### **Literature Review**

A longitudinal study of students in the U.S.A from first grade in 1982 to 1996 (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997) identified a number of aspects of the school experience which are relevant to student attrition. In particular, it identified that “the beginning school transition, when children are just settling into the academic routine, is a critical period for academic and personal development” (p. 98). The study also identified that the attrition phenomenon in school is “the culmination of a long-term process of academic disengagement” (p. 87) and that the drop out process begins for many students in the very early years of primary school. While the study did not propose that “what happens in first grade necessarily seals children’s fates...prospects for ‘reengagement’ later are not good when children are plagued early in their school careers by self-doubt, are alienated from things academic...[or] are prone to problem behaviors” (p. 98). This presents the complexity of the attrition problem in that it cannot be viewed simply as an event which occurs at the particular time of the decision being taken to abandon study. Rather, the phenomenon must be examined within the complete context of the life situation and previous experiences of the individual concerned. This view is also supported by Mooney, Sherman and Lo Presto (1991) when they observe that “college adjustment is simply not a function of single variables but the result of a whole host of interrelated conditions” (p. 447). Lamb, Walstab, Teese, Vickers and Rumberger (2004) view completion of school and early leaving not as spontaneous events, but part of a process which is often long-term. They also cite the major reasons given for leaving school as “the desire for work, a lack of interest in (or a dislike of) school, and family or personal reasons” (p. 12).

A longitudinal study in the U.S.A. (Jimerson, et al., 2000) of participants over the age range of 6 months to 19 years highlights the long term nature of the attrition phenomenon and the important role that the family context has in attrition for secondary school students. The family context from a very early age is again demonstrated to influence school attrition.

The results of this study demonstrate the association of the early home environment, the quality of early caregiving, socioeconomic status, IQ, behaviour problems, academic achievement, peer relations, and parent involvement with dropping out of high school at age 19. These results are consistent with the view of dropping out as a dynamic developmental process that begins before children enter elementary school. Psychosocial variables prior to school entry predicted dropping out with power equal to later IQ and school achievement test scores. (Jimerson, et al., 2000, p. 525)

Studies have shown that secondary school “dropouts are more likely to come from families in which they have to make decisions on their own and in which their parents are less involved in their education” (Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter, & Sanford, 1990, p. 283). The family background situation, such as socioeconomic status, has been demonstrated in studies in both Australia and the U.S.A. to influence the rate of dropping out of school where students from a lower social class background are much more likely to leave school prematurely (Batten & Russell, 1995; McMillan & Marks, 2003; Rumberger, 1983). A number of other factors related to the family situation have been identified as contributing to the problem of school dropout including mobility between schools, misbehaviour and high absenteeism (Rumberger & Larson, 1998).

The particular issue of the influence on secondary school attrition for students residing in a one parent family compared to those who reside in a two parent family has been examined. Astone and McLanahan (1991) concluded that “children from nonintact families report lower educational expectations on the part of their parents, less monitoring of school work by mothers and fathers, and less overall supervision of social activities than children from intact families” (p. 318). They also found that “children from single-parent families and stepparent families are more likely to exhibit signs of early disengagement from school” (p. 318). However, even though there were obvious differences in the school experiences of the students studied, “parenting practices explain less than 10 percent of the difference in graduation...between children from intact and nonintact families” (p. 318).

Engagement with high school is often described in terms of the behaviours that students engage in which involve them in school activities (Wooley & Bowen, 2007). The influence of involvement in school extracurricular activities has been demonstrated to influence the rate at which school students drop out (Mahoney & Cairns, 1997). However, one study found that only “certain extracurricular activities (athletics and fine arts) significantly reduces a student’s likelihood of dropping out, whereas participation in academic or vocational clubs has no effect” (McNeal, 1995, p. 62).

