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A Contemporary Study with Early School Leavers: Pathways and Social Processes of Leaving High School

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Abstract

This article provides an account and discussion of research processes used in a contemporary study of early school leaving in Ontario, Canada. The Ontario *Early School Leavers Study* was conducted in conversation with 193 young people who left school prior to graduating, their educators and parents. The study was informed by a review of international literatures which point to the need for innovative social approaches and youth-attuned methodologies in the study of early school leaving. We present our research processes as informed by this literature and then present new analyses that illustrate critical social processes in early school leaving. The findings present unique data to show three pathways to early leaving and a constellation of risk and protective situations encountered by these young people along the way. Risk situations included the daily social workings of poverty, low socioeconomic status, the need to take on early adult roles, "place", academic and social disengagement, negative relations with families and/or school personnel, and inflexible or unsupportive school structures. Protective situations were encountered in supportive families; from parents and teachers; in schools that were caring, flexible, and proactive; and in processes of self determination. The perspectives of the young people are discussed in relation to the international literature and the perspectives of 71 parents and educators who participated in the study. Impacts on practices in secondary schools suggest that early school leaving be recognized and treated as a heterogeneous, complex social process occurring at and across the nexus of families, schools, youth cultures and communities.

Introduction

It is well documented that one of the most critical issues facing young people, schools, and society is that of leaving school early. There is no universally accepted definition or measurement of what was once referred to as "drop-out" and this begs the question as to the

meaning of the variable rates and trends[1]. For instance, it has been estimated in Canada that approximately 12 percent of students do not finish secondary school (Bushnik, Barr-Telford & Bussiere, 2004) while an Ontario cohort study suggests that up to one-quarter of students may not graduate (King, 2004). But, which age of young person are we speaking about? There is a shell game of rates in early school leaving driven by the ability or will to accurately count those in grades 9, 10, 11 or 12 who depart from high school. The number who depart in any given year (across all schools across the country) is larger than that recently used by Statistics Canada (2010) who now define drop-out as the "share of 20-24 year olds who have not completed secondary school" as arising in labor force data. They suggest that counting those who are younger would be to miss the fact that many young people find their way back into high school. Using this more conservative Statistics Canada estimate, there are now an estimated 8.5% (180,000) of 20-24 year olds in Canada without a high school diploma. This is down from 16.6% (340,000) in 1990/1991. Only 1 in 4 of these young people is employed (Statistics Canada, 2010).

Different data analyses present rates of early school leaving in Canada as varying considerably among provinces and territories, with Nunavut having the highest rate at 67.4%. Across the provinces, the highest percentage of early school leavers is in Manitoba (26.9%). A large proportion of Canadian youth who leave school early do so at an early age with little formal education. Approximately one-third of early school leavers exit schools with Grade 9 education or less and almost two-thirds leave with Grade 10 or less. Four in ten early leavers have left school by the age of 16 (HRSDC, 2000). Statistics Canada (2008) data also shows that only 3 in 10 students return to school once they have left. Therefore, current rates and trends

[1] See Tilleczek (2008) for a review of these varying definitions and measurements.

demonstrate an ongoing signal of how young people are faring in high school although the signal strength is fuzzy and distant depending on who is broadcasting.

Our review of international literatures[2] demonstrates that these conflicting trends are not the only challenges in the study of early school leaving. Indeed, the ways in which we get beneath these trends to understand the experiences of young people at high school is of upmost importance. The literature review uncovered the dearth of qualitative work and pointed to some that has partially filled the gaps with a handful of excellent projects (cf. Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac & Zine, 1997; Smyth & Hattam, 2001; 2002). Such qualitative work suggests how to unpack the social process so often neglected in this research area. In addition, decisions about which young people to speak with, how to locate them, and how to speak with them are important but often disregarded details. But, such decisions illuminate how we can do research and informed practice *with* and *for* young people and make visible the social organization of often individualized problems such as early school leaving.

The literature also demonstrates that early school leaving has broad social and cultural implications and is a long term, multi-dimensional process that is influenced by a wide variety of school and out-of-school experiences (Tilleczek, 2008). But, little has been written about the social experiences or pathways of youth who leave school early. Indeed, the emphasis in the literature has largely been on negative, pathological, individual risk factors or the "geography of failure" (McRae, 1999 cited in Smyth & Hattam, 2001). The risk situations that have been previously well identified in research literature include: low socioeconomic status, minority group status, specific community characteristics, household stress, poor family process/dynamics, limited social support for remaining in school by significant others, conflict between home-school culture, assumption of adult roles, low levels of student involvement with

[2] See Tilleczek (2008) for detailed findings not presented here.

education, risk behaviour, discrimination and identity conflict, youth with learning, behavioural and/or physical disabilities/mental illness[3]. However, it is unclear as to *how* these social situations and processes function in the pathways of early leavers. This article therefore presents new analyses which elucidate these social interplays and make visible the methods and decisions used to study them in our Ontario *Early School Leavers Study.*[4]

Methodological Processes and Decisions

The *Early School Leavers Study* was informed by a complex cultural nesting approach (Tilleczek, 2011; 2007; 2004) which has emerged from work across the disciplines of sociology, psychology, youth studies and education. Young people and those closest to them are inseparable from their culture and contexts. Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 2005) work has been prominent in describing multiple levels at which various risk or protective influences occur when young people confront transitions. These levels of concentric systems -- chronosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, mesosystem and microsystem-- are well known to many researchers in health and education who describe the contexts within which young people develop. Young people actively negotiate role and setting changes and "every transition is both a consequence and an instigator of developmental processes" (1979: 27).

The complex cultural nesting approach invites further examination of the fundamental social processes and relationships between young people, teachers, schools, communities, and societies and guides our understanding of *how* these factors influence young people. It draws upon research on youth transitions and development such as the Developmental Contextual model (Lerner, 2002), the Socioeconomic Gradient and Income Inequality models (Wilkinson &

[3] See Tilleczek (2008) for a review of literature.
[4] Ferguson, Tilleczek, Rummens, Boydell & Roth Edney (2005).

