

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL SUPPORT AND GRADUATE STUDENTS'
GROWTH AS SELF-DIRECTED LEARNERS**

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in conformity with the requirements for
the degree of Master of Education**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis reports on a qualitative study investigating the contribution of graduate students' social support networks to their development as self-directed learners. Specifically, this thesis examined the sources of social support on which graduate students rely over their first seven months of study, the functions of these supportive relationships, and the importance of these relationships in contributing to students' development as self-directed learners.

Four Master's of Education students at Queen's University -- three females, two full-time and one part-time, and one part-time male -- participated in the current study. Data collection began in November, 1999, and was conducted over a four-month period. Data collection included both individually scheduled interviews as well as a group interview. Peers in the program, faculty, and family members were each identified by the participants as important sources of social support. However, the support participants drew from peers outside of the program was influenced by their status in the program as either a full-time or part-time student. Much of the participants' comments about social support encompassed four categories: emotional, information, material, and appraisal. Meanwhile, one dimension of self-directed learning was prominent for each participant, either self-monitoring or self-management. For all participants, motivation was an underlying dimension that was related to their more prominent dimension of self-directed learning. For participants in the current study, social support contributed to self-directed learning; however, the extent to which this connection existed depended on the individual and her or his degree of self-directedness.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I felt at the beginning of the year I kind of had a vague idea of what I wanted to look at, but I didn't have the language ... I didn't know how to talk about it. (Paula, G p. 9)

Similar to how Paula described her abilities to research her area of study, I too struggled to find the language to describe the development I have made as a graduate student and learner, and to the support I have received from others that has encouraged this development. My motivation in conducting a study of how social support contributes to self-directed learning for graduate students has been due to my ever increasing awareness of my development and how I have seen other individuals contributing to my growth as a graduate student. I recognized how sharing and learning about others' experiences would help me in truly understanding my own growth and experiences within the program. More importantly, my interactions with the participants in my study gave me the language to express how this development occurred. As such, the purpose of my study was to investigate how social support contributes to graduate students' development as self-directed learners.

My interest in social support networks first evolved from a study conducted by the research group with which I was involved that investigated our own Master of Education (M.Ed.) program (Freeman et al., 1999). Our team of researchers first developed a survey designed to obtain students' perceptions of their experiences in the M.Ed. program. Survey results indicated that the quality of students' programs appeared to vary widely. Second, we conducted interviews that proved to be valuable in further exploring issues that had arisen in survey responses and which highlighted the importance of social support for graduate students.

Over the course of our research, I became fascinated with how important a supportive environment could be in influencing the quality of students' experiences in the program, and the role this support may play in influencing graduate students' competency in becoming self-directed learners. The realization of the importance of a supportive environment and its role in encouraging graduate student development forced me to reflect a great deal on my own situation and the situations of those around me. A large part of my success as an M.Ed. student at Queen's University and the quality of my experiences in the program have been due, I feel, to the support I have received from various individuals, for example, my supervisor and peers. This support has encouraged me to take responsibility for my own learning, and, has not only helped to develop my research abilities, but has also increased my confidence as a researcher. As such, the importance of exploring the social support students receive in the program has become an important issue to me. How do students perceive social support? Who are the individuals on whom students rely for this social support (e.g., peers, faculty, or family members)? Do the same individuals fulfil the same functions of social support for all individuals? Finally, how does social support contribute to self-directed learning? These questions motivated me to research the relationship between social support and graduate students' growth as self-directed learners.

Background to the Study

The main assumption of this study was that graduate students' sources of social support would fulfil different functions toward increasing their competency in becoming self-directed learners. This idea was supported largely by the findings of a pilot study I (Berndt, 1999) conducted examining the sources of social support for one part-time female and one full-time female student in the Spring of 1999, and by a study conducted

by Freeman et al. (1999) investigating students' perceptions of the M.Ed. program at Queen's University.

In my pilot study, a semi-structured interview format was adopted to investigate the sources of social support for one part-time female student, Elizabeth, also a married full-time resource teacher, and one full-time, single female student, Cathy. For Cathy, it appeared that her primary source of social support was her supervisor. Her supervisor demonstrated support in two ways: by acting as a resource and "making time for her." Cathy's supervisor acted as a resource by providing her with advice, presenting her with possible ideas for future work, and providing her with assistance on "how to do something." Cathy's supervisor made time for her by scheduling appointments with her as soon as possible and providing her with his home telephone number for issues that needed immediate attention.

Cathy's other sources of social support included her peers and family. Peers, both in the program and outside of the program, were identified as sources of social support. Her peers in the M.Ed. program provided suggestions and gave advice about assignments, while her peers outside the program served as an outlet for complaints regarding course work. Cathy's family demonstrated emotional support by encouraging and embracing her decision to pursue an M.Ed. degree.

