

International and National Factors Affecting School-To-Work Transition for At-Risk Youth in Canada: An Integrative Review

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Abstract

This paper provides an integrative review on the unemployment of at-risk youth and their transition to adulthood within Canadian and international contexts. Factors that influence school-to-work transition for at-risk youth include: (a) international economic and social factors, (b) fixed individual and family factors, (c) individual and family factors amenable to change, (d) educational contexts, (e) workplace contexts, (f) school-to-work intersection, and (g) outcomes for individuals. We also consider the complexities of comparing and synthesizing these factors and, finally, suggest an agenda for action by Canadian researchers and policy makers based on the results of our integrative review.

KEYWORDS: at-risk youth; school-to-work transition; work-based education

Many factors appear to influence the school-to-work transition and career

development of Canadian at-risk youth. This paper provides an integrative review on the unemployment of at-risk youth and their transition to adulthood within Canadian and international contexts. Risk is usually defined as a factor or a confluence of factors, within a youth's social context, that increases the likelihood of the youth experiencing distress and negative developmental outcomes in a variety of life situations (Gerard & Buehler, 2004). Our use of the term at-risk youth follows the definition articulated in the OECD publication *Our Children at Risk* (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 1995), which defines at-risk youth as "those failing in school and unsuccessful in making the transition to work and adult life and as a consequence unable to make a full contribution to active society" (p. 21). By youth, we refer to those between 15 and 24 years (age range used by Statistics Canada; Usalcas, 2005). Making sense of the extensive international data about school-to-work transition for at-risk youth has proven to be complex; however, understanding these data may inform programs designed to meet the career needs of at-risk youth in Canada. Our purpose is to synthesize recent research on the unemployment of at-risk youth and their transition to adulthood within Canadian and international contexts, and to consider the implications for researchers and policy makers in Canada.

Our research brings together studies in three fields that focus on the transition from the role of high school student to the role of productive adult, characterized by career stability, healthy relationships, and community involvement.

The first field describes the international and national context within which the other fields are situated and reports statistical data on the scope of the problem of at-risk youth. These studies emphasize the growing global concern for youth unemployment (e.g., Elder & Schmidt, 2006; Quintini, Martin, & Martin, 2007). The second field includes empirical research on co-operative, vocational, and work-based education programs that provide at-risk youth with authentic opportunities to enhance career development in workplace settings (e.g., Munby, Hutchinson, Chin, Versnel, & Zanibbi, 2003; Watson, 2005). The third field is developmental research where persistent findings in large-scale studies reveal that academic achievement is one of the strongest predictors of successful transition to adult roles. A frequent recommendation of developmental researchers and policy makers is that educators develop programs that include workplace experience to enhance students' academic accomplishments and to steer at-risk youth away from paths to social exclusion (Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Ferguson, Tilleczek, Boydell, & Rummens, 2005).

Trends in Youth Unemployment

International documents consistently point toward a growing youth labor force, with youth populations increasing faster than youth employment rates worldwide (Elder & Schmidt, 2006). As a result, youth unemployment rates in the last decade have risen to nearly three times the rate of adult unemployment. Youth make up 43.7% of



the world's unemployed despite the fact that youth of working age constitute only 25% of the population (Quintini et al., 2007). While the majority of youth are located in developing countries, rates of unemployment have also increased in developed countries including Canada; recent data show the current unemployment rate for youth, 15 to 24, in Canada is 16.8% while the overall unemployment rate for Canada is 8% (Statistics Canada, 2010). Large-scale studies estimate that, currently, at-risk youth make up about 25% to 30% of youth in Canada and the United States (Burststein, 2005; Saunders, 2008; Scarpetta, Sonnet & Manfredi, 2010; Wilmms, 2002), and recent employment outcome data from the United States suggest that only about 40% of at-risk youth are employed as young adults (Pungello et al., 2010).

Unemployment rates of youth have traditionally been more sensitive to demographic, economic, and social shifts than the rates for adults (Quintini et al., 2007). When the economy is booming, at-risk youth seek employment looking for the success that eluded them in school. When the economy wanes, they are usually the first to be laid off and few return to school, setting up a cycle of temporary employment and marginal attachment to the labor market. At-risk youth are more likely than others seeking employment to use temporary and part-time work as modes of entry into the workforce. Youth who leave education early, particularly those who do not complete secondary school, face increased difficulty in moving out of unemployment (Organization for Economic and Co-operative Development; OECD, 2008b). While improvements occur during economic booms, concerns persist about the ability of many youth to attain career stability (OECD, 2008c).