The quality of the academic outcomes which have been achieved by students has been identified in many Australian and international studies as being a primary indicator of secondary school dropout (Batten, & Russell, 1995; Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; McMillan & Marks, 2003; Robinson, 1999; Rumberger & Larson, 1998). A longitudinal study in the U.S.A. commencing when the study participants were in grade

seven established that the students who were “most vulnerable to early school dropout were characterized in grade 7 by high levels of aggressiveness and low levels of academic performance” (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989, p. 1437). This study confirms the early origins of the dropout phenomenon identified in the study by Alexander, Entwisle and Horsey (1997) described previously. Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice and Tremblay (1997) have also demonstrated the role of poor academic performance and a number of other factors on attrition in an examination of data from two longitudinal studies when they found that “potential dropouts will tend to cumulate grade retention, to have poor academic grades, and feel disengaged from schooling. They will [also] be more likely to come from low status families where parents did not get very far in their schooling” (p. 752).

The literature reviewed in relation to the secondary school dropout phenomenon demonstrates that it is not a simple process or a decision which is made quickly. Rather, the phenomenon is presented as a complex issue which may have its origins within the family situation from an early age. It also appears to be strongly influenced by the nature of school experiences, including the quality of achievement outcomes and the level of academic engagement. The particular aspects which were examined in this study were the nature of the social relationships with family, peers and teachers, the level of emotional engagement with school, the capacity to cope with the complexity of the school curriculum and the quality of achievement outcomes.

## **Method**

An original questionnaire was developed which was completed by 144 students between the ages of 18 and 22 from two separate cohorts of a tertiary bridging program. The questionnaire was completed in class time of a compulsory course in weeks 2 or 3 of each semester. The questionnaire comprised two sections, with the initial section collecting demographic data and the second section comprising a series of Likert style items utilising a five point scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The Likert items were included to allow the development of scales which would facilitate the measurement of a number of targeted constructs which were considered relevant to the attrition phenomenon. A Principal Components Analysis was completed of the Likert style items using direct oblimin rotation as it was expected that the factors identified would be correlated.

An analysis of the Scree plot and rotated factor solution identified six factors which were available as a basis for further analysis. The six factors identified accounted for 67.7% of the common variance in the underlying data. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy of .835 and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity ( $p < .001$ ) indicate that the underlying data were appropriate for factor analysis (Dziuban & Shirkey, 1974). The scales developed were assessed for internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha. The scale names and Cronbach's alpha values are shown in Table 1.

Scale	No Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Scholastic Engagement	6	.910
Emotional Engagement	5	.852
Capacity to Cope with Schoolwork	5	.887
Peer Relationships	5	.878
Family Relationships	9	.919
Teacher Relationships	6	.893

**Table 1. Questionnaire scales and Cronbach's alpha values**

Each Likert item was allocated a value with Strongly Disagree being allocated a value of 1 up to Strongly Agree which was allocated the value 5. The overall result for each scale was calculated by adding the value for each item which comprised the scale and then dividing by the number of items in the scale. This approach allows the overall result on the scale to be interpreted in terms of the original scaling used. A final result on the summated scale of 3 would indicate the neutral position.

The Emotional Engagement scale measured the level of emotional connection between the respondent and the school and classroom and included items such as “I liked going to school” and “I felt a high level of commitment to my school work”. The Scholastic Engagement scale targeted the amount of effort that was expended to engage with the curriculum and included items such as “I worked hard when the teacher set work for the students to do in class” and “I studied in preparation for examinations”. The Capacity to Cope with Schoolwork scale targeted the respondents' capacity to understand the work which was done in class and included items such as “I felt prepared to start new work when it was introduced” and “I knew how to do my homework”. The scales which addressed the respondents' social context during the last two years of school measured the respondents' perception of the quality of relationships and the perceived level of support available from family, peers and teachers. These scales included items such as “My parents understood what I was going through at school”, “My school teachers were supportive of my work at school” and “I had positive relationships with my classmates”.

The scale to measure the level of academic achievement was developed by combining the responses to Item 7 in the questionnaire, where respondents provided an average grade for each of the courses completed during the last two years of secondary school, with four Likert items which targeted the quality of academic results obtained. Due to the differing number of course results provided, only the first three courses were used. These values were then summated to provide an overall measure of academic achievement ranging from a low of 7 to a high of 35.

## Results and Discussion

The following discussion will initially compare the data from the questionnaire based upon whether the respondent had completed secondary school or not. The influence of the students' residential situation on attrition from secondary school will then be examined.