Elizabeth's main source of social support was her husband. Elizabeth's husband provided this support in three ways: emotionally, financially, and in giving of his time. Emotionally, Elizabeth's husband showed his support by telling her how proud he was of her. Financially, her husband helped finance her tuition fees. In freely giving of his time, Elizabeth's husband cared for their daughter, came home early from work so she could arrive to class on time, and edited her course work for grammar and spelling mistakes.

Elizabeth also described the support she received from her peers, both in the M.Ed. program and outside the program, as well as the support she received from her supervisor. Elizabeth's peers outside the program, primarily her principal and vice-principal, acted as a resource for ideas and spent time discussing the program with her. Elizabeth's peers in the M.Ed. program demonstrated their support by stopping and "chatting" with her when they saw her, sympathizing with her during difficult periods, and providing helpful resources. Elizabeth's supervisor recognized that Elizabeth had a busy professional and personal life, helped Elizabeth choose courses, and understood that Elizabeth's family and work commitments came first.

Although each of the participants recognized their supervisors, peers, and families as important sources of social support, they did not appear to agree on their importance. Cathy selected her supervisor as her primary source of social support, while Elizabeth identified her husband as her primary source of social support. Peers, both in the M.Ed. program and outside of the program, also acted as social support. While Cathy drew more upon her peers in the program for support, Elizabeth connected more with her peers outside the program for support.

The Freeman et al. (1999) study was undertaken primarily by students themselves using their peers as informants, with the use of a questionnaire constructed by the authors. The study was designed to compare the perceptions, quality of experiences, and overall satisfaction between male and female students, part-time and full-time students, and students choosing to complete a thesis versus a project as a means of achieving their M.Ed. degree requirements at Queen's. Follow-up interviews were also conducted with nine students to further investigate their experiences in the M.Ed. program. Based on the survey responses of 43 graduate students and the interview data from nine participants, Freeman et al. found that the overall response to

the M.Ed. program by students was extremely positive. Participants expressed satisfaction in their personal relationships with faculty, staff, and peers. Both quantitative and qualitative results indicated the extent of strong relationships with faculty. All six of the survey questions targetting "project/thesis supervisor" were among the 10 most positively rated, as were two questions about course instructors, who were seen as being knowledgeable and approachable. Additionally, the qualitative results indicated that faculty members were generally seen as approachable, open-minded, and collegial. Many students stated that professors were open and willing to listen to their various research interests. Although the majority of the participants reported that they had excellent relations with the faculty, a few students felt undervalued by some faculty members. When these students felt negatively, their dissatisfaction resulted from the faculty not hearing their voices and not recognizing their personal significance within the program.

Participants in the study cited their peers as sources of both emotional and academic support. Although most students readily found this support to help them fight isolation, it was necessary for them to develop support systems outside of the program structure through personal initiatives.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to build and expand on the qualitative results from both my pilot study, which discovered that part-time versus full-time students rely on different sources of social support, and the Freeman et al. (1999) study, which discovered the importance of student-student relationships in fighting sentiments of isolation, and of student-faculty relationships in encouraging feelings of personal significance. Specifically, I examined the sources of social support on which graduate

students rely during the first seven months of study in the M.Ed. program at Queen's University, the functions of these supportive relationships, and the importance of these relationships in contributing to students' development as self-directed learners.

Conceptual Framework

Social Support

The definition of social support tends to vary widely among those who have studied it (Cooke, Rossmann, McCubbin, & Patterson, 1988). For example, it has been referred to by Hirsh (1981) in a general manner as support which is "provided by other people and arises within the context of interpersonal relationships" (p. 151). A more explicit definition has been offered by Cobb (1976) who identified three components of social support: (a) information that one is cared for and loved, (b) information that one is esteemed and valued, and (c) information that one belongs to a network of communication and mutual obligation. In her review of the literature examining definitions, constructs, and theories of social support, J. Pearson (1986) described both the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of social support. Qualitative constructs of social support are process-oriented and refer to the perceived meanings and expressive values of social support. These concepts encompass characteristics such as the content (meanings people give their relationships), intensity (obligation and commitment), and directedness (reciprocity of relationships) of social support. Quantitative constructs of social support, meanwhile, describe the presence of relationships available to an individual. The quantitative constructs describe properties such as the density (connections among those who know the individual), the range (the number of direct contacts), and the anchorage (the length and complexity of relationships) of social support. Within the current study, social support systems will be defined according to

Caplan (1974) as "enduring interpersonal ties to groups of people who can be relied upon to provide emotional sustenance, assistance, and resources in times of need, who provide feedback, and who share standards and values" (p. 160).