Improved access to data and multilateral agreements for sharing data have contributed to increased international research on youth transition; however, researchers have argued that decontextualized data make the comparisons superficial and that international comparative studies of the perceptions of youth are nonexistent. In response to critiques of youth transition research in Britain, Byner (2001) proposed a new paradigm for studying youth transition that enabled

comparisons between countries. He cautioned that comparative research must take account of historical and social influences. Direct comparisons of data in documents from the OECD or Eurostat are problematic because they lack information on the context within which the data were collected. Additionally, the quality of the data varies across countries and data typically present the picture the country wishes to project to the world. The data do not help the reader to understand the political and institutional forces that influence youth transitions. Education, training, and employment systems reflect the government's political agenda and contribute to the pathways youth follow and to defining successful outcomes. Caution must be exercised when making comparisons because each group of youth studied at a particular moment in time experiences a different constellation of contextual and policy influences. In our review of literature, we focus specifically on the following seven contextual influences on at-risk youth: (a) international economic and social factors, (b) fixed individual and family factors, (c) individual and family factors amenable to change, (d) educational contexts, (e) workplace contexts, (f) school-to-work intersection, and (g) outcomes for individuals.

Given the complexities of these influences and our long-term goal of developing a model of person-context relations to inform research on the potential of work-based education programs to engage at-risk youth, our research team completed a collaborative process to analyze international, national, and local documents. The next section of this paper describes the steps we undertook to construct a template for research team members to use to examine the related literature.

Method

A vast body of empirical and non-peer-reviewed literature on school-to-work transition has been published in the past two decades. The documents our research team gathered following a systematic search of related databases and internet-based resources proved to be varied in nature, scope, and veracity. A search was conducted using electronic databases including PsycINFO, ERIC, CINAHL, and Sociological Abstracts

from 1990 to 2009. The original search strategy yielded 264 citations using search terms "at-risk youth," "work," "transition," and "education." The number of citations was reduced by eliminating duplicate citations and documents not available online. Hand-searching the reference lists of these documents identified others resulting in a final list of 29 documents.

Using a template (Appendix A), 29 documents were reviewed in this analysis (see Appendix B for a list of documents). These documents included: 9 peer-reviewed papers which described quantitative and qualitative studies; 4 OECD reports written by policy analysts who accessed large survey data bases on youth transition in selected countries; and 9 reports prepared by Canadian government departments or policy research institutes using Statistics Canada data. There were also 5 documents from Great Britain and 2 reports by specific research or working groups within the province of Ontario, Canada which included curriculum guides and website descriptions of community-based programs offering transition interventions for at-risk youth. A mechanism for analysis was needed to synthesize the diverse and vast information in a way that would inform our research purpose. In order to ensure our document analysis was systematic and objective, we developed a document analysis template including six "clusters" of information aligned with risk and protective factors identified in research on early school leavers (Ferguson et al., 2005; Raymond, 2008). The fifth and final version of the template appears in Appendix A, and the synthesis of findings is reported in the next section.

Results

Descriptive Features of Documents

The 29 online documents, which varied in scope from local studies to syntheses of data from many countries, were uploaded to an online document repository. The intended audience for these documents ranged widely with most intended to influence policy or report on the effects of policy implementation.



Definition of Youth and At-Risk Youth Based on Document Analysis

Individual countries and major international bodies, including the OECD (Quinitini et al., 2007) and the International Labour Organization (ILO; Elder & Schmidt, 2006), have reported on the crisis of youth employment in developed and developing economies, using varying definitions of youth. The OECD documents define youth as 15/16 to 24 years, with a further breakdown into teenagers (15/16-19) and young adults (19-24) (OECD, 2008b; Quintini et al., 2007). The ILO adopts the United Nations definition of youth as 15 to 24 years (Elder & Schmidt, 2006). Many Canadian documents that report Statistics Canada data define youth as 15 to 24 years (Usalca, 2005).

Few international comparison documents provide a clear definition of at-risk youth (Wilmms, 2002). Our use of the term is consistent with the definition in the OECD publication *Our Children at Risk* (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 1995), which defines at-risk youth as “those failing in school and unsuccessful in making the transition to work and adult life and as a consequence unable to make a full contribution to active society” (p. 21). Wilmms (2002) estimates that up to 30% of Canada’s youth are vulnerable to later negative outcomes such as unemployment and poor physical and mental health. Some international comparison documents refer to NEET youth meaning those who are neither in employment, education or training (Bynner & Parsons, 2002), a term that is thought to capture the lost potential of the work force. However, NEET refers to one group of at-risk youth while overlooking other groups, such as those with life-long health conditions or disabilities, who are rarely identified in these documents. An exception is the OECD report *Students with Disabilities, Learning Difficulties, and Disadvantages – Statistics and Indicators* (2008b).