An analysis of the final dataset of 144 responses identified 11 cases as outliers which were removed from further analysis. Of the remaining respondents, 50 (37%) reported that they had not completed secondary school. The mean and standard deviations for the dataset for each of the questionnaire scales based upon whether the respondent had completed secondary school are shown in Tables 2 and 3.

		Emotional Engagement	Scholastic Engagement	Capacity To Cope	Family Relationships	Peer Relationships	Teacher Relationships	Academic Achievement
N	Valid	50	47	50	49	50	48	45
	Missing	0	3	0	1	0	2	5
	Mean	2.52	3.04	3.34	3.58	3.90	2.83	22.44
	Std. Deviation	1.01	1.04	.830	1.12	.908	.965	5.17

**Table 2. Scale means and standard deviations for students who dropped out of secondary school**

		Emotional Engagement	Scholastic Engagement	Capacity To Cope	Family Relationships	Peer Relationships	Teacher Relationships	Academic Achievement
N	Valid	89	90	92	90	91	90	81
	Missing	3	2	0	2	1	2	11
	Mean	3.10	3.44	3.45	3.62	3.87	3.50	22.42
	Std. Deviation	.830	.829	.694	.763	.761	.739	4.58

**Table 3. Scale means and standard deviations for students who completed secondary school**

It is apparent from a comparison of the means for each of the scales that there is very little difference between the two groups for the peer and family relationships, capacity to cope with the complexity of the curriculum and the level of academic achievement. However, the mean scores for the level of emotional engagement ( $\bar{X}_{Dropped\ Out} = 2.52$ ,  $\bar{X}_{Completed\ School} = 3.10$ ) and quality of teacher relationships ( $\bar{X}_{Dropped\ Out} = 2.83$ ,  $\bar{X}_{Completed\ School} = 3.50$ ) appear to be substantially higher for those students who have completed secondary school. An independent samples t-test comparing all of the scales was also completed using school completion as the control variable with the results shown in Table 4. The effect size for each variable demonstrating a statistically significant difference is also shown using Cohen's d (Cohen, 1988).

Scale	t	Sig (2-tailed)	d	df
Emotional Engagement	-3.619	.000	0.627	130
Scholastic Engagement	-2.372	.019	0.427	128
Capacity to Cope	-.779	.437		133

Family Relationships	-.242	.809		130
Peer Relationships	.228	.820		132
Teacher Relationships	-4.485	.000	0.800	129
Academic Achievement	.032	.975		120

**Table 4. Independent samples t-test based on secondary school completion**

This analysis indicates that there are statistically significant differences in the quality of emotional and scholastic engagement and the quality of teacher relationships. The biggest effect size is seen for the level of emotional engagement and teacher relationships. An effect size of 0.8 is considered large, while 0.5 is considered medium in size (Cohen, 1988). This indicates that there is a substantial difference in these reported levels based upon whether the participant had completed school or not, particularly for the participants' perception of the quality of the student-teacher relationships.. There were no significant differences identified between the students' capacity to cope with the complexity of the curriculum, their levels of academic achievement or the quality of family relationships. Previous academic literature which identified the level of academic achievement as one indicator of secondary school attrition does not appear to have been associated with attrition for these participants (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; Janosz, et al., 1997; Rumberger, 1983).

Tables 5 and 6 show Pearson's r correlations based upon whether the participant completed secondary school or not.

		Emotional Engagement	Scholastic Engagement	Capacity To Cope	Family Relationships	Peer Relationships	Teacher Relationships	Academic Achievement
Family Relationships	Correlation	.407**	.227	.304*	1	.435**	.388**	.420**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.129	.034		.002	.007	.005
	N	50	46	49	49	49	47	44
Teacher Relationships	Correlation	.609**	.343*	.361*	.388**	.267	1	.570**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.020	.012	.007	.066		.000
	N	48	46	48	47	48	48	43
Capacity To Cope	Correlation	.435**	.384**	1	.304**	.440**	.361**	.739**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.000		.005	.001	.020	.000
	N	50	47	52	49	50	48	45
Academic Achievement	Correlation	.443**	.575**	.739**	.420**	.250	.570**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.000	.000	.005	.098	.000	
	N	45	42	45	44	45	43	45