Social support systems are essential and serve a multitude of functions that can be organized into six categories: listening, technical appreciation, technical challenge, emotional support, emotional challenge, and the provision of social reality (Pines & Aronson, 1988). Pines and Aronson suggest the importance of individuals¹ needing, on occasion, one or more people who will actively *listen* to them, without giving advice or making judgements; someone with whom they can share the joys of success and the pain of failure, as well as someone with whom they can share conflicts and trivial everyday incidents. All individuals also need *technical appreciation* for work they accomplish. If they have completed an excellent piece of work, they desire to have it acknowledged. Someone who provides individuals with technical support not only must be an expert in the field, but must be trusted for honesty and integrity. *Technical challenges* from a friend are an important means of avoiding stagnation and boredom. Contact with someone who can challenge ways of thinking and encourage the attainment of greater goals keeps individuals from stale or superficial efforts. Most individuals also need someone who is willing to provide *emotional support* occasionally: someone who cares more about the individuals as human beings than about the particular piece of work that has been completed. When individuals are emotionally involved or caught up in a situation that they cannot think about logically, an *emotional challenge* provided by a friend who inquires into their use of logic at the time may help

¹ The term 'individuals' (pluralized) will represent those being supported or needing support, while the term 'friend' or 'someone' (singular) will represent the person who is providing support.

individuals arrive at a rational solution. Finally, a friend who has a similar world view and similar priorities, values, and views is important to be a truly effective *social reality* touchstone in those times of stress or confusion. Pines and Aronson (1988) also describe the importance of discriminating functions from each other and of realizing that not any one person will be able to perform all of these functions.

Pines and Aronson's (1988) model of social support is based on their research on the causes and cures of career burnout. In their work, Pines and Aronson advocate the use of social support systems as an effective prevention mechanism against burnout. They propose that individuals are well protected against burnout, and can work toward reducing stress in their life and work when they encounter people in their environment who fulfil the functions of social support. Although Pines and Aronson's model is applicable across a variety of contexts, within the context of the current study, the present model may overlook the more academic functions of social support: those functions that help students to be successful in their learning endeavours.

In his work, Birch (1998) presents activities designed to help students in grades 9 through 12 to become more aware of the different types and possible benefits of social support, as well as how to develop skills for obtaining social support. Birch provides a brief overview of four types of social support: emotional support, information support, material support, and appraisal support. *Emotional support* is described as demonstrating care or sympathy toward other individuals; listening to individuals or being there when they need a friend. *Information support* refers to being a source of knowledge (e.g., telling individuals where to find information), whereas *material support* describes those instances where someone provides others with an object or tangible resource. Finally, *appraisal support* demonstrates providing feedback, affirmation, praise, or suggestions to individuals.

A comparison of the Pines and Aronson (1988) and Birch (1998) models of social support also demonstrates the variability in the definitions of social support. First, the authors differ in their method of presentation of their functions. Pines and Aronson present their model from the perspective of individuals seeking support, while Birch presents his model from the perspective of someone providing support. Second, both the Pines and Aronson and Birch models examine the affective (i.e., emotional support, listening, social reality touchstone) and cognitive (i.e., technical challenge, material support, information support) functions of social support; however, both emphasize one domain over the other. This difference may be reflected in the nature of their research and their purposes for examining social support. In comparing Pines and Aronson and Birch, one category, emotional support, is similar in both definitions, although more specific according to Pines and Aronson. While Birch examines emotional support within a single factor, Pines and Aronson define it across two categories (emotional support and emotional challenge). Finally, Pines and Aronson appear to emphasize the emotional functions, while Birch stresses the more cognitive functions of social support. Birch's appraisal category does not directly parallel with Pines and Aronson's technical appreciation category and refers to the dimensions of affirmation, praise, and feedback potentially received from a network of persons as opposed to a specific person who is an expert in the field. Additionally, the information and material functions included in Birch's (1998) definition are not explicitly included in the Pines and Aronson (1988) model, yet are dimensions perceived as valuable within the current study.

In this thesis, therefore, I will supplement the Pines and Aronson (1988) model with the information, material, and appraisal support functions presented in Birch's (1998) model. In doing so, I hope to attain a more comprehensive understanding of how social support contributes to graduate students' self-directed learning.

Self-Directed Learning

Self-directed learning is a central concept in the study and practice of adult education (Garrison, 1997). The adult education model of self-directed learning “concerns itself with the process of learning and the identity of the learner, and proposes that the desired result from a self-directed learning episode is growth, change and development - learning that is personally meaningful, and therefore particularly useful” (Wilcox, 1996, p. 175).