International Economic and Social Influences

The first cluster within our template captured data on international and societal influences on transition. Globalization—the interconnectedness, movement,

and communication among individuals, economies, information, and cultures (Burbules & Torres, 2000) - was specifically identified as important to this understanding. Within this globalized era, “education’s challenge will be to shape the cognitive skills, interpersonal sensibilities, and cultural sophistication of children and youth whose lives will be both engaged in local contexts and responsive to larger transnational processes” (Suárez-Orozco & Qin-Hillard, 2004, p. 3). This challenge is amplified for students who seek to enter the labor market directly from secondary school, making globalization a fundamental consideration in school-to-work pathways.

Mills and Blossfeld (2004) compared the effects of globalization on transition to adulthood in 14 countries. Four structural shifts associated with globalization have led to increased uncertainty in the labor market for youth generally and even more so for those who are at-risk—internationalization of markets, intensification of competition, spread of global information networks, and a rise in the economic importance of markets. This uncertainty is filtered through institutions including the employment, education, welfare, and family systems. Youth experience the effects of globalization through the timing and ease of entry to and security within the labor market, availability of a social safety net, and the possibility of partnership and parenthood.

Many documents identified globalization’s direct impact on youth entry to the labor market. Youth are often unprotected by seniority, lack human capital such as education and experience, and have weak ties to work organizations and unions (Elder & Schmidt, 2006; Mills & Blossfeld; 2004; OECD, 2008a). Youth may seek shelter from this uncertainty by remaining in education, relieving the immediate problem of labor market attachment, and hoping enhanced human capital of education will assure a more successful attachment later (Mills & Blossfeld, 2004).

The education system has been directly affected by global trends. The knowledge economy privileges those with education and labor market experience. Youth who cannot accumulate experience must rely on education to

enhance the likelihood of labor market attachment. The rise in more precarious forms of employment, a direct result of globalization, is a trap for youth without education or access to education. Increased uncertainties can also lead to educational preparation that is poorly matched to labor market needs. Youth who rely solely on education for their competitive edge may be disadvantaged compared to applicants who attain workforce experience (Mills & Blossfeld, 2004).

Our analyses identified other effects of international economic and social factors. Welfare regimes (Buchholz, Hofäcker, & Blossfeld, 2006) differ across countries and reflect national ideologies about social equality. Labor market policies and social support mechanisms affect the school-to-work transition and are particularly relevant during economic uncertainty. Some countries have mutual obligation programs where youth must engage in training or education programs in order to continue to receive social assistance (Marks, 2007). Other countries have limited employment insurance schemes that provide insufficient support to those unemployed.

Finally, globalization affects the family system, which is interdependent with the employment system and has direct consequences for the transition from school-to-work and adult life. Mills and Blossfeld (2004) suggest a north-south divide in these effects. In the south, cultures appear to be more familistic, marriage is institutionalized, and there is less tolerance for non-marital unions and alternative co-habitation arrangements. In combination with the economic effects, many young people delay their transition to partnership and parenthood and remain in the parental home. The continuation of education increases the economic dependence of youth on their parents or the government for financial support. Globally this trend is increasing for young women in particular (Mills & Blossfeld, 2004). Data from countries in the north reveal a different trend. A higher degree of tolerance for non-marital unions and alternative living arrangements is more common. High rates of temporary and part-time work may contribute to the



postponement of commitment in the area of family decisions.

Although living standards have increased over time, the gains are disproportionately distributed to certain groups such as those already attached to the labor market, those with education, and those who have acquired rights through association with unions or labor organizations (Elder & Schmidt, 2006). The unprotected or excluded either do not experience increases in living standards or do so on a weaker level. Globalization forces us to develop a multi-level conception that links global transformation to impacts at institutional and individual levels. The remaining clusters of our template address the institutional and individual levels and are discussed next.

Fixed Individual and Family Factors.

These factors included age, gender, family socio-economic status, peer group, health status, disability status, and access to social support. Youth are required to negotiate these multiple factors, which appear to have a cumulative effect on successful transitions.

Age.