Pickett, 2009; Keating and Hertzman. 1999) and the Life Course model (Elder, 1997; 1995) and the sociological lens of Institutional Ethnography (Smith, 2002) to examine how opportunities and constraints occur in families, schools, work places, local communities and larger (global) society. This perspective invites description and categorization at three inseparable and interacting levels: cultural, systemic, and individual. Each youth is seen as a social being that is nested within a family that is in turn nested within a community and society that is contextually and globally situated. As such, the realities of modern youth and youth cultures are taken into consideration as meaningful context (Tilleczek, 2004). Transitions to adulthood are nested within each other such that movement through secondary school is a part of the movement to adulthood where societal understandings and misunderstandings about young people are of significance in their treatment at school (Tilleczek & Ferguson, 2007). As Furlong and Cartmel (2007) have suggested, a main feature of modern society is the fallacy of individual control which obscures the social relations between people and institutions that govern opportunities and risks.

It is therefore necessary to examine these social relations and place the everyday experiences of young people at the nexus of research (Tilleczek, 2011**).** Currents arising from subaltern studies which attend to those who have been marginalized from school and society (cf. Apple & Buras, 2006) and from voiced research which attempts to give voice and visibility to disadvantaged youth (cf. Smyth & Hattam, 2001) suggest ways in which we can speak to and hear young people, and what it could mean to do so. The complex cultural nesting approach provides focus to these issues of research inquiry and process *with* and *for* young people in an attempt to make space for voices that are often silenced or marginalized. The methodological glue for the project was critical ethnography which "refers to ethnographic studies that engage in

cultural critique by examining larger political, social and economic issues that focus on oppression, conflict, struggle, power and praxis" (Schwandt, 1997, 22) and was used for examining the connections of early school leaving to wider socio-historical issues (Spradley, 1979; Thomas, 1993). The active negotiations of youth who are living the disengagement from school were discussed and recorded.

Through these "open and purposeful" discussions with young people (cf. Smyth & Hattam, 2001; 2002), the project team sought to allow and record stories and experiences of early school leavers. Special attention was given to the intersections of various types of identity markers (e.g. cultural, racial, linguistic, class, gender, etc.) and schooling. The study's focus was on producing detailed descriptions and analysis of the social processes and organization of every day experiences (cf. Smith, 2002) and lived realities of disengagement from school and early school leaving. The design and sampling strategy was therefore very important to ensure reflection of diverse experiences of young people who left school. This article focuses on experiences and factors that are common to all of the youth. However, it is important to acknowledge the heterogeneity of experiences as presented here and elsewhere (cf. Tilleczek, 2008).

Which Youth Experiences? Sampling Decisions

This study used a qualitative sampling process which is not a single, fixed step. Rather, we employed a purposive, iterative and theoretically driven process (LeCompte & Priessle, 1993) to generate a thorough sample for describing the experiences of early school leavers that we imagined as having no clear or fixed boundaries. The first decision was to develop a loose guide for selecting our participants from across the province of Ontario. We used a maximum variation sampling frame to address the range and heterogeneity of young people that the

literature had suggested we hear from. To that end, we developed a sampling frame that was sensitive to geography (all areas of the province and rural/urban), age, cultural status, language and socioeconomic background. Early leavers and those who had left and returned made up the largest number (169) of youth interviews. *Early Leavers* were youth who have left an Ontario high school prior to receiving their Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) whether dropped out or permanently expelled. However, 24 young people who were currently in school but identified to us as "at-risk" of leaving were also interviewed if s/he met one or more of the risk variables identified in the project's socio-demographic literature review and/or had been identified by an educator as "at-risk."[5]

In addition to these groupings, the complex sampling strategy allowed for a diverse sample by gender, linguistic identity, visible/non-visible status, newcomer/established status, Aboriginal status, and sexual orientation. We sought to find a minimum of eight youth for in-depth qualitative interviews as recommended for each population subcategory of theoretical interest (McCracken, 1988). For example, the sample was reflective of the urban–rural continuum found across the province of Ontario and included consideration of metropolitan areas (Toronto), major city (Ottawa), smaller cities (Hamilton; Kitchener-Waterloo; Thunder Bay; Sudbury), and rural areas (outside Sudbury and Thunder Bay; Owen Sound), thereby permitting data analyses at both the local and provincial levels.[6]

We interviewed diverse youth, including Anglophone, Francophone, urban, rural, newcomer, second generation, third plus generation, visible minority, non-visible minority, Aboriginal, as well as lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered youth (LGBT). By considering various sub-groups in

[5] For further discussion on "at-risk" categorization, problems, debates and issues associated with it, see Tilleczek & Ferguson (2007).

[6] See http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/reports.html for copies of the Sampling Frames, Ethical Processes and Consent Forms and Research Tools (Face Sheets, Interview Guides, Focus Group Guides).

participant sampling design, we were able to document and analyse experiences and influencing factors that are both unique to specific categories of youth and common to all. This article discusses the common aspects, social processes and pathways to early leaving for the whole group of 193 early leavers. Unique analyses per group have been provided elsewhere (Tilleczek, 2008).

Locating Young People: The Ethics of Recruiting and Speaking to Youth

Exacting ethical processes were followed which were based on but exceeded the Tri-Council Policy for research ethics in Canada. The Hospital for Sick Children and three University Research Ethics Boards approved of the proposed ethical treatment of the participants. The team proceeded with a number of ethical principles, the most important of which was respectful care in the informed and confidential treatment of young people who often felt marginalized in other "adult" spheres and institutions. Our ethical processes included youth-attuned and detailed information and informed consent letters to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. We tested the letters and process with young people to assure contextual and linguistic understanding of the study goals and the processes for the interviews. Young people were encouraged to ask questions at multiple points in the Face Sheet completion and interview process and were clearly told that they did not have to complete the Face Sheet or interview and could withdraw at any time. The interviewers treated the cultural and narrative aspects of the process with care which included adapting the order of interview questions to the comfort level of young people and providing each young person with a community-specific laminated wallet sized card with local "help" numbers. We also put processes in place for young people to contact a psychologist should they wish to do so. It should be noted that none of them did so.

Participants were selected within each of the identified youth sub-populations based on their interest in the study and their willingness to talk about their own experiences. Following a letter sent to school boards explaining the project, Lead Investigators made first contact with the various boards at the seven study sites to identify personnel who would work with the research team in recruiting youth, parents/guardians and educators. Field Coordinators subsequently made personal contact with the selected boards to elicit specific names and contacts. It became obvious that some school communities could offer no help in locating young people who had left school. Other youth were therefore identified and recruited informally via community agencies including a range of youth outreach and social services. One out of two early school leavers was recruited formally through school boards, the second informally through the community in agencies such as shelters for street involved youth, youth community groups in ghettoized urban areas, or youth outreach workers in education or mental health. The difficulty in finding young people who had left school early is notable. However, building collaborations with community groups proved indispensible in locating young people and providing a context for their daily lives and struggles.

