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# DROP OUT FROM STATE SECONDARY GIRLS' SCHOOLS IN NEW ZEALAND: AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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## ABSTRACT

*Economic change requiring a more highly skilled workforce prompted worldwide concern over high school drop out. Dropouts are young people who leave school early, often without attaining formal educational qualifications. Much previous research centred on at-risk students and a range of individual, social, family and school factors associated with drop out were identified.*

*This case study of student drop out and retention at three girls' state secondary schools over 2003 suggests that early leaving behaviour cannot be understood outside of the settings in which it occurs. Adopting an ecological perspective facilitated a deeper understanding of the complex interactions between the dropouts and their environment.*

*From a narratives and numbers approach rich stories of early leaving emerged. Patterns of leaving were consistent with national trends: The lower decile school had the highest drop out rate, and dropouts were more likely to be Maori and Pasifika than European. Dropping out was shown to be a complicated and iterative process in which the influence of the environment is very important.*

*Family and school relationships had a major impact but which had the greatest influence was inconclusive because there was a high level of interconnectedness between these proximal settings within the mesosystem and the bigger picture education and welfare systems. The extent of the contribution each level made to early leaving varied across individual stories, between schools and over time.*

*Leaving school is an ecological transition that involves changing roles from high school pupil to that of tertiary student, mother, worker or benefit recipient. The students' stories show drop out to be both an outcome, and an initiator, of developmental change.*

*An important challenge for schools is not necessarily to reduce the number of early leavers but to establish effective transition programmes that assist students to become proactive in navigating the many transitions anticipated over their life course. The implementation of such school programmes needs to be supported by parallel changes in government policy.*

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

“If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants,” Isaac Newton was quoted as saying (Lindgreen, Vallaster, & Vanhamme, 2001, p. 508). Without the incisive critique, the close guidance and encouragement of Professor Richard (Dick) Harker in the final writing stages, the inspiration NorthTec colleague Dr Stanley Frielick provided by suggesting utilisation of the ecological approach as a framework to pull together the complex and inter-related factors which emerged during the data gathering phase, and Professor John O’Neill’s idea to incorporate a baseline intentions survey into the research design, I would not have achieved the level of understanding about secondary school drop out which I am able to share with you here.

I attribute the self knowledge and personal satisfaction I have gained through completing this study to the guidance of my supervisors and to the assistance and support of a great many other people, my family, friends and work colleagues. In particular I need to acknowledge the assistance of my mother, Betty Carding, who transcribed the Face-to-face Interview tapes and provided me with ongoing support and encouragement to complete, and of Colin Small, computing tutor at NorthTec, who assisted with the graphs in Chapter 4. My daughter-in-law Katherine Ansley acted as research assistant, facilitating some of the interviews at the school where I was principal. Coding and entering the data into the computer was a time consuming exercise because of the large number of surveys to process, and I am grateful to Kath and my son who together (to avoid transcription errors) did the majority of data inputting from the Intentions Survey.

I would like to thank the board of trustees and principals of the schools involved, for allowing me to undertake this research, and to the staff for supporting me during this study. In particular I wish to publicly acknowledge the special work of the associate head of English and principal’s nominee, Margie Sunde, at my own school. She carried a large part of the burden associated with the necessary devolvement of survey administration. In retirement, she painstakingly proofread every one of the chapters of this thesis, cross checked by work colleague and friend Lorraine Weber although I take responsibility for any errors or omissions which may have crept into the final document.

Whilst a personal agenda to reduce early leaving from my own school was the prime motivator for this study, I believe that the three schools involved also gained from their participation. To protect the confidentiality of these schools, I cannot publicly

name the many staff that assisted me in this project but I do hope that this is not seen as detracting from the sincerity of my heart-felt thanks. It is worth noting here that staff members were very interested in their students' wellbeing and keen to be part of the project, which they saw as of value to them. The generosity in the time given and their willingness to assist was very much appreciated.