Teenagers (15-19 years) typically have the least education and experience and are challenged to obtain the experience valued by employers. These youth often seek part-time, low skill work because it is more attainable. A disproportionate number of youth work in part-time and temporary positions compared to adults (Elder & Schmidt, 2006; OECD, 2008; Quintini et al., 2007).

Gender.

Young women have more difficulties finding work than young men. When they do find work, it is often at a lower rate of pay and in unprotected, low skill jobs (Quintini et al., 2007). When poor parents need to make a choice about which of their children should receive an education, girls tend to be excluded first. Without an education, chances of securing a decent job are almost zero. That is why young girls in the developing world have little option but to marry which, given their poor family background, is most likely a move from one poor household to another.

In OECD countries, male and female school leavers have similar employment rates in the first year out of school but the male employment rate climbs more steadily and steeply than the female rate. In several OECD countries, many young females exit the labor market to become mothers particularly if there are good family benefits (OECD, 2008a).

Family socio-economic status.

Family socio-economic status has been proposed as a fixed factor. Rojewski (1997) noted that adolescents from low income households were the least likely to be employed while still attending secondary school. Theorists have argued that adolescents from families with lower socio-economic status may be exposed to poor role models and develop attitudes based on their parents' negative workforce experiences. This may also be tied to social welfare regimes that act as disincentives to engaging in low-paying jobs that lack security. Family socio-economic status is also linked to levels of parental education (Hango & deBroucker, 2007; Shaienks, Gluszynski, & Bayard, 2008). Adolescents whose parents who did not complete secondary school are over-represented in the data on early school leavers.

Peer group.

Our template included peers as a fixed factor but this was not an evident influence in the documents reviewed. An indirect relationship between peer group and transition was anticipated as negative peer relationships are strongly correlated with low school commitment, which can affect the success of the transition from school-to-work (Zeman & Bressan, 2006). There were no data in the documents we reviewed to support this as a fixed factor that could alone affect the transition process.

Health and disability status.

This factor was identified in some documents; however few dealt with health and disability status in much depth. The OECD documents mention that resources are required to address mental health issues, which are prominent in the workplace (OECD, 2008b). Few data in the documents we reviewed

examined how health and disability factors influence the transition from school-to-work for youth, although Elder & Schmidt (2006) addressed this particularly vulnerable sub-group of youth. They are seen as high risk for poor labor market attachment without intervention designed to reduce their vulnerability. In some documents, youth with disabilities are counted among those labeled NEET (Elder & Schmidt, 2006; Furlong, 2006).

Social supports.

The final fixed factor in our template was access to social supports. As we noted earlier, a country's welfare regime affects the transition from school-to-work. Some countries have virtually no social safety net, and the responsibility for protecting vulnerable youth falls to families. Countries with a conservative welfare regime such as Germany and the Netherlands have social policies aimed to ensure that people who have to leave employment are protected against a decline in living standards (Mills & Blossfeld, 2004). Other countries have a range of social supports aimed at maintaining equity, supporting the underprivileged, and achieving fair income distribution. In recent years some countries have made youth ineligible for social support to encourage greater participation in the labor market (Furlong, 2006).

Individual and Family Factors Amenable to Change

The third cluster in our template categorized factors at the individual and family levels that were likely to be amenable to change and could be addressed through transition intervention programs in schools and in community-based agencies focused on youth and family services. Most of these factors were rarely mentioned in the documents we reviewed on international and national contexts of school-to-work transition, perhaps a limitation of youth transition data collected at international and national levels. Our research team postulated that these factors included family expectations and tolerance, as well as individual motivation, self-efficacy, aspirations, risk taking, and personal agency. We did find evidence that



the long term effects of poor labor market attachment include loss of personal well-being and ongoing erosion of skills, motivation, and self-confidence; for example, the adverse effects of unemployment on youth well-being and mental health have been reported in European statistical studies (Ryan, 1999).

Educational contexts.

Educational contexts that prepare students for the workforce differ widely from country to country. Few international reports explore contexts of education in depth. Some documents point to specific school-to-work programs such as co-operative education or apprenticeship opportunities. For example, the National Pact for Training and Youth Skilled Staff was established in Germany as a bridge between the Ministry of Education, trade unions, and employer organizations (Quintini, et al., 2007). This pact provided government support to employers for training new workers in trades and, subsequently, the German Ministry of Education reported the highest increase in apprenticeship positions since 2000. Similar initiatives across many developed countries make explicit links between school learning and job readiness. These co-operative and apprenticeship programs appear to be effective. Gangl (2003) reported a significant reduction in early career unemployment rates when students engaged in such programs. Ryan (2001) and Steedman (2005) argued that this increase in job success is due to better matching of job readiness in specific skills to workplace demands. Matching educational programs with student interest and workforce labor demands appears to be key in achieving successful school-to-work transition, especially for at-risk youth. In the absence of specialized apprentice or co-operative education programs, at-risk youth encounter difficulties finding meaningful work and often begin in low-paying, temporary employment.