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Table 5. Selected scale correlations - students who did not complete secondary school**

		Emotional Engagement	Scholastic Engagement	Capacity To Cope	Family Relationships	Peer Relationships	Teacher Relationships	Academic Achievement
Family Relationships	Correlation	.117	.145	-.050	1	.128	.104	-.004



Relationships	Sig. (2-tailed)	.301	.196	.653		.251	.356	.971
	N	80	81	83	83	82	81	76
Teacher Relationships	Correlation	.398**	.138	.300**	.104	.086	1	.238**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.218	.006	.356	.440		.038
	N	81	81	83	81	82	83	76
Capacity To Cope	Correlation	.166	.223*	1	-.050	.174	.300*	.581**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.135	.043		.653	.114	.006	.000
	N	82	83	85	83	84	83	77
Academic Achievement	Correlation	.323*	.485**	.581**	-.004	.092	.238*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.005	.000	.000	.971	.428	.038	
	N	74	75	77	76	76	76	77

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Table 6. Selected scale correlations - students who completed secondary school**

While the independent samples t-test failed to indicate any significant difference in the overall quality of family relationships based upon whether secondary school was completed or not, the pattern of correlations for this scale differs substantially between the groups. No statistically significant correlations were identified for the family relationships scale for those participants who completed secondary school. However, those who did not finish school demonstrate significant correlations of the family relationships scale with all scales except scholastic engagement. High correlations are demonstrated for the level of emotional engagement ( $r = 0.407$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ) and academic achievement ( $r = 0.420$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ). The quality of teacher relationships for these participants is also correlated with the quality of family relationships ( $r = 0.388$ ,  $p = 0.007$ ). This indicates that, for those participants who dropped out of secondary school, the nature of the family relationships which existed correlated to the quality of teacher relationships. The school experience for those participants who dropped out is also much more strongly associated with the quality of the teacher relationships, with the correlations for the level of emotional engagement ( $r = 0.609$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and academic achievement ( $r = 0.570$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) being high.

The mean scale values obtained for students who did not complete secondary school for the quality of emotional engagement with school ( $\bar{X} = 2.52$ ) and teacher relationships ( $\bar{X} = 2.83$ ) are below the neutral position. The level of emotional engagement and the quality of the student-teacher relationships are also the only scales where a statistically significant difference exists between the respondents based upon school completion. While no overall differences have been identified in the quality of the family relationships based upon school completion, it is apparent that the quality of the family relationships is strongly associated with the quality of the school experience and academic outcomes for those participants who did not complete secondary school. The low level of engagement for students who drop out of secondary school has been previously identified (Alexander, et al., 1997; Finn & Rock, 1997; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).

Of the respondents who reported their residential status, 63 (46.7%) reported that they did not reside with both parents during the last two years of secondary schooling. The responses to the item were re-coded to indicate whether the respondent resided with both parents during their last two years of schooling, or in some other situation. The independent samples t-test described earlier for the quality of family relationships ( $\bar{X}_{Completed\ School} = 3.58$ ,  $\bar{X}_{Dropped\ Out} = 3.62$ ,  $t = -0.242$ ,  $p = 0.809$ ) showed no statistically significant difference based upon whether the respondent had completed secondary school or not. An independent samples t-test of the summated scales identified no statistically differences based upon the participants' residential status for any of the scales, except for family relationships ( $\bar{X}_{Both\ Parents} = 3.84$ ,  $\bar{X}_{Other\ Situation} = 3.33$ ,  $t = 3.397$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $d = .542$ ). This indicates that the residential status, while giving rise to a significant difference in the quality of the reported family relationships, did not give rise to significant differences in the levels of engagement, peer and teacher relationships, the capacity to cope with the curriculum or academic achievement.

A Pearson  $\chi^2$  test was conducted to test if a statistically significant difference existed for successful completion of secondary school based upon whether the individual resided with both parents or not. The contingency table which resulted is shown in Table 7.