Whilst I was a principal when I commenced this study, I worked at Northland Polytechnic (NorthTec) from 2004 as Executive Dean. I am grateful to Chief Executive, Terry Barnett, for allowing me to continue with the research project whilst employed there; he generously funded my student fees and allowed me to present associated papers at conferences, which facilitated peer review of my work as it progressed.

Lindgreen et al. (2001, p. 507) identified three phases in doctoral research: getting started, surviving the ups and downs and reaching closure. I look back from the final phase hoping that readers will enjoy, as well as learn from, the stories of early leavers which I present here. Typical of many novice researchers, I found the difficulty of deciding how to present my research findings one of the most challenging aspects of this case report. The inertia which resulted was certainly a down period which required a great deal of consideration and consultation to overcome.

Much previous drop out literature described, rather than sought explanations for the so-called "dropout problem" and I was at great pains for this study not to be challenged on the same grounds. Many researchers had identified the family as having a major influence on student achievement and retention at school, and I was fortunate that Professor Roy Nash, my initial supervisor, was a recognised authority on the matter. Unfortunately Roy was not well for a great part of the seven-year period during which I continued my study, and indeed he finally succumbed to the ravages of cancer late in 2006. The death of my father in that same year, of my nephew Hamish the year previously, and the discovery that my close friend and work associate, Derek Colebrook, had cancer, certainly challenged my commitment to the cause. Throughout these traumatic events, and indeed on a day-to-day level, my husband, Graeme Coutts, has been a cornerstone of support, chivvying me along if I was losing focus and assisting me with technical problems associated with computer use. Over the last year of this family marathon he even took over most of the cooking and cleaning duties in an effort to make appropriate time for writing which competed with the heavy commitments of my work role.



My greatest indebtedness is to the young people who so willingly shared their time and their stories with me. I believe that many of them found the storytelling process therapeutic, an aspect I discuss in the conclusion. The rich narratives which emerged are a tribute to their candour: They opened up their hearts in the belief and trust that others might learn from their experiences. Whilst it is up to the reader to decide how applicable the findings from this particular case study are to their own situation, I feel confident that everyone will be able to learn something from the stories these leavers have shared.

## PREFACE

A crucial phase in feminist research and writing is “finding one’s voice” and this occurs when “the researcher understands a phenomenon *and* finds a way of communicating that understanding” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 16). Like many other researchers I experimented with many different ways of writing before I found a way of presenting the voices of the girls who left, and my own experiences. In the same way that theoretical discussion should be traced to the data, so too should researchers describe their own role thoroughly, “so that readers will understand the relationship between the researcher and the participants” (Janesick, 2000, p. 389). It is my hope that the preface will go some way towards facilitating this understanding for the reader.

### **My Role as Researcher: Understanding *is* Interpretation**

*“I want to be all that I am capable of becoming”*

Katherine Mansfield, 1888-1923 (quoted in Exley, 1993, p. 6)

I never really thought of myself as a feminist. I like to call myself “Mrs,” as I am proud to be married and have been to the same very supportive man, Graeme, for more than 30 years. He is my “very best friend” and the father of our only child, Damian, who is married to a wonderful woman, Kath, a teacher like me. They have no children yet but I understand it is in their plans.

However, on reflection I realised that one of the driving forces in becoming a principal of an all girls’ school was to ameliorate, for other young women, the negative and unsupportive school situation I had found myself in as a teenager at an all girls’ school.

I wanted to be a doctor, right through school. I dreamed of being like Albert Schweitzer, a talented musician who had given his life to medicine and helping underprivileged peoples in Africa. I vividly recall the assembly when the principal of the girls’ school I attended asked all the students who wanted to be doctors to meet with her at recess. This was amazing! Someone actually wanted to talk to me about my dreams and aspirations! Well out of a school of 1,200 girls only three of us fronted. And

the principal then proceeded to tell us that we were too dumb, that it would take us seven years to complete and “we would only get married anyway.” Although he was proud of what I had achieved with my life at the point he died in 2006, these remarks were congruent with the thoughts of my father at that time. He also felt that education was a waste of time for girls: “Why don’t you be a secretary, like your mother?”, he said. It was only because my mother insisted that I should be allowed to make my own choices and to aim high in my personal career goals that I was allowed to leave home aged 17 for “further education.”