Workplace contexts.

Workplace contexts are at least as diverse as educational contexts. In reviewing literature on contexts of work, three delineating factors were used: (a) labor market attachment factors, (b) wages, and (c) skills. These factors were consistently

cited across international documents as critical contributors to youth engaging in productive occupation.

Labor market attachment factors.

Many youth find it difficult to move from temporary to stable employment with work patterns characterized by a series of short-term contracts (Bynner & Parsons, 2002). Data collected in OECD countries on NEET youth suggest they spend three of the first five years after leaving school in non-employment (Quintini et al., 2007). This instability in early labor market experiences predicts poor labor market attachment in the long-term (Ryan, 1999).

Wages.

Wage is another workplace context factor that contributes to the picture of youth unemployment and transition difficulties. Youth with no experience or training are often paid less for work of equal value than their adult counterparts. In some countries, minimum wage policies are in effect and it may not be possible to support oneself when receiving minimum wage even if one works full-time hours (Elder & Schmidt, 2006). Data from some OECD countries reveals that youth earn less than two thirds of the median hourly rate of 25-54 year olds. Low wages, job loss vulnerability, and sensitivity to the economic cycle all lead to discouragement—the leading reason for labor market inactivity (Quintini, et al, 2007).

Skills.

Most youth in OECD countries are employed in sectors that do not require specific skill sets for entry-level positions. The retail trade sector is the largest employer of young adolescents while the accommodations and food service sectors employ more older adolescents, in part due to liquor licensing laws. These positions usually provide on-the-job training, but turnover is high and most youth work part-time in combination with full-time school (Usalcas, 2005). More advanced positions require more specialized skills and often youth must first engage in specific apprenticeship or co-operative education programs. Adult workers fare better securing work in these positions.

School-to-work intersection.

This section of the template guided us to consider the alignment between school and work contexts. We sought descriptions of partnerships that enhanced the match between school and work. Five OECD countries currently operate what is known as dual or apprenticeship systems (OECD, 2008a). Austria, Denmark, Germany, Switzerland, and Norway structure their secondary education system so that youth are in school part-time and in the workplace part-time, and apprenticeship is part of the formal education system. This relationship between schooling and employment usually lasts three to four years. An examination at the end of the program tests readiness to enter the chosen occupation (Quintini et al., 2007).

OECD countries with this dual system have among the lowest youth unemployment rates and highest early labor market attachment. Avoiding early labor market difficulties is important, because the literature shows that lengthy periods of unemployment can have persistent negative effects on employment probabilities and earning potential (Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Quintini et al., 2007). The German government revamped its apprenticeship system in 2004 with the cooperation of unions and employer organizations (Elder & Schmidt, 2006). In 1998, the United Kingdom developed a labor market activation program called the New Deal for Young People, designed to enhance labor market involvement of youth who had received income support for more than six months (OECD, 2008).

These Active Labour Market Programs (ALMPs) for jobless and disadvantaged youth focused on job search skills, remedial education, job training, and provided direct job creation. ALMPs provide a mix of active and passive measures using the principle of mutual obligation—social assistance is dependent on participation (OECD, 2008a). Two-thirds of the OECD countries with data on ALMPs report that they have resulted in an increased share of youth gaining labor market attachment (OECD, 2008c). Nordic countries pioneered this approach whereby the government commits a place in a training, education, or work program for any



youth who is unemployed and receiving social assistance. Australia implemented a similar mutual obligation policy in 1998 and included participation in work, volunteer activities, education, training, and community based employment programs.

Outcomes for individuals.

The final cluster of the template focused on outcomes for individuals as a result of the intersection between school and work. The international documents offered generalizations based on aggregated data from large surveys. Few documents articulated the lived experience of transition from school-to-work for at-risk youth. The OECD/CPRN (2005) document *From Education to Work: A Difficult Transition for Young Adults with Low-levels of Education* highlights the need for robust research that goes beyond economic implications and reports the marginalization and social exclusion experienced by youth with low levels of education.