Locating Parents and Educators

Parent and educator focus group participants were much easier to locate. They were chosen from across the province, by language/culture, and their role in the education system. To be included, a parent or guardian was that of an early high school leaver who had left an *Ontario* high school prior to receiving his/her OSSD and had not returned to any form of high school education to receive his/her OSSD. Educators were included if they held positions of high school teacher, guidance counselor, vice-principal or principal *currently* working in the *Ontario*

school system. Care was taken to use a variation of parents with Francophone, Anglophone, Aboriginal, northern, southern, rural and urban youth who had left school. Educators were similarly sampled by region, language, and culture with care taken to speak to both teachers/counselors and administrators. A total of 14 focus groups were conducted with 19 parents/guardians and 52 educators across the province. The groups were not mixed so that parents and educators had separate conversations. Approximately five to eight participants were in each group and each lasted about 2 hours for Face Sheet completion and group discussion.

Speaking with Young People

Research data was comprised of verbatim transcripts arising from our purposeful conversations with young people[7] and supplemented by detailed field notes that were both observational and reflexive in content (cf. Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). This conversation began with an open and invitational question "please describe what was going on in your life when you left school." The young people could start at any point of departure in any context covered by school, family, friends, work, community etc. Prompts were constructed so as to assist interviewers in seeing and guiding them across a range of contexts and social processes. Field note comments were recorded immediately following the taped interviews and were written and/or audiotaped and then transcribed. They consisted of information relating to the place of meeting, observations about the young person, the felt "match" between interviewer and young person, the tone of the conversation and any other comments felt to be relevant. Data also included survey questionnaires (Face Sheets) especially developed for the project to provide a background understanding of all participants and to collect information on socio-demographics and known risk and protective situations as previously identified in the existing research

[7] See http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/reports.html for copies of the Interview guides and prompts and the Interviewer Training Package.

literature. The young person was assisted in completing the Face Sheet by the interviewer. The process was completed before the conversation and used to facilitate rapport and open up areas for further probing. The development of the study research instruments – interview guides, prompts, ethical consents and Face Sheets – was informed by two literature reviews, extensive consultation with advisors drawn from boards of education, school personnel, community groups, young people, and other researchers with expertise in relevant areas. This expert group was consulted with three times over the course of the project.

Our narrative and culturally sensitive process of interviewing (open, negotiated, and purposeful moment of conversations) was informed by the literature (cf. Fontana & Frey, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Smyth & Hattam, 2001). The metaphor for the interviews and focus groups conversation was that of the *dance.* The attempts to ensure that our interview guides were used in the manner in which they were intended was critical to research rigor. Interviewer training sessions were developed and delivered across the province to approximately fifty interviewers. They were developed and led by the Lead Investigator and Research Coordinator in each site. A comprehensive package containing the process for training, and a listing of relevant project materials was generated for both individual youth interviews and focus group interviews**.** Conducting seven distinct training sessions relating to data collection greatly enhanced the process. Since most of the interviewers were highly experienced, their input into the order, language and timing of the questions and prompts was invaluable. For instance, the Aboriginal team training session alerted us the need for gift giving, beginning the conversation in the history of colonization and residential schooling should the young person wish to address it, and ending the conversation with deep gratitude (which was used in all conversations). The

Francophone and Newcomer training sessions similarly provided important culturally sensitive input.

The conversations with young people were conducted at a mutually agreed upon place. For most youth, this happened in the community at coffee shops, libraries, community agencies and so forth. For others, the interview location was a school if they were still enrolled. Each interview began by securing informed consent and then worked from a protocol to guide the purposeful discussion. The conversations ranged from one to two hours. Post-interview debriefing was provided to the young people, interviewers and transcriptionists as needed. As mentioned above, this included making available a psychologist for young people. In addition, a laminated card was created for each young person to fit into a wallet or pocket. These cards were written for each specific site and provided community-specific youth service information.

The interviewers and transcribers were encouraged to speak with the research team and each other to decompress after the interview and field note taking. Many did take this opportunity since the stories were often difficult to hear. A noteworthy aspect of the interview process was the number of "thank you" statements made by the youth to the interviewers. These affirmed that they were pleased to have been given the opportunity to tell a story "which they had never told before" despite the fact that their stories were often difficult to tell and hear.

Data Analysis

The analysis of interviews involved the development of a Code Book[8] originating in the review of international literature (known risk and protective situations) and constructed through a series of sixteen team discussions with five research investigators for each interview. This analytic process adapted a team approach suggested by Diekelmann (1992) in which the

[8] See http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/reports.html for copies of analytical Code Books.

investigative team listened to the audio file, read the entire verbatim transcript, read the field notes, viewed the Face Sheet, and began coding the transcript. Both risk and protective situations were considered at multiple levels. The first level of analysis allowed thematic analysis of these "factors" as social processes without reducing the experiences of young people to "variables". The concomitant stories and experiences - as reported in this article - were a first and important step in understanding the wide sweep of positive and negative features, influences and pathways of early school leaving. The transcripts were not returned to the young people for verification given the large number (193) of young people and the short time frame for completing of the field work (one year).

While the emerging analytic codes were themselves mutually exclusive, it was certainly possible, and often necessary, to multi-code many large segments of the transcribed interview text. Thus, protective factors could also be coded as risks, should the young person speak of them in this paradoxical way. The team discussed their individual analyses on a regular basis and collectively began to build an analytic code book. Inter-coder agreement was ensured through this ongoing collaboration. Sixteen group conversation took place to arrive at 11 discreet "code families" each with multiple 'parent' and 'child' codes.