			Both Parents	Other	
Completed Secondary School	No	Count	17	33	50
		Expected Count	26.7	23.3	50
	Yes	Count	55	30	85
		Expected Count	45.3	49.7	85
Total		Count	72	63	135

**Table 7. Contingency table for residential status and school completion**

The Pearson  $\chi^2$  value was 11.926 ( $p = .001$ ) with an associated phi coefficient of -0.313 ( $p < .001$ ). This result demonstrates a statistically significant difference with weak to moderate strength of association for the completion of secondary school based upon residential status with 76.4% of respondents who resided with both parents completing secondary school, compared with a completion rate of only 47.6% for those who resided in some other situation. This result indicates that participants who resided with both parents have a statistically higher completion rate for secondary school. This supports the existing literature which has demonstrated that dysfunctional family situations are associated with attrition in secondary school (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Jimerson, et al., 2000; Rumberger, et al., 1990).

An independent samples t-test using school completion as the control variable was then conducted on the sub-set of participants who did not reside with both parents. While significant differences were identified in the level of emotional engagement ( $\bar{X}$

*Completed School* = 3.1,  $\bar{X}_{Dropped\ Out}$  = 2.5,  $t = -2.402$ ,  $p = 0.019$ ,  $d = .60$ ,  $df = 67$ ) and teacher relationships ( $\bar{X}_{Completed\ School} = 3.6$ ,  $\bar{X}_{Dropped\ Out} = 2.9$ ,  $t = -2.615$ ,  $p = 0.011$ ,  $d = .72$ ,  $df = 69$ ), no difference was identified in the quality of family relationships ( $\bar{X}_{Completed\ School} = 3.9$ ,  $\bar{X}_{Dropped\ Out} = 3.8$ ,  $t = .142$ ,  $p = 0.888$ ,  $df = 67$ ). An independent samples t-test was also conducted on the sub-set of participants who resided with both parents using school completion as the control variable with very similar results. The level of emotional engagement ( $\bar{X}_{Completed\ School} = 3.1$ ,  $\bar{X}_{Dropped\ Out} = 2.5$ ,  $t = -2.572$ ,  $p = 0.013$ ,  $d = .69$ ,  $df = 61$ ) and teacher relationships ( $\bar{X}_{Completed\ School} = 3.6$ ,  $\bar{X}_{Dropped\ Out} = 2.8$ ,  $t = -3.548$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ,  $d = .68$ ,  $df = 58$ ) demonstrated significant differences, while no difference was again identified in the quality of the family relationships ( $\bar{X}_{Completed\ School} = 3.4$ ,  $\bar{X}_{Dropped\ Out} = 3.2$ ,  $t = .142$ ,  $p = 0.829$ ,  $df = 59$ ). These results indicate that where the participants' residential situation is held constant, no significant differences exist in the quality of the family relationships based upon whether the participant completed school or not. Rather, the differences are seen in the quality of the teacher relationships and the level of emotional engagement. Considering the substantial and statistically significant difference which exists for school completion based upon the students' residential status, these results from the analysis appear somewhat paradoxical.

## Conclusion

There are two major conclusions made as a result of this study. Firstly, the academic outcomes achieved by the study participants between 18 and 22 years of age who have not completed secondary school were adversely influenced by the poor nature of the student-teacher relationships perceived by the student. Study participants who demonstrated a low quality of student-teacher relationships also demonstrated low levels of emotional engagement with school. This suggests that, for these study participants, one possible contributor to the decision to drop out of secondary school were the poor classroom experiences which were involved in attendance at school. There is no evidence identified which suggests poor quality peer relationships contributed to secondary school attrition with peer relationships reported at very positive levels.

The second finding is that students who resided with both parents during their last two years of secondary school demonstrated a rate of completion of secondary school which was significantly higher than for those who resided in some other situation. While there were no apparent differences in the reported quality of the relationships between participants and parents, capacity to cope with the curriculum complexity or the level of academic achievement based upon residential situation, the residential situation of students appeared to have a substantial influence on the capacity to complete secondary school. It is concluded that the home situation is manifesting itself at secondary school in the form of low levels of academic engagement and poor student-teacher relationships and the decision to drop out of secondary school is based

upon these school-based factors. Previous research (Whannell, Allen, & Lynch, 2010) in relation to this cohort of students has demonstrated that, for those students who demonstrate low levels of academic engagement during their last two years of secondary schooling, the quality of academic achievement was strongly associated with the quality of the student-teacher relationships which existed. The current study further indicates that the student-teacher relationship plays an important role in facilitating positive outcomes for students who must reside in a family situation which is other than the traditional two parent household.

A bioecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994) identifies the role of proximal processes as being essential to the cognitive development of the individual. In this framework such processes are posited to activate the potentialities of the individual which then allows the individual to develop cognitively as their potential permits. Bronfenbrenner (1999) has specifically argued that environmental instability, such as that involved in parental divorce, has a detrimental impact on cognitive development. This particular approach to cognitive development would suggest that there should be some difference in the levels of the capacity to cope with the curriculum complexity and academic achievement based upon whether students reside with both parents or not. This study suggests that this was not the case for the study participants. The educational outcome which appears to have been negatively affected for the participants of this study who did not reside with both parents is the capacity to actually complete secondary school.

The difference between knowledge and cognitive ability must be distinguished at this point. By way of example, it cannot be inferred that simply because a person cannot play a musical instrument that the person lacks musical ability or that he/she is incapable of learning when given the opportunity. In the context of students in the tertiary bridging program who have failed to complete secondary school, and particularly for those who did not reside with both parents, a distinction must be made between their capacity to successfully complete tertiary study and their current state of knowledge. It would be expected that students who have not completed secondary school will not be as academically prepared as those that did due to their more limited exposure to the educational environment. However, this study indicates that they will possess similar potential to be able to cope with the course content and to achieve academically if the effort is made to provide the support which is needed to cater for their lack of academic preparation.

This study emphasises the important role that secondary school teachers have in relation to students in their care who may be dealing with family situations which do not support them educationally. The capacity for such students to complete school and achieve good academic outcomes is strongly associated with the quality of the experience at school, particularly the nature of the student-teacher relationships which exist.

One major implication this study has for educators of students in tertiary bridging programs is that they must be aware of the substantial proportion of students

who have not completed secondary school. Such students would be expected to have a low level of preparedness for tertiary study and will require significant support to be able to handle the course content due to their lack of preparation. Educators must also be aware of the negative influence that student-teacher relationships which may have been experienced by these students in secondary school, particularly in regard to the negative impact on emotional engagement. This study demonstrates that one path to improving a student's emotional connection to his/her studies and improving the capacity to cope with the curriculum complexity and achievement is through the medium of the student-teacher relationship. While educators are not in a position to be able to address a student's home situation, they are able to directly influence the experience in the classroom. The onus is therefore placed upon educators to acknowledge their important role in creating an appropriately supportive classroom environment for those students who must cope with situations outside of school which do not support them in their academic endeavours.

Three opportunities for further research are available. This study has utilised a quantitative approach to data collection. The paradoxes identified in the role of residential status in the secondary school outcomes for the participants would perhaps be able to be explained using a qualitative approach. Secondly, little research has been done in relation to the type of academic environment which is necessary to re-engage students such as those in tertiary bridging programs with education (Bedford, 2009). While this study supports the view that teachers have an important role to play in creating such an environment, what form this would take would require further research. The opportunity also exists for this study be repeated in relation to the students' experience during the tertiary bridging program to determine if the teacher still influences the classroom experience in the same manner as was the case during secondary school. Considering that students are older and have had the opportunity to separate from the traditional family environment they grew up with, it will also be of interest to determine the role that the current family residential situation plays in relation to bridging program completion.