Summary

In summary, the international context is a complex and mixed picture of factors that contribute to the challenges for at-risk youth transitioning to productive adult roles. Youth in most OECD countries appear to move between states of employment, unemployment, education, and inactivity. They also appear to engage in multiple states simultaneously. The length of the school-to-work transition is variable across countries. Some youth in all countries appear to leave formal schooling early, which leads to frequent periods of unemployment, temporary work, low pay, and reduced quality of life. OECD countries use a variety of solutions to engage youth in school, but the one commonality in all countries is that school failure appears to trigger difficulties in labor market attachment and creates challenges for school-to-work transition (Elder & Schmidt, 2006; Quintini et al., 2007). The good news is that early and sustained intervention is likely to help prevent the cycle of cumulative disadvantage. Matching interventions to the specific needs and interests of at-risk youth is one way to enhance the likelihood of diverting these youth from the path to social exclusion. We now exam-

ine the transition of at-risk youth in the Canadian context and present a synthesis of the literature that analyzes survey data and interventions.

Discussion and Implications for the Canadian Context

Canada has experienced a period of sustained economic growth and has a flexible labor market that is outperforming most OECD countries (Antunes, 2009; OECD, 2008b). In the decade between 1996 and 2006, youth unemployment dropped from 15.4% to 11.6%, which was below the OECD average. There is, however, a great deal of variability within the regions of Canada (Hango & deBroucker, 2007). Many youth combine education and employment, some delay entry to post-secondary education to travel or volunteer, some move between employment and post-secondary education as finances permit, and most are able to start their careers with permanent, full-time work (Hango & deBroucker, 2007).

Fixed individual and family factors.

Considering fixed individual and family factors, some Canadian youth are not as fortunate as others. Aboriginal youth are more likely to experience difficulties in school-to-work transitions after leaving secondary education prematurely. Among immigrant youth, the school-to-work transition is delayed with many of these youth pursuing post-secondary education for extended periods. Females are less likely to drop out of high school and more likely to go onto post-secondary programs before entering the labor force. They are also less likely to delay the start of post-secondary education. The presence of a long-term limiting condition, a disability or a chronic illness, is a hindrance to further education and these youth are less likely to follow a pathway that leads to completion of post-secondary degrees or diplomas. Risk of dropping out of high school also increases in larger families. Finally, parental level of education is a predictive factor; youth whose parents completed post-secondary education are more likely to proceed to post-secondary education before labor market entry (Hango & de Broucker, 2007).

As our research focuses on at-risk youth, we were particularly interested in data concerning youth with long-term limiting conditions—disability or chronic illness. The Conference Board of Canada (Kitagawa, 2002) reported that in Canada, the income of persons with disabilities is 15% less than the income of people without disabilities, a high differential compared to other OECD countries. The employment rate of persons with disabilities in Canada is 56%. Canada is viewed as actively ensuring that persons with disabilities are integrated into the labor market rather than providing income transfers in the form of pensions or disability allowances. As promising as these data appear, other sources indicate that youth with long-term limiting conditions are vulnerable and at-risk for poor labor market attachment (Hango & deBroucker, 2007; OECD, 2008). These youth are less likely to complete post-secondary education, which leads to employment that offers low wages and limited security. In the recent past, Canadians with disabilities have been three times as likely to be poor and to have repeated episodes of unemployment (Burstein, 2005).

Individual and family factors amenable to change.

Academic achievement plays a role in the pathways to post-secondary education. Marks do matter. The higher a student's marks, the less risk the student will drop out of school which in turn predicts completion of post-secondary education and better labor market attachment (Hango & deBroucker, 2007). Contrary to popular belief, part-time employment during high school years can be beneficial. Youth who work more than 20 hours per week, however, are at higher risk of dropping out or delaying participation in post-secondary education (Saunders, 2008). Parental expectations are also a factor in the pathway followed by Canadian youth. When parents have high expectations, their children tend to have higher educational attainment. Finally, becoming a parent prior to age 19 is associated with greater risk of following a pathway that leads to dropping out of high school or to a second chance program (Hango & deBroucker, 2007).



Educational contexts.

In Canada, education and training are provincial jurisdictions leading to some variance in programming across the country. Overall, students across Canada are comparatively successful on international benchmarks. Canadian students score well above the OECD averages on PISA and TIMSS assessments (OECD, 2008a). Canada also leads OECD countries in the proportion of youth attending university or college. These data reflect that Canadian secondary education emphasizes academic preparation for work in a knowledge-based economy (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada; AUCC, 2007). This emphasis leaves secondary students with few opportunities to pursue vocational studies and contributes to the skills shortages in the marketplace (OECD, 2008c). The healthy labor market in Canada in recent years has been accompanied by a relatively high drop-out rate compared to other OECD countries, especially in the province of Alberta.