After having carefully considered the interview materials and coded each transcript, subsequent forms of analyses were conducted on the interview transcripts to reveal stories of individual pathways to early leaving. This was accomplished in a similar team process whereby each of five coders wrote a short narrative summary of the interview to encapsulate the pathway and wrote a brief narrative description (placed in temporal order) that often melded past, present and future. Each analyst then placed each narrative into one of three pathways: *Starting from Scratch* included the young people who encountered multiple risk situations at all levels of their

lives: family, community, and school. These were youth for whom schooling posed yet another risk within an already difficult life path. *Mostly Protected* included youth on another end of the continuum who appeared to be benefit from numerous encounters with protective situations in their families, communities, schools and themselves. *In-Between* were the young people who encountered both risk and protective situations at many levels. They faced numerous challenges, but also had distinct possibilities and opportunities in life. These were discussed across all team members to reach agreement. An additional team member then cross-checked all codes and "narrative pathway summaries" and input each transcript into Ethnograph. A similar process was engaged for the thematic analysis of all parent and educator focus group transcriptions. However, no narrative pathway summary was written for them. It is worth stating that any disagreements in either thematic or narrative analysis were discussed until all coders reached agreement on the code/theme and/or narrative pathway. This labour intensive process of team discussions and checking resulted in the sixteen iterations of the code book.

To assure that the data collection and analytical processes enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings rather than simple group conformity, the research team defined the terms by which to address rigor in our qualitative data analysis. We addressed rigor in two ways: research practice as procedural rigor; and analytic or theoretical rigor. While rigour commonly refers to the reliability and validity of research (Davies and Dodd, 2002), we wanted both processes to be reliable based on consistency and care in the application of research practices and reflected in the visibility of research practices (Fossey et al, 2002). For instance, our decisions about criteria for appraising our rigor took into account the distinctive goals of our project and were embedded in a broad understanding of qualitative research design and data analysis (Mays & Pope, 2000; Twohig and Putnam, 2002). "Making sense" of the thematic and narrative analysis was aided by

considering methods of purposeful conversation as resources rather than as indicators of quality in their own right (Eakin and Mykhalovskiy, 2003). We were attentive to research practices vis-à-vis elements of carefulness, respect, honesty, reflection, engagement, awareness, openness and sensitivity to context. Our group collaborative process, work with the expert advisory group (who assisted in our analysis and interpretation of data), and attention to detail in cleaning and reading the data are good examples.

Emergent findings were verified using the following criteria: *inter-coder reliability* through the use of multiple reviewers at all levels of data analysis and the comparison of the transcription process with notes; *audit trail* through careful field notes and tracking our decision-making, *thick description* through adequate description of the context and the sample; and, *persistent observation* through spending reasonable time speaking to young people, educators and parents. Our use of varied data collection and analytical methods and speaking to more than one group offered opportunities to corroborate findings. In addition, we were able to recognize parallels at the conceptual and theoretical level with international literatures and provide comparability between contexts in a conceptual rather than statistical manner (Sim, 1998). In summary, our ethical and methodological decisions had to do with the desire to get beneath often politically motivated and variable trends about "drop-outs" and shift the analysis toward making visible the complex social processes, experiences and lives of early school leavers. These tales were told to us by young people who themselves had lived the process and were elaborated upon by their teachers and parents. The team was honored to have been able to speak a large number and variety of young people across Ontario who has informed us with insightful analysis and perspective. In the process, they have also taught us how to better engage future research *with* and *for* young people.

Findings:

The Young People

Before presenting the social processes and pathways of early school leaving for the whole group of 193 young people, it is necessary to illustrate who they were. Nearly 59% of the sample identified as male (n=112), 38% as female (n=74) and the remaining 1% (n=2) as "other". This distribution matches the 3:2 gender break down of early leavers in the existing literature. In total, 27 Francophone, 31 Aboriginal, 68 3rd+ generation (mainly non-visible minorities), 10 LGBT, 41 visible minority newcomers, and 16 non-visible minority newcomers were interviewed. Thirty-two of these youth were from rural communities. The majority of the Face Sheets were completed in English (86%) and the remainder in French (14%). Further, 78% of the sample was attending an English language school while 22% were in French schools. The majority of youth interviewed were born in Canada (85%, n=158) and the remaining 15% (n=29) born elsewhere. Approximately one-third (33%) of the sample self-identified as a visible minority**.** Of those who provided the information (n=187) the majority had been attending public schools (see Table 1).

Table 1: Type of School Attended by Youth Participants

School Type	Frequency	Percent
Public	120	62.2
Catholic	42	21.8
Private	4	2.1
First Nations	4	2.1
Other	17	8.8
Total	187	96.9

Of the 188 young people who provided their current age (5 did not), the majority were 18 or 19 years of age with a range of 13 to 25 years. Given that the majority of the sample was 18 years or older (68%) it was not surprising that 54% were not living with a primary caregiver at the time of the interview. Table 2 shows the income distribution based on the 118 young people (61%) who answered this question on the Face Sheet. The distribution shows the relatively low levels of family income, with close to 50% of the sample living with under $30,000 per year and nearly 60% living below the $40,000 cut off point. This is further reflected in the self-report measure of social class which asked the young people whether they felt themselves "to be poor", "middle class", or "rich" in comparison to other young people. Nearly 95% of the youth felt that they were either middle class (69%) or poor (24%). The social class backgrounds of the sample are also reflected in the finding that 59% of the sample had a job while in high school. The general corroboration of self-perceived social class, family income and the literature suggests the face validity of the finding.

Table 2: Family Income Categories of Youth Participants

Category	Frequency	Percent
< 10K	18	**9.3**
10K -< 20K	24	**12.4**
20K -< 30K	14	**7.3**
30K -< 40K	13	**6.7**
40K -< 50K	10	**5.2**
50K -< 60K	13	**6.7**
60K -< 70K	5	**2.6**
70K -< 80K	3	**1.6**
80K -< 90K	4	**2.1**
90K -< 100K	2	**1.0**
100K +	12	**6.2**
Total	**118**	**61.1**

Many youth stated that they had been identified as "special needs" students (37%; n=71). Special needs were defined by the Ontario Ministry of Education checklist of identification as a special education student (learning disability, gifted, blind/low vision, deaf/hard of hearing, physical disability, developmental disability, speech/language impairment, mild intellectual disability, or autism). The most frequently mentioned exceptionalities were ADD/ADHD (n=16), behavioural problems (n=9), learning disabilities (n=7) and gifted (n=5). Of students who had been identified, most reported having been identified as having special needs in elementary school (85%) with only 15% being identified in grade 9 or after.