The term self-directed learning carries with it “considerable confusion and misunderstanding” (Garrison, 1997, p. 18) as a result of the tendency of the term to be applied indiscriminately to a diverse range of phenomena (Candy, 1991). Within the current study, self-directed learning will be defined as “a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes” (Knowles, 1975, p. 18).

I examined three models of self-directed learning. The first two models (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Candy, 1991) initially guided my thinking of self-directed learning and helped my understanding of the two components they emphasize -- self-directed learning as a method and self-directed learning as a goal -- as distinct entities. The third model (Garrison, 1997) reconnected the two components and linked them explicitly to the social environment.

Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) distinguished between self-directed learning as a method and self-directed learning as a goal by using *self-directed learning* to refer to instructional processes and *learner self-direction* to refer to personality characteristics and attributes. Self-directed learning is the process in which learners assume primary

responsibility for planning, implementing, and evaluating the learning process, whereas learner self-direction centres on learners' desires or preferences and abilities for assuming responsibility for their learning. Self-directed learning and learner self-direction are linked through the recognition that each emphasizes the importance of learners assuming personal responsibility for their thoughts and actions. Self-direction does not necessarily mean learning in isolation; however, it does mean that the learner assumes primary responsibilities for, and control over, decisions regarding planning, implementing, and evaluating the learning experience (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991).

Self-Directed Learning. Self-directed learning as an instructional process subdivides into the concepts of learner-control and autodidaxy (Candy, 1991). Learner-control describes the degree of self-directedness as opposed to teacher-directedness and is dependent on the extent to which a learner is involved in: deciding what is to be learned, selecting methods and materials for learning, communicating with others about what is being learned, and evaluating achievement of goals. Self-directed learning may include participants accepting some of the teacher's frameworks that fall within their purposes because they feel able to modify these frameworks. Although learners may evolve their own goals in teacher-directed learning, these exist as a subset of the teacher's goals.

Akin to the notion of learner-control is the term autodidaxy. Autodidaxy, or self-instruction, is the "individual, non-institutional pursuit of learning opportunities in the natural setting" (Candy, 1991, p. 18). Learners intentionally initiate and implement their own learning projects. In these situations, the learner is not frequently conscious of being a learner. Autodidacts may seek formal assistance but essentially learn outside formal structures.

Candy (1991) describes both the concepts of learner-control and autodidaxy as falling on two separate continua. Control over an instructional situation varies according to the degree of involvement at any point on the continuum, from very formal, teacher-directed activities (e.g., lecturing) to informal, learner-controlled activities, where learners have accepted almost all control over valued instructional functions (e.g., independent study). Along the continuum, various instructional strategies are placed that demonstrate the deliberate surrendering of certain instructional domains by the teacher accompanied by the acceptance of responsibility by the learner.

Like learner-controlled situations, Candy (1991) proposes that the notion of autodidaxy can also be placed upon a hypothetical continuum. At the far left of the continuum lies assisted autodidaxy while at the far right lies "pure" autonomous learning (autodidaxy). In all situations along the continuum, the initiative for the learning project is with the learner; however, the distinction is made to the extent that the autodidact makes use of a guide or helper in assisting with emotional encouragement, the location of resources, and the management of the learning process itself.

Despite learners at the far left of the autodidactic continuum (assisted autodidaxy) and learners at the far right of the learner-control continuum (independent study) both sharing a number of similarities (e.g., independence of effort on the part of the learner, support or assistance rendered rather than direct instruction), autodidaxy is divorced from institutional contexts (Candy, 1991). The difference between independent study and assisted autodidaxy depends on the notion of "ownership" (Candy). Ownership involves the image of instructor; the instructor is absent in autodidact processes and the learner is frequently not conscious of being a learner. The only question is the amount and type of assistance obtained. Meanwhile, in independent study situations, the instructor subtly influences the learner's choices; the instructor

maintains some degree of control, and hence ownership, over the instructional transaction. Candy (1991) argues that until a learner senses that total control of a situation has passed from the teacher and feels competent to exercise control, the situation is still one of independent study rather than autodidaxy with "ownership" still vested in the teacher.

Learner Self-Direction. Learner self-direction focusses on what is going on within an individual and is understood according to personality (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991). Brockett and Hiemstra believe that "learner self-direction refers to characteristics of an individual that predispose one toward taking primary responsibility for personal learning endeavors" (p. 29). For these authors, personal responsibility is a choice; individuals can choose how they respond in any given situation. In assuming a primary decision-making role and accepting responsibility for those decisions, an individual assumes personal responsibility.

Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) also feel that personal responsibility is central to the idea of self-direction in learning and that there are two reasons why personality is vital to a clearer understanding of self-direction in learning. First, there is a major connection between self-direction and self-concept: "how one is seen, perceived, and experienced by oneself" (Brockett & Hiemstra, p. 122). A relationship exists between an individual's positive self-concept and the extent to which one adopts the principles of self-direction in learning. Second, research on individuals' participation in more formal adult and continuing education learning activities has revealed a strong link between individuals with certain learning orientations and participation in adult learning activities. An emphasis on attitudinal factors from research on participation and barriers to participation reinforces the importance of personality as a determinant of, or a deterrent

to, participation in adult education activities. While every individual has the capacity to be a self-directed learner, individual personalities affect how one approaches a self-directed learning activity (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991).

While Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) emphasize personal responsibility, Candy's (1991) goals of self-directed learning are to have both autonomous learners and learners with the skills and abilities to manage their own learning. According to Candy, the goal of most educational endeavours is the development of self-directed individuals: individuals who exhibit the characteristics or qualities of moral, emotional, and intellectual autonomy. Individuals are regarded as autonomous to the extent that they have the ability to conceive goals and plans, exercise freedom of choice, use the capacity for rational reflection, have the will power to follow through, exercise self-restraint and self-discipline, and view themselves as autonomous (Candy, 1991).

Candy (1991) also addresses the importance of self-management, or the willingness and capacity to conduct one's own education. Candy contends that people's willingness to participate in self-directed learning activities is shaped by their construction of the particular situation and circumstances.

Self-Monitoring, Self-Management, Motivation, and the Social Milieu

Although describing self-directed learning and learner self-direction as two distinct concepts provides the illusion that the concepts are independent of each other, both are, in fact, intimately connected and influenced by the social context. According to Brockett and Hiemstra (1991), "in order to truly understand the impact of self-direction, both as an instructional method and as a personal characteristic, it is crucial to recognize the social milieu in which such activity transpires" (p. 32). Both Brockett and Hiemstra and Candy (1991) acknowledge that although there are times when

independent and autonomous efforts are required, there are limits to the nature and extent of learning that can be achieved alone. Few learning endeavours are entirely self-directed, but rather are dependent upon individual motives and interests that are shaped and modified through interactions with other people.

Garrison (1997) views self-directed learning (encompassing both instructional and personality dimensions) from a “collaborative constructivist” perspective which views meaning and knowledge as both personally and socially constructed. A collaborative perspective involves the individual taking responsibility for constructing meaning, and, at the same time, including the participation of others to confirm knowledge. Garrison (1997) argues: “to be theoretically useful, self-directed learning must go beyond task control [self-directed learning] and include the process of accepting responsibility to construct meaning and to cognitively monitor the learning process itself [learner self-direction]” (p. 21). As such, he proposes a model which integrates three dimensions, each intimately connected to one another, to reflect an approach toward self-directed learning in an educational context. The three dimensions include self-management (contextual control), self-monitoring (cognitive responsibility), and motivation (entering and task).

Self-management, concerned with task control issues, is intended to reflect social setting (resource management) and what learners do during the learning process. Specifically, it involves the execution of learning goals and the management of learning resources and support. Consistent with the collaborative constructivist view, an individual is considered to construct meaning along with the “shared world”; control over management of learning tasks is realized in a collaborative relationship between the teacher and learner. Self-management does not imply that students are independent and isolated learners. In an educational context, facilitators provide the necessary

elements for a successful educational outcome, specifically, support, direction, and standards. Task control is determined by balancing the factors of proficiency, resources, and interdependence. Proficiency represents the abilities and skills of the facilitator and learner, while resources comprise a range of support and assistance available in the educational setting. Meanwhile, interdependence reflects the institutional or discipline standards as well as learner credibility and choice.

Attached to increased learner control through self-management is greater responsibility in the monitoring of the learning process. Self-monitoring is the “process whereby the learner takes responsibility for the construction of personal meaning (e.g., integrating new ideas and concepts with previous knowledge)” (Garrison, 1997, p. 24). Self-monitoring is not independent of contextual factors, but involves both internal (cognitive and metacognitive processes) and external (efficient and effective feedback from teacher) feedback.