A report from the Conference Board of Canada (Kitagawa, 2002) highlights challenges to transition to work that arise in the education system. A systematic approach for managing youth transitions is lacking in most educational jurisdictions. Stakeholders tend to operate within parameters that serve their interests with little coordination between education institutions, employers, and other work-based education opportunities. There are insufficient resources for helping at-risk youth to stay in school and students who choose not to attend university are particularly poorly served (Kitagawa, 2002). Most curricular outcomes are academically focused and schools seem unaware of the mismatch between these academic outcomes and the skills needed to succeed in the workplace. There is little in the education system that encourages young people to pursue skilled trades after high school. Rather the trades appear to be considered as an afterthought for students not likely to succeed in university, and the apprenticeship system in Canada is largely under-developed (Antunes, 2009).

Workplace contexts.

Employment protection in Canada is among the least strict in the OECD (OECD, 2008c) and paid work by teenagers starts very early (OECD, 2008c). In the province of Alberta the minimum working age recently dropped from 14 to 12, while the minimum working age in most European countries is 16. Youth in Canada tend to have low entry wages but then move into higher paying jobs fairly quickly. Unlike their adult counterparts, youth cannot access employment insurance in Canada. Employer demand for skilled trades-people exceeds the available supply in Canada. Unlike some countries like Germany, Canada does not have a tradition of developing skilled trades. Immigration has traditionally been the solution to the skills shortage in the Canadian workplace.

School-to-work intersection.

This is an area where Canada appears to lag behind other OECD countries. There is a weak apprenticeship system in Canada and it varies from province to province. Co-operative education programs have been developed in a number of provinces and other work-based education programs are developing in response to the needs of students who are not well served by the academically focused mainstream curricula (Nova Scotia Department of Education, 2008). Partnerships between industry and educational institutions are beginning to be developed.

Saunders (2008) completed a synthesis report of the eight studies in the Canadian *Pathways for Youth to the Labour Market* project. This synthesis showed the pathways groups of youth are likely to take to the labor market and identified data to inform the design of interventions aimed to divert at-risk youth from social exclusion. The synthesis shows that there is no national career development strategy or standards for the quality of career development services. Programs and services are limited, decentralized, and organized by provincial governments or community organizations. Some provinces are attempting to revitalize the secondary vocational curriculum through partnerships with post-secondary institutions and employers, primarily in response to

a local need for skilled workers—a decentralized market approach to training. Co-operative education programs that demonstrate a clear link between school and a possible future career are promising initiatives; however, uptake of these programs remains limited.

Outcomes for individuals.

Research rarely reports the experience of transition from the perspective of the youth who endure the process. An exception was a report commissioned by the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training. Ferguson, Tilleczek, Boydell, and Rummens (2005) conducted an interview study with 193 early school leavers where the collective voice of disengaged youth expressed determination, hope, and plans to return to school. The risk and protective factors they identified within and outside the school context were consistent with the factors identified in our document review; for example, educational systems must be more flexible and proactive, while parents must stay involved, provide guidance, and hold realistic expectations. Most importantly, youth need to stay in school.

This qualitative study can inform the design of interventions to keep potential drop-outs on pathways to productive adult life and labor market attachment. Further research like the Ferguson et al. (2005) study with at-risk youth following other pathways could inform the design of interventions matched to the needs of these vulnerable youth.

Future Directions for Research and Implications for Policy Development

To summarize, reviewing the research makes it clear that youth who are disengaged from school are more likely to drop out and to enter paths of social exclusion. The international research provides a complex picture of factors that contribute to the challenges at-risk youth face as they make the transition from school to work. Global forces affect individuals in their communities, contributing to youth moving between stages of employment, unemployment, inactivity, and education; these forces generally lengthen the time required for youth to achieve stable labor market attachment. Comparing the Canadian con-



text with factors affecting this transition in international data yields a number of implications for research and for policy.

Preventing at-risk youth from disengaging from high school must become a priority. Reviewing a large number of Canadian and international documents demonstrated the dearth of research on the experience of at-risk youth and on their perspectives on what would keep them engaged in school. What studies there are suggest that, in Canada, these students lack alternatives to the academic stream, such as co-operative education, apprenticeships, and other forms of work-based education that are prevalent in countries such as Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands. Education systems in these countries work closely with the labor market to provide a straightforward alternative to an academic education enabling youth to begin a direct transition to the trades and other careers while still in high school. These countries not only meet the needs of youth who might be likely to leave school early, they also meet their national need for skilled trades people without relying on immigration, as we do in Canada.