Of course I never even tried for medical school. By then I had lost confidence in my ability. It was still in the days before the Equal Pay Act of 1972, and even though I worked after school and in the holidays I could not earn enough money to live off as a student. So I took a government studentship. That is how I got into teaching. It is a decision I do not regret as I feel I have made a difference for many young people in both secondary and tertiary education settings in the 35 years I have been involved with “education”. I have been especially interested in assisting students with special learning needs of any kind, whether they are physical or intellectual disabilities, or barriers to learning through family or other circumstances. I have always had a particular interest in the progress and achievement of young Maori women, because it was a young Maori girl who took me under her wing as a seven year old new immigrant and looked after me in the playground when the Pakeha kids gave me heaps. I owe her a debt of gratitude which I am pleased to be able to pay back, if somewhat indirectly, through the work I have done with Maori in Wanganui, and more recently in Northland.

I began this research when I was a principal of a girls’ secondary school out of a sense of social justice, as well as from a practical concern for my school’s declining roll. I was interested in the reasons why some senior students left school before the course of study they had enrolled in for the year was complete. Although I felt that the inquiry would be assisted by the insider information being a principal would bring, this concept provided many challenges for the Massey University College of Education Ethics Committee. My original proposal reflected the positivist paradigm I was influenced by at the time: it included a list of strategies aimed at avoiding researcher effects, minimizing bias and reducing ethical concerns. One of these was the employment of a research assistant to follow up the students who left from my own school, although disappointingly few Face-to-face Interviews resulted. However, being a principal had other advantages, and it did facilitate access to both staff and students at

the other two school sites which form part of this case study.

Before that I had worked in two other polytechnics<sup>1</sup> and I had always been interested in equity issues, about making sure students who were in some ways disadvantaged were given every opportunity to make the best of their ability and the opportunities available. I had done some work on drop out from Wanganui Polytechnic in 1995, and this interest continued in my role as Executive Dean at NorthTec (Northland Polytechnic).

Laurel Richardson considered “writing as a *method of inquiry*, a way of finding out about yourself and your topic....a way of ‘knowing’—a method of discovery and analysis” (2000, p. 923). And so it was with me. It was not until the writing up stage that I came to the realisation that this research is predominantly about women. It is about the girls who left school, their teachers and their mothers. It is about the women who tried to help them along the way, the principals, deputy principals, deans, the careers and guidance counsellors. And it is also about the special relationship I developed with the participants, the girls who dropped out of school, which has privileged such amazing stories. There are some things I know which cannot become part of the formal record but which have moved me to tears.

When I was reading Shulamit Reinharz’s book I realised that I was one of those women she had identified, who intended to study other people’s experience but who in the process recognise they are part of the group studied and use this identification to deepen the study (1992, p. 235). Reinharz made some wonderful links, through Andrée Collard, with the ecological conception I have chosen as the best way to portray my findings. She maintained that feminist researchers are housed in particular academic disciplines and theories but simultaneously connected to feminist scholarship, living in the house of their body and personal relationships.

Ecology is woman-based almost by definition. Eco means house, logos means word, speech, thought. Thus ecology is the language of the house. Defined more formally, ecology is the study of the interconnectedness between all organisms and their surroundings—the house. (Collard, 1989, p. 137, quoted in Reinharz, 1992, p. 241)

In accordance with both philosophical hermeneutics (Schwandt, 2000, p. 194) and accepted feminist practice, I bring my own experiences, as both a principal and a past

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<sup>1</sup> I worked at Hawke’s Bay Community College as the Head of Science and Technology in the decade prior.

pupil of an all girls' school, into the interpretation and analysis of the stories of the young women who left school early in 2003. Analysis and interpretation are coloured by these experiences and those of the research journey, for “understanding *is* interpretation” (emphasis in original, *ibid.*).

My hope in sharing my own story, alongside those of the leavers, is to contribute to an improved understanding of the way these young women come to leave school at that time.

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