A majority (60%) of the young people had also taken the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) which is a requirement for graduation in Ontario and 67% of them had passed it. Of those who passed the OSSLT, the majority proportion (85%) were from the group who left school and later returned and graduated. In comparison, 69% of the early school leavers and 50% of those in school and "at-risk" passed the OSSLT. Of the 20 students who had repeated a grade, 75% had repeated only one grade. Many young people (64%) also reported having had an interruption in their schooling in the past. Moreover, 88% reported having skipped classes while in secondary school, and 67% reported having been suspended up to 5 times. Of those students who had been expelled 93% (n=60) reported up to 4 expulsions. Many of these young people also described a transient life with 33 of them moving more than 10 times, 77 of them moving 3-10 times, and an additional 17 moving once.

Pathways and Social Processes to Early School Leaving

Eighty-one percent (134 of 166) of our Anglophone transcripts have so far been closely examined for the young person's narrative pathway to early school leaving. Three different pathways resulted from the team's narrative analysis such that: 42% (n=57) were *starting from*

scratch; 28% (n=37) were *mostly protected;* and 30% (n=40) were *in-between*. *Starting from Scratch* were those young people who encountered multiple risk situations at all levels of their social lives: family, community, and school. These were youth for whom schooling posed further risk situations within an already difficult life path. For example, they may have been experiencing abuse or neglect at home as well as struggling at school and were on complicated and difficult social journeys. Their experiences detail the social struggles as organized at in different life spheres.

> *"First get off the streets, second get a job, third finish your education so you can get a career. So it is like steps at a time. It is like some people have those things already and they are lucky that they have those things already handed to them and they don't have to start at the bottom and work their way up. They don't understand what that is like. Starting at the bottom is – I am slowly getting there. I'm not there, but I am slowly getting there"* (Elliott). [9]

> *"I got into selling drugs. I got into using cocaine. I had a good friend of mine who was roughly the same age as me who…she was prostituting herself to make money, so I offered to be her pimp or whatever you want to call it, and I was pimping her while taking her money to buy cocaine, to buy new clothes, to get my nails done, my hair done, whatever, and I was thinking I was just living it up. When really I was just numbing my pain, trying to take away the fact that the one thing I had to live for was gone…But, I don't know if it was very-it was very tormenting" (*Taylor).

The following brief narrative summaries provide other examples of the kinds of pathways and social encounters as lived by two such young people who were "starting from scratch". These brief narratives as reconstructed from the conversations with George and Sherry reflect many social experiences that young people encountered and negotiated.

George:

- George ran away from home at age 11 due to abuse from his adopted father
- He was living on the streets but still going to school on and off
- He was removed from family home by Children's Aid Society at age 15 and placed in foster care

[9] All young people have been provided with pseudonyms.

- He did not feel that he belonged in his foster home and ran away to live with biological sister
- He worked and bought his own home at age 16 and he supported himself and older girlfriend (in university) while working full-time and going to high school
- George then entered the reserves/joined the military. He served overseas; returned with Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome and was receiving excellent psychiatric care
- Went into transitional housing, received financial support to complete his high school diploma
- Future plans: university and then set up his own business

Sherry:

- Sherry is a 20 year old bisexual female
- She went into full time foster care/group home at age 8
- She developed what she described as a poor sense of identity and had low self esteem
- She was maltreated at school by other young people and teachers
- Sherry saw herself as overweight and suffered mental health issues and a speech impediment
- She was on numerous medications for mental health issues
- Would sometimes assault people or "freak out" due to verbal bullying she experienced
- Sherry was expelled and suspended in grade 9 for fighting and left school in grade 10
- She felt that the discipline for bullies was insufficient and bullying played an important role in her final moment of leaving school
- Sherry felt disengaged due to peers who she claimed "pushed" her out of school
- Leaving school made it easier for her to think and increased her self esteem
- Sherry became pregnant after leaving school
- Having her son made her realize the value of education
- She attended an alternative learning center and earned her high school diploma

In contrast, the *Mostly Protected* were those young people who had numerous encounters with protective situations within their families, communities, schools and themselves. For instance, they may have come from caring homes with educational advantages and have been enjoying school before leaving but wanted to take a "break" for various reasons.

> *"Well, a friend offered a job to me. Well, it started off with landscaping. That was the summer going into grade 12 and it was just amazing money. And in the winter, I started doing snow removal and that was amazing too. That was back breaking. And then, finally I realized, like, the guys I was working with…like, I don't want to be crude or stereotypical but they were idiots. Like you'd be talking to them and every other work was the F word and they're all racist and everything. I don't want to turn out to be like that. I just didn't want that. I knew I was better than that. Ya, better" (Dylan).*

These young people most often had plans to negotiate their way back into school, or were in the process of doing so. The following brief narrative summaries provide representative examples of the social encounters and journeys as told by two such young people.

Kaili:

- Kaili grew up in a very supportive family and felt well protected
- She is in a relationship with her boyfriend and working full-time
- Finishing high school diploma to go to college
- Missing one credit
- Frustrated because friends all left high school
- Strong family/friends but wants independence
- Good academic standing
- Good school but they failed to keep track of her credit needs, leaves school
- She does not want to be in school with younger students
- Adult roles/working/car/relationship
- She attends a new high school for last credit
- Kaili has plans to attend college

Mark:

- Mark is a 19 yr old male
- He lives at home with parents and siblings and his parents are supportive and proud of him
- He was raised in a privileged neighborhood and household
- Mark encountered many good teachers but did not like school itself
- He was getting mid-range grades in most classes and failed a few classes, but repeated them
- Mark was never "in trouble" at school or at home
- In the middle of grade 12, he decided that he wanted to buy a car, and so left school to work and earn money
- After leaving high school, he enrolled immediately into a night school program and completed grade 12
- Mark plans to attend college or university in the future

In-Between were the group of young people who encountered both risk and protective situations and factors at many levels. They faced numerous challenges, but also demonstrated various ways in which they met possibilities for success. For example, a poor start at home

might have been met with a caring educational environment and outreach. Or, a supportive home was not enough to overcome the problems encountered in the school or with friends.