## References

- Alexander, K., Entwisle, D., & Horsey, C. (1997). From first grade forward: Early foundations of high school dropout. *Sociology of Education*, 70(2), 87-107.
- Astone, N., & McLanahan, S. (1991). Family structure, parental practices and high school completion. *American Sociological Review*, 56(3), 309-320.
- Batten, M., & Russell, J. (1995). *Students at risk: A review of Australian literature 1980-1994*. Melbourne: ACER.
- Bedford, T. (2009). Beyond our control?: Pre-tertiary bridging program students' perceptions of factors that affect their progress with study. Paper presented at the Third National Conference of Enabling Educators, Toowoomba.
- Bentley, T., & Gulumurthy, R. (1999). *Destination unknown: Engaging with the problems of marginalised youth*. London: Demos.
- Bradley, D., Noonan, P., Nugent, H., & Scales, B. (2008). A review of Australian higher education Retrieved 22 Feb, 2010, from [www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Review/Documents/PDF/Higher%20Education%20Review\\_one%20document\\_02.pdf](http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Review/Documents/PDF/Higher%20Education%20Review_one%20document_02.pdf).
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1986). Ecology of the family as a context for human development: Research perspectives. *Developmental Psychology*, 22(6), 723-742.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1999). Environments in developmental perspective: Theoretical and operational models. In S. Friedman & T. Wachs (Eds.), *Measuring environment across the life span: Emerging methods and concepts* (pp. 3-28). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Ceci, S. (1994). Nature-nurture reconceptualized in development perspective: A bioecological model. *Psychological Review*, 101(4), 568-586.
- Cairns, R., Cairns, B., & Neckeman, H. (1989). Early school dropout: Configurations and determinants. *Child Development*, 60(6), 1437-1452.
- Cohen, J. (1988). *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences* (2nd ed.). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Earlbaum Associates.
- Costello, A., & Osborne, J. (2005). Best practices in exploratory factor analysis: four recommendations for getting the most from your analysis. *Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation*, 10(7), 1-9.
- Dziuban, C., & Shirkey, E. (1974). When is a correlation matrix appropriate for factor analysis? Some decision rules. *Psychological Bulletin*, 81(6), 358-361.
- Finn, J., & Rock, D. (1997). Academic success among students at risk for school failure. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 82(2), 221-234.
- Fredricks, J., Blumenfeld, P., & Paris, A. (2004). School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, 74(1), 59-110.
- Janosz, M., LeBlanc, M., Boulerice, B., & Tremblay, R. (1997). Disentangling the weight of school dropout predictors: A test on two longitudinal samples. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 26(6), 733-762.

- Jimerson, S., Egeland, B., Sroufe, L., & Carlson, B. (2000). A prospective longitudinal study of high school dropouts examining multiple predictors across development. *Journal of School Psychology, 38*(6), 525-549.
- Kennedy, K., & Lee, J. (2008). *The changing roles of schools in Asian societies*. Abingdon, Oxford: Routledge.
- Lamb, S., Walstab, A., Teese, R., Vickers, M. & Rumberger, R. (2004). *Staying on at School: Improving student retention in Australia*. Brisbane: Queensland Department of Education and the Arts.
- Mahoney, J., & Cairns, R. (1997). Do extracurricular activities protect against early school dropout? *Developmental Psychology, 33*(2), 241-253.
- McMillan, J., & Marks, G. (2003). *School leavers in Australia: Profiles and pathways*. Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report No 31. Melbourne: ACER.
- McNeal, R. (1995). Extracurricular activities and high school dropouts. *Sociology of Education, 68*(1), 62-80.
- Mooney, S., Sherman, M., & Lo Presto, C. (1991). Academic locus of control, self-esteem, and perceived distance from home as predictors of college adjustment. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 69*(5), 445-448.
- Robinson, L. (1999) *The effects of part-time work on school students*. Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth Research Report No 9. Melbourne: ACER.
- Rumberger, R. (1983). Dropping out high school: The influence of race, sex and family background. *American Educational Research Journal, 20*(2), 199-220.
- Rumberger, R., Ghatak, R., Poulos, G., Ritter, P., & Sanford, M. (1990). Family influences on dropout behavior in one California high school. *Sociology of Education, 63*(4), 283-299.
- Rumberger, R., & Larson, K. (1998). Student mobility and the increased risk of high school dropout. *American Journal of Education, 107*(1), 1-35.
- Whannell, R., Allen, B., & Lynch, K. (2010). Casualties of Schooling? 18 to 22 year old students in a tertiary bridging program. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 35*(5), 1-17.
- Wooley, M., & Bowen, G. (2007). In the context of risk: Supportive adults and the school engagement of middle school students. *Family Relations, 56*(1), 92-104.