Garrison (1997) suggests that motivation has a great influence on learners assuming responsibility and control of the learning process. He proposes two motivational phases which reflect “perceived value and anticipated success of learning goals at the time learning is initiated and mediates between the context (control) and cognition (responsibility) during the learning process” (p. 26). The motivational phases involve processes in deciding to participate (entering motivation) and the effort required to stay on task and persist (task motivation). Entering motivation involves the commitment to a goal and the intent to act. It is established through the process of selecting goals and deciding to participate, and influences effort and persistence. Garrison hypothesizes that entering motivation is determined by valence and expectancy. Valence is the attraction to a learning goal which is determined by personal needs and values, reflecting the reasons for persisting in a task, and by affective states,

or the learner's attitudes toward self, task, and goal preference. Expectancy is the belief that desired outcomes can be achieved. Expectancy is composed of personal (competency) and contextual (contingency) characteristics. Personal characteristics are the perceived skills, abilities, and knowledge of an individual while assessing learning goals. Perceptions of ability affect the decision to participate in a learning task as well as the choice of goals and learning environments. Contextual characteristics are the perceived institutional resources or barriers, and the social or ideological constraints perceived by the learner. Together competency and contingency represent "anticipated control" which is critical in assessing expectancy of success and in making decisions regarding goal-directed behaviours, and reflects a learner's perceived ability and opportunity to exercise control over a learning process. The second phase of Garrison's (1997) motivational model is task motivation, which is connected to task control and self-management. It is the "tendency to focus on and persist in learning activities and goals" (p. 27). Because motivation to assume responsibility for learning is influenced by external conditions and internal states, Garrison suggests that motivation and responsibility are reciprocally related and facilitated by collaborative control on educational endeavours.

Self-directed learning, then, appears to be a multidimensional construct influenced by the social context within which learning occurs. Although Brockett and Hiemstra (1991), Candy (1991), and Garrison (1997) all acknowledge the importance of the social context, a discussion of how individuals within the social context act as social support for self-directed learning is limited. Garrison speaks of individuals in terms of "collaboration," "resources," and "support"; however, his discussion does not specifically address how these elements are provided to the learner. In their work, Brockett and Hiemstra, and Candy discuss the role of educators and how they can facilitate self-

directed learning through the adoption of strategies and practices (e.g., strategies for promoting critical reflection and rational thinking), but fail to address the influence other individuals (e.g., peers) may have as facilitators in this process. In specific reference to Brockett and Hiemstra, and Candy, the use of strategies for promoting critical reflection and rational thinking may also not be obvious to the learner, or the learner might, in fact, not be able to recognize or vocalize the strategies instructors use in an attempt to promote self-directed learning. Therefore, in this thesis, I attempt to use the social support framework constructed earlier to facilitate an understanding of students' descriptions of how they perceive social support, provided by various individuals, as contributing to their self-directed learning. Participants' descriptions of their learning experiences, and the social support they perceive as supporting these experiences, are viewed according to the three dimensions proposed by Garrison (1997): specifically, how participants understand and describe the control they exercise over their educational endeavours (self-management), the personal responsibility they demonstrate for their learning (self-monitoring), and their sense of motivation for pursuing learning.

Overview of Thesis

This thesis investigates how social support contributes to the self-directed learning of graduate students. In chapter 2, I review the literature on social support and self-directed learning. I then discuss the connection between these two research domains, thereby providing a rationale for my study. In chapter 3, I detail the context of the research, the method of participant selection, and the data collection and data analysis methods used. I also introduce the participants: Steven, Heather, Paula, and Sabrina. In chapter 4, I present the data collected. Using participants' language as often

as possible, I describe the social support participants received from peers inside the program, faculty members, family, and peers outside the program. I also explore the one prominent dimension of self-directed learning for each participant according to Garrison's (1997) model. Finally, I examine the contribution of each participant's sources of social support to her or his self-directed learning. In chapter 5, I discuss the similarities and differences between participants' sources of social support and self-directed learning, and how social support contributes to self-directed learning for the participants. I also address the influence of context, the limitations of the study, and my final thoughts and reflections on the current study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents an overview of the literature on graduate students' social support and self-directed learning that informed the current study. First, I examine the literature investigating the two primary reasons why graduate students need support. I then describe mentoring as a form of social support, initially focussing on faculty members and then on peers as mentors and sources of social support. In the next section, I review the literature on self-directed learning in formal adult education settings. Specifically, I investigate the strategies and techniques used by educators to encourage self-directed learning, the success of these strategies, and students' perspectives toward these strategies. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the connection between the two research domains.