> *"You know, like uh like they go around thinking they're big and bad cause their daddies are lawyers and doctors and stuff, right? They're going around in cool cars, like oh yah, look at that you know, and…I don't know, I found the work too easy, but uhh I just didn't want to, didn't meet my interests so, just didn't do it." (Steph)*

> *"…I have a history of bad reps with teachers. That's pretty much why I left school… I'm prone to hate male teachers more… Usually when male teachers try to reach out to me, like I can understand, like that if I'm doing bad in school, they try to reach out and talk to me, but I never really had my dad in my life, so I'm not really good with males in authority figures. So I guess that's the main problem with it." (Cheryl)*

The following brief narrative summaries provide representative examples of the paths as told by two such young people.

Kathleen:

- Kathleen comes from a working poor family and made many moves
- Her parents are kind and supportive people
- She has been receiving low grades at school and is struggling academically and hangs out with "risky" friends
- She likes school
- Early adult roles are necessary to support her family
- She has a strong and positive identity and likes herself
- She became pregnant while in high school
- No outreach at school or in day care setting but had good teachers and guidance to help her look for alternatives in school and better daycare
- Plans to go back to school and find a job

Clifford:

- Clifford is a 16 yr old who identifies as a bi-racial male
- He comes from a supportive family who have moved neighbourhoods (from inner city to suburbs) to try to keep him out of trouble
- Involved in extracurricular activities in elementary school but started getting in trouble in high school (gang related activities and drinking)
- Has difficulties with peers at school relating to gang conflicts
- He is in trouble with the law beginning at age 12 –charged with theft and incarcerated for 3 months; following 2 years charged with more crimes and experienced 2 more incarcerations.

- School personnel tried to help him deal with problems and get kids to leave him alone, but he rejected the help
- Clifford left high school in grade 9 – he was expelled for gang related fighting
- States that dropping out had nothing to do with his family or home life, it was because of school peers
- Clifford felt that if he stayed at school he would continue to be in trouble with gangs and the law – so made a choice between staying in school and in trouble, or leaving school and getting away from the gangs.
- There was no perceived connection with his Aboriginal community other than they helped him when he was in legal trouble
- Clifford planned to return to school but was not allowed back to the school
- Felt like he was too far behind to start somewhere new
- He is currently working full time in construction and would like to go back to school but perhaps in another province where he has extended family

Of the 134 Anglophone transcripts examined for narrative pathways of early school leaving, 37 had come from *mostly protected* situations. This is a surprising finding and runs counter to the notion that leaving school early happens only in the most desperate situations. The remaining 72% of these young people were either *starting from scratch* or *in-between*, with both groups detailing their encounters with multiple problematic social situations. These differentiated faltering points add to our ability to re-define early school leaving as a complex process - one that is nested, fragmented, based on broken or kept promises between people, and occurring across multiple levels of systems (families, homes, schools, communities, societies). Early school leaving was also mapped out from these storied transcripts as a gradual stage in the process toward adult status.

> *"I look back and then it's really depressing a lot of the times. Like some of the simplest mistakes you make have such… a huge effect on your future, and you just don't realize it at that age." (Jason)*

> *"It was just too hard for me to actually go to school. That was just work related because, I mean, I was on welfare at the time. I was actually out on my own. And, but welfare was not really a lot of money so I was working nights, 5 nights a week on top of going to school. And… it was too hard for me to get up in the morning and go to school. It wasn't really that I didn't want to go to school at that point. It was just hard for me to get up." (Dakota)*

Mapping Risk and Protective Situations as Social Processes

This section moves from the narrative summaries presented above to describe a variety of underlying social processes as mapped out for the whole group of youth participants. This data provides detailed descriptions of the host of risk and protective situations encountered and negotiated both in and out of school. Numerous instances of inter-relational text in the transcripts indicated that risk and protective situations were numerous and often functioned simultaneously. For instance, many youth suggested that they liked some teachers or school very much, but other teachers or schools led them to disengage from school. Or, teachers were seen by some youth as the saving grace in life while other young people were unable to find any supportive or caring teachers. These kinds of social paradoxes also emerged in relation to friends or the family which could function as clear sources of support, strong negative influences, or both at the same time.

> *"My mother and my father split up when I was three. My brother was just, just born. My mom phoned the cops and kicked him out 'cause he hit her or something and... my mom and my brother, we all, we were great, you know? Like around grade six for me, she started dropping off parenting-wise. She was always a good person, like you know, she hit some bad luck. Some bad health issues… She drank… It wasn't like she was drunk at the house. She'd go to the bar and drink and them come home drunk and go to sleep. You know? She wasn't around us being all sloshed…"*

> *"I like being there, it's a lot more different than a regular high school, like it allows me freedom…so many thing are different, scheduling, I don't have to be forced into a class room to sit and listen to a teacher like droning on about a subject and I can work at my own pace, I can sit wherever I want to, leave and take a break and I don't have to ask permission… I feel like an adult here…there is not so much of a high school mentality"*

> *"Maybe if they actually tried to help me. They never did, they just kicked me out or gave me detentions or…expelled me. Nobody actually lifted a finger"*

> *"…I went to my guidance counselor…she told me you know, the best thing for you since I have so much trouble with school…is to probably drop out of school now,*

> *cause now is the time for you to do it. And when she told me this I was shocked because she is the guidance counselor. They are the people who are supposed to encourage you to stay in school, not to drop out."*

School related risks situations described by young people included school policies upheld by teachers and principals that were counterproductive to keeping students in school or allowing them to return. In short, a lack of flexibility and/or passivity on the part of school personnel and in school policies was cited. Many youth spoke of direct and indirect messages from principals, vice-principals, teachers and guidance counselors indicating to them that they are NOT wanted in the school system. Many youth also discussed negative relationships with teachers, curriculum that was too difficult, a lack of support with schoolwork, a lack of recognition of differing learning styles and a climate that is simply not enjoyable and thus not conducive to learning.

> *"Because some people need the slower pace, give them the slower pace. Some people need faster, have faster pace. But don't do the same thing for everybody. So in my case, I fell behind by one day, and they were going that fast. Like, I had no way of catching up."*
>
> *"well, just make school more interesting…make school more fun, more for everybody"*
>
> *"…they [teachers] would guide you but they also make you more like you were really important and even like, you could even talk to them about problems at home"*

Tables 3 and 4 illustrate the range of risk and protective situations and the multiple levels at which they were identified and conceptualized. While not direct mirror images, the multiplicity of both risk and protective situations and the fact that many of them functioned in paradoxical ways is noteworthy. The detailed themes gleaned from these 193 young people exceeded that reported in the existing research literature, especially in relation to the contradictory social processes such as excellent/troubled student-teacher relationships or school

practices which both distance and support young people depending on who they are. In addition, the number of protective situations described by these young people had not previously been identified in the literature, although some comment on the need to further understand non-pathological telling of the story of early school leavers is emerging.