Another strategy that has been effective in increasing the share of youth gaining labor market attachment is Active Labour Market Programs (ALMPs) for jobless and disadvantaged youth which focus on job search skills, remedial education, job training, and provided direct job creation. ALMPs, which use the principle of mutual obligation (social assistance is dependent on participation), have been particularly effective in the Nordic countries and in Australia.

These findings suggest a research agenda that focuses on the experiences and recommendations of at-risk youth and their educators, perhaps beginning by studying successful work-based education programs from which we can learn how to design programs and interventions that meet their individual needs. Canadian data also point to the need to focus research on Aboriginal youth who have extremely low rates of labor market attachment and to take advantage of the potential of school-to-work programming, one of the most effective means to secure a successful transition to the workforce. Finally, to

meet the need for re-engagement of jobless youth, who have left school early, research is required on the characteristics of effective ALMPs that would be attractive to these marginalized young people.

While Canadian students may generally be better positioned than students in many other countries to engage in meaningful work, and while research on these issues may point to made-in-Canada solutions, policy changes are also necessary. A key feature of successful transition programs appears to be matches among school curricula, workforce demands, and student needs and interests. Thus developing apprenticeship, co-operative education, and mutual obligation programs requires the cooperation of education, training, labor market, and social assistance sectors. Although provinces like Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Alberta have recently added educational opportunities to meet the needs of at-risk youth during the high school years, a much more focused and widespread effort will be required to achieve policies that prevent social exclusion of our most vulnerable youth and that re-engage those already experiencing social exclusion.

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Appendix A

Draft Nov18 – Template For Reviewing Papers – *Individual and Contextual Factors*

Reviewer:	Code:	Country (scope):
APA Citation:		
Youth Definition:		
Study Design / Type of data analysis used and/or produced:		
Type of Document: Refereed Journal Article (Empirical Study)		
Path to locating Document:		
Other Leads:		
Brief impressionistic sketch or Purpose / Research Question:		

*Code each line with first 3 letters of author's last name or acronym of organization, last two numbers in year, initials of reviewer, Example: For Furlong paper reviewed by Researcher One (FUR06RO). Purpose of research: to answer, **which WBE programs are most likely to be effective for specific disengaged youth?** We will develop a model of person-context relations for youth and programs. Use this template in concert with the detailed clusters (oct1 & oct14). In the space below, on paper or online, write a brief description of what is in the paper, not just the name of the item. Remember, not all items (or clusters) will be in every document. With your suggestions, we will revise this. Code each line with first 3 letters of author's last name or acronym of organization, last two numbers in year, initials of reviewer, and page number. (FUR06-PC-563)



Cluster Pre-1(nov18): Society as Context (e.g. political, economic, social factors) that provide high level context for problems and solutions
Cluster 1(nov18): Individual and Family Factors that are Fixed (e.g., age, SES, disability status
Cluster 2(nov18): Individual & Family Factors Amenable to Change (e.g., expectations, identity
Cluster 3(nov18): Educational Contexts (e.g., curriculum options, evaluation, school’s expectations
Cluster 4(nov18): Workplace Contexts (e.g., country, social context, induction
Cluster 5(nov18): School-to-Work Intersection (range from match to mismatch to needs of individuals) (e.g., partnerships
Cluster 6(nov18): Outcomes for Individuals as a result of the Intersection or Match (e.g., employment status, duration of transition
What was missing from the template:

Appendix B

Documents Used In Analysis

Burstein, 2005	Leitch Review of Skills, 2006
Bynner, 2001	Maguire & Rennison, 2005
Bynner, 2005	O’Connor, 2003
Bynner & Parsons, 2002	OECD, 2008a
Department of Children, Schools and Families, 2007	OECD, 2008b
Dusseldorf Skills Forum, 2007	OECD, 2008c
Elder & Schmidt, 2007	Quintini et al., 2007
Ferguson et al.,2005	Raymond, 2008
Finnie, 2000	Ryan, 1999
Franke, 1998	Saunders, 2008
Fryer, 1997	Taylor, 2007
Furlong, 2006	Usalcas, 2005
Gauthier & Furstenburg, 2002	York Consulting, 2005
Goldenberg, 2006	Yates & Payne, 2006