Graduate Students' Social Support Systems

The importance of social support for graduate students' success has long been recognized. Studies as early as the 1960's (e.g., Baird, 1969; Hall, 1969; Mechanic, 1962) have reported the importance of social support systems in the emotional and academic development of graduate and professional students. More recent research investigating graduate students and social support groups has expanded to include a variety of populations and activities. For example, research exists on the social support graduate students receive as teaching assistants (e.g., Habel & Graveel, 1988; Staton & Darling, 1989), as international students (e.g., Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992a), as employment seekers (e.g., Trzyna, 1983), and as researchers/thesis writers (e.g., Page-Adams, 1995). Research also exists on the benefits of peer group support and faculty support programmatically initiated for graduate students (e.g., Bowman, Bowman, &

DeLucia, 1990; Phillip, 1993); however, no literature exists investigating the importance of social support systems in helping graduate students' development in becoming independent researchers and learners. Also lacking from this research are the voices of the students as investigated by students.

Why do Graduate Students Need Support?

There are two primary reasons why graduate students need support. First, social support is important as a means of coping with the stressful events associated with the transition to a graduate student and integration into the academic environment. Second, social support benefits students in socializing them to their new role as graduate students and in fostering their professional development and involvement.

Social Support as a Means of Coping with Stress. The transition to a graduate student has been described as an overwhelming and stressful experience for some. Graduate education has been described as a period "involving multiple and rapid life changes" (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992b, p. 716) and of "challenges and difficult transitions" (Bowman et al., 1990, p. 58). De Rosenroll, Norman, and Sinden (1987) related some students' experiences of their first term in a school counselling/counselling psychology program with words such as "isolated," "frenzied," "confused," and "overburdened" (p. 157). Jeavons (1993, p. 50) explained the "incredible work loads and stress" that encompass Ph.D. programs, while Conrad and Phillips (1995) cited the social and intellectual isolation Ph.D. students experience throughout the completion of their studies.

In their study, Bowman et al. (1990) reported on the most common difficulties participants experienced in response to the challenges associated with graduate school.

These difficulties included changes in financial position, changes in support networks, fear of failure, lack of knowledge about the program, family adjustments, relocation stresses, and changes in living conditions. The difficulties reported by students in the Bowman et al. study are consistent with the sentiments expressed in the reflections of three graduate students in a study conducted by K. Boyle, Freeman, and Chow-Hoy (1996) on the role of peer mentoring in overcoming stress. The graduate students interviewed in this study described their early experiences as graduate students as "lonely" (p. 10) and "isolat[ing]" (p. 12).

The stresses and transitions graduate students experience over the course of their studies have been shown to have serious effects on other aspects of their lives. Mallinckrodt and Leong (1989, 1992b) discovered that the transition to graduate student is associated with the risk of the development of physical and psychological health problems. Mallinckrodt and Leong (1989) surveyed male and female students to compare their psychological stress symptoms and physical health complaints associated with different types of life-change events including academic programs. Based on results from 166 graduate students, the authors found that the total number of negative life events (e.g., negative personal encounters with professor or advisor) was significantly related to psychological symptoms of stress for all graduate students, while the total number of negative life events was significantly related to physical health complaints for women only.

Although many students experience stress and difficulty in the transition to their new roles as graduate students, social support is a mediating variable in the stress students experience. Social support networks have been found to be critical elements in the emotional and academic development of graduate students (e.g., Bowman et al., 1990; DeFour & Hirsch, 1990; Goplerud, 1980; Hodgson & Simoni, 1995; Munir &

Jackson, 1997). Hodgson and Simoni (1995) concluded from their study of 566 first and second year doctoral students that graduate social support was related to students' academic and psychological functioning. According to responses on The Graduate Student Stress Survey, students who experienced less satisfaction with graduate school, less perceived academic support, less graduate social support, and more financial problems reported greater psychological distress.

Goplerud (1980) described the effects of varying levels of social interactions on first-year graduate students' reports of stressful events on their health and emotional problems during the first six months of graduate study. Twenty-two graduate psychology students completed four questionnaires measuring (a) social interactions, (b) support and general satisfaction measures, (c) stressful life events, and (d) physical and emotional problems. Social interactions were measured for the first 10 weeks of the academic year using a modified participant-observation instrument to record social contacts that lasted longer than five minutes, exclusive of class time or formal meetings. Seven months after the beginning of the school year, participants received a questionnaire eliciting the following information: subjective feelings of peer and faculty support; general satisfaction with graduate school experience; number, intensity, and duration of stressful life changes during the previous six months; and the number of health and emotional problems experienced during that interval.

Social support, defined by frequency of social contacts, emerged as a mediating variable in students' assessment of the stressfulness of events experienced during their first six months of graduate study, and in the number of emotional and physical problems experienced during that interval. Socially active participants, although they experienced slightly more life changes than less active participants, reported that events were generally less intense, and that the duration of disruptiveness that these events caused

was shorter. Finally, the more often students interacted with faculty outside of classes during the first weeks of school, the less likely they were to report intense or prolonged life disruptions during the first six months of graduate study. Frequent and emotionally and/or intellectually satisfying relations with faculty were also linked to a reduced likelihood of experiencing health or emotional problems during this period.