As Table 3 and 4 also illustrate, a wide range of risk and protective factors are present beyond the school in the surrounding social contexts. At the cultural level, socioeconomic status, poverty, gender, and ethnicity were experienced as barriers to remaining in school. Classism and racism were reasons cited for bullying and/or low expectations held by teachers, peers, or class mates. The most prevalent relation to social class and minority status was the need to take on multiple adult roles while attempting to remain in school. Often this proved daunting to impossible for students. The relationship between success in school and working, raising children, living on one's own, or navigating the streets proved problematic. Leaving school was then seen as a necessary but momentary active "solution".

Table 3: Risk Situations Encountered by Youth Participants

	Culture and Society	Schools, Homes, Communities	Young people
Surrounding School	• Lower social class • Minority group status • Gender • "Place" (region or community) • Youth culture (not conducive to learning) • Immigration/resettlement	• Family • School-home link • Adult status	• Disabilities • Risk-taking • Social isolation • Identity issues • Moves/interruptions
Within School	• Ineffective discipline • Lack of referral, counseling or outreach • Negative school culture (bullying, violence, lack of care, flawed structures, etc.) • Negative administrator relations (with youth, parents, teachers) • School structural flaws • Lack of assessment for disabilities • School/Culture conflicts	• Negative teacher-student relations • Curriculum • Passive Instruction • Disregard for learning style • Lack of support, outreach	• Low levels of engagement • Suspensions/retentions

Table 4: Protective Situations Encountered by Youth Participants

	Cultural and Society	Schools, Homes, Communities	Young people
Surrounding School	• "Place" (region or community) • Supportive others in community (links to social and community services)	• Family • School-home link • Moderate employment	• Educational advantage • Friends/partners • Healthy lives • Insight, reflection, motivation
Within School	• Positive school culture • School and class size • Tutors and support • Alternative education	• Teaching style/care • Counselors - outreach • Curriculum	• Friends/peers • Classmates

When reading the detail by which these risk and protective situations are organized in the lives of young people, school completion is seen as social promises made between young people, school systems, school personnel, friends, community, and family. Early school leaving is a social and inter-relational process rather than an individual decision. It is contingent on promises (kept or broken) between people. The following four quotations provide some examples.

> *"[my dad] needed that help. He'd been packing the boxes since he was young, right? And then he told me 'I need help' and then I basically just left school…just to help out my dad"*

> *"…I've gone to jail numerous times just because I got drunk and acted like an idiot. Or, you know, selling drugs to make money…just to be able to live on the street and not starve to death"*

> *"I was never disrespectful to teachers or anything, but a lot of teachers were disrespectful towards students…"*

> *"…I look back at my own childhood and the patterns and how they repeated themselves, and when I was young my mom couldn't take care of me, I was in Children's Aid on and off… and here's this other child that's going to be born into this world and I can't do that… I just couldn't, so I said I'm going to change my life… I knew that I wanted to have my high school diploma because I was having a child I needed to support, that I was determined to raise and I was determined to provide for and give a life to, that I didn't have…"*

Young people's accounts of becoming disengaged and leaving high school are often non-linear and fragmented social process rather than those described in the literature as simple and linear individual decisions. These complex social processes were evidenced by the past, present and future concerns that coalesced in the narratives around multifaceted social and emotional resolutions and/or a disconnection with school personnel, families or friends. Youth described their experiences in a back and forth manner where pasts, presents and futures intertwined in the retelling of their experiences. There were no simple constructions of the social phenomenon of early school leaving but common throughout these conversations was the thread of contradiction,

struggle, complexity, multiple tensions and subversive forces. Slippages occurred at many points as evidenced in the range of risk and protective situations that were lived and negotiated by these young people.

On the other hand**,** with very few exceptions these young people also intended to return to some form of education. Young people had clear and specific goals regarding what their schooling would provide in terms of future jobs and careers, but they wanted a different kind of school than that which they had already encountered. Moreover, leaving school early was seen by some as a reasonable and necessary momentary step in their own pathway to adulthood.

> *"I think maybe I'm glad I left school because – I know that sounds so weird, right? Like I'm glad I left school, but from the time like I was 16 when I left school and now I'm 18, and that's only 2 years, but you can grow a lot in 2 years, and realize a lot of things… and that's what I've done. I've realized, you know, you need school… You might not like it. I mean people don't like going to work everyday, but you need to go in order to live. Just like school…. But the thing is, when you go to school, you need a support system. And you need people to be there for you if you don't understand things… Like high school- you're not helping me- so what am I supposed to do? Sit here and just not understand anything? So, like I mean, I'm glad I did it and those factor into my thinking… cause if I'd stayed there I just would have got nowhere anyways."*

> *"… A better future for myself. Like, I can go to college and show that no matter, even when it gets hard, you can take a break, as long as you go back and finish what you started. You should always finish what you start no matter how long it takes you. Cause it took me a long time"*

Parents and Educators

A negative school culture was the most pervasive risk situation for young people as noted by both parents and educators. This included racism, classism, poor treatment by class mates and peers, and an inability to effectively manage the school day. However, in contrast to young people and educators (who more often stated that leaving school was a necessary and sometimes protective factor), only one parent suggested that leaving school was a necessary step in helping

young people mature and realize the importance of education. Most parents did not want their sons and daughters leaving school and felt that the school itself should reach out in any way possible to them. For parents, cultural ignorance, racism, bullying, punitive policies, educators who were uncaring and a lack of respect for young people were negative processes encountered in schools.

Educators acknowledged this constellation of risk situations – they did not blame the individual student. They recognized the complexity of the phenomenon of early school leaving and the ways in which risks intersect. Similar to the parents, school culture flaws were seen by educators to be related to a lack of cultural competency and racism on the part of school personnel and students. Bullying, punitive policies and a lack of care were also noted as were youth troubles with drugs, alcohol and mental health challenges.

Not surprisingly, educators (like youth) called for more open, flexible and caring approaches to school. Many felt that this was within their reach. For both educators and parents, it was parents themselves and caring educators who were seen as protective, they felt strongly that their support and advocacy were critical pieces in the educational journeys of their children. The conversations with both parents and educators revealed the intricate place of families in the educational lives of youth. These young people, parents and educators all recognized and described the ways in which students are nested in social systems across homes, families, schools, communities and societies. Pathways toward school completion crossed these multiples systems with many opportunities and challenges encountered along the way.

Discussion

The *Ontario Early School Leavers Study* was designed to further understand and address early school leaving from the perspectives of young people, parents and educators. This article has presented data not yet published from that study. Specifically, we have illustrated three pathways to early leaving and the host of risk and protective situations encountered by the whole group of 193 young people. In addition, we have detailed many of the research decisions and processes that may be of interest to future researchers working *with* and *for* young people. There are more analyses underway to further explicate the experiences of young people on these three pathways and of the three groups of young people we interviewed (left school, returned and graduated, at school and still at-risk). Indeed, the relationships between the pathways and groupings are of interest.

We have described the social processes of early school leaving as experiences related to countless social events and negotiations that occur throughout the lives of young people. A dynamic interplay of risk and protective situations was described as occurring in the complex cultural nests of young people. As a result, early leaving has been shown as a social phenomenon which is nested the larger society, in contemporary youth culture, in families, in schools and in communities. It is a multi-level process determined by complex relationships and influences in the everyday lives of young people. We concur with Dorn (1996) in that this is a divergence from earlier work defining the "drop-out" problem as singular, one-time individual decisions. We also concur with Furlong and Cartmel (2007) in that these social processes have been obscured by generations of individualistic explanation and blame.

One benefit of the study was its ability to hear from youth, parents and educators. The picture they have painted is one of youth, parents, and educators struggling to have youth

succeed in situations which are complex and demanding for all three groups. The delineation of the risk and protective situations currently extends research knowledge about such factors and shows a remarkable level of inter-respondent agreement. The data presented here concurs with many of the risk factors found in previous literature (see Tilleczek, 2008 for a review of literature). And, our analyses show that many youth struggle against imposing difficulties at the individual, family, school, and societal levels. At the same time, their interviews revealed a wealth of strengths and protective factors at every level, a finding not much reflected in the literature.

The dialogue between parents, educators, and young people is a further strength of the current analysis. Both competing and concurring messages were heard. For example, young people, educators, and parents recognized structural problems such as racism and poverty which can lead to alienation within the school and direct instances of bullying. Family struggle and mental health were also recurrent themes across the groups, as was the clear recognition of the unique challenge of taking on adult roles while still in high school. Each group spoke of excellent teachers, care, and concern within schools that had flexible arrangements which proved helpful. Educators were more vocal than were parents about the structural problems that occur in schools. Parents were alone in voicing their tireless advocacy on behalf of youth. But, youth could see the need to advocate on their own behalf and to seek the help and support of others. Indeed, they often both individualized and blamed themselves while laying out complex social structural barriers to school completion. Similar to Smyth & Hattam's work (2002), these young people provided countless examples of the ways in which modern rational educational structures and politics rub up against their need for flexible and caring education.

While both youth and educators agreed that leaving school can sometimes be necessary or preferable to staying, parents disagreed and stated that youth should never have to leave school. The competing view of the aims, purposes and cultures of schools is made plain. The finding that early leaving holds both negative and positive meanings for young people and teachers has not been well reflected in the "drop-out" literature which more often attends to the problematic and risk outcomes (cf. Smyth & Hattam, 2002). However, adaptive functions and meanings of youth "risk-taking" suggest that a purely negative interpretation of leaving school as an individual and "risky" rite of passage be re-examined (Tilleczek & Hine, 2006). These findings have implications for understanding the rise of multiple, circuitous, and elongated pathways in and out of school as reflected elsewhere (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007 Tilleczek, & Lewko, 2001). Secondary schools must make visible their multiple re-entry points and strategies as youth "drop-back" to school.

Despite the multitude of risk situations faced by this diverse group of young people, they constructed a future for themselves that included completion of *their* education. Similar to Smyth and Hattam (2002; 2001) we found that individual stories of youth disengagement could be characterized by despair whereas collective accounts tend to also generate stories of "hope and possibility". In addition, we found that no individual accounts were entirely despairing. The majority of conversations clearly depict youth who, although struggling with a multitude of risk situations, are at the same time determined to make better lives for themselves. This often included a resolve to complete their high school education.

In practical research terms, the pathways and social processes of early school leaving outlined here suggest that there is no simple solution for "fixing" problems. But, the inclusion of youth, parents and educators in the discussion creates a space for reflexive approaches. It is the

responsibility of this shared community to integrate the cultural realities and values of youth into our evidence. A reflexive approach requires that we examine the decisions, processes and consequences of research, assuming that this will serve the ultimate goal of assisting young people and those closest to them (Mueller et al., 2008). But, what does it mean to help?

The results presented here suggest that policy and practice initiatives could be successful if they have a broad focus and address the complex cultural nests of youth. This is consistent with previous research regarding effective strategies to reduce early school leaving (cf., Tilleczek, 2008; Schargel & Smink, 2001; Rumberger, 2001; Health Canada, 1999; Shannon & Bylsma, 2003). A broad focus includes academic, social, and supportive activities which are responsive to a wide range of student needs and made possible through the effective integration of community services. This is a tall order calling for more than fidgeting. All approaches to reducing early school leaving must see that the youth who are most likely to disengage from school come from diverse circumstances, face daunting developmental challenges, and often have needed to assume adult roles which require attention to effective work/life balance strategies. The findings here provide cause for cautious optimism for youth in negotiating contemporary secondary school cultures to the extent that policies and programs become well informed by their stories and lived realities.

Current initiatives aimed at student success could be informed by the clear messages of a need for care, understanding, and flexibility in the secondary school. As Smyth and Hattam (2002) have shown, school cultures which are “active” (as opposed to “passive” or “aggressive”) are those which work well for a range of young people and find multiple ways to welcome, acknowledge and care. The pillars of education which relate to the teaching of content, such as

literacy and numeracy, are best enacted as yoked to those relating to the multiple, complex, and difficult life pathways down which many young people travel.

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