Based on 89 students' responses to self-administered questionnaires, DeFour and Hirsch (1990) concluded that the extent of black graduate students' social integration was related to their psychological well-being and academic performance. Students in better integrated departments were better adjusted and perceived themselves to be making good progress in their graduate work. These students were also less likely to have considered dropping out.

As a means of assessing the role of social support and need for support on anxiety among women graduate students, Munir and Jackson (1997) surveyed 61 women doctoral students from a large Midwestern state university. Based on participants' responses to three inventories investigating personality and social support networks, and the rank-ordering of four sources of support networks in terms of their importance, four categories of social support were established: (a) family (spouse, parents, siblings); (b) school (students, faculty, and work colleagues); (c) friends; and (d) graduate advisor. Friends were cited the most frequently as sources of social support and graduate advisors the least. Family members provided the most social support and graduate advisors the least; however, support from graduate advisors was important for lowering anxiety over the other sources.

Social Support as a Means of Socialization. A successful socialization process is critical for a successful graduate career (Turner & Thompson, 1993). The socialization

process primarily involves how newcomers learn about the important features of a new setting (Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1993). Both institutional and individual forces influence the socialization process. The context within which students are socialized is constructed by institutional policies and practices, the traditions and values of the institution, and by the department and discipline. In addition, how each student experiences socialization opportunities is influenced by factors such as prior experiences with socialization, personalities, and individual support systems (Lindsay, 1988).

Graduate faculty are crucial socialization agents because they define knowledge and disciplinary values, model roles of academics in the discipline, and offer practical help and advice (Baird, 1995). In their study exploring issues of supervision within the disciplines of physics, mathematics, and engineering science, Pole, Spokkereef, Burgess, and Lakin (1997) concluded that the early student-supervisor relationship is crucial in the socialization of the Ph.D. student. Novice Ph.D. students looked toward their supervisors for guidelines and directives as to what to do to fulfil their status as doctoral students. Moreover, students expected their supervisors to be knowledgeable about their area of study. Overall, novice Ph.D. students appeared to anticipate a high degree of involvement from their supervisors in the early days of their research.

Both academic socialization and non-academic socialization have been found to strengthen graduate students' identification with their departments and to enhance interpersonal relationships. Kirk and Todd-Mancillas (1991) investigated situations, events, or acts with peers, faculty members, or both, that signalled acceptance, belonging and/or emotional support. They concluded from interviews with 29 graduate students that two interpersonal interactions -- dyadic interactions with peers or faculty members and small group interactions -- signalled acceptance, belonging and/or emotional support. Small group interactions were classified into academic socialization

(e.g., meetings with thesis committee members), which strengthened students' identification with their department, and non-academic socialization (e.g., where students became involved with a social club or met socially with other graduate students and professors), which enhanced interpersonal relationships and strengthened students' identification with their department.

The frequency and nature of contact with faculty members have also been found to be significantly related to the amount of professional role commitment (Weiss, 1981), research productivity (Malaney, 1988), and degree progress (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988) for graduate students. Weiss drew upon questionnaire data previously collected by the Carnegie Commission National Survey of Higher Education to examine the development of professional role commitment, or socialization of graduate students to professional roles, as it was reflected in students' productivity and professional self-concept. The productivity index consisted of items indicating professional behaviour, for example, attendance at professional meetings, while the self-concept index consisted of items indicating professional motives and attitudes, for example, intrinsic interest in one's field. Based on the responses from 8,476 cases, Weiss concluded that students who interacted frequently with faculty members on an informal basis were more likely to be highly productive and to hold a high professional self-concept than students having little or no informal contact with their professors.

In his review of the literature devoted to research studies on various topics in graduate education, Malaney (1988) reported that graduate research assistants who had intense professional interactions with their supervisors had greater research productivity compared to their peers. Similarly, Girves and Wemmerus (1988) believed that students' relationships with faculty members were crucial to the students' educational and professional development and ultimately to students' graduate degree progress. In their

study investigating the influence of graduate grades, level of involvement in program, satisfaction with department, and alienation on graduate degree progress, Girves and Wemmerus (1988) found that the 486 graduate students who reported on a questionnaire as having a number of faculty colleagues and being treated like a 'junior' colleague by one's advisor made better degree progress.

Bland and Schmitz (1986) suggest that research knowledge and skills by themselves are insufficient to make a successful researcher, but that a supportive environment and role models are also required. For many graduate students, the support of a mentor is one way in which this supportive environment is created.

Mentoring as a Form of Social Support

The mentoring relationship is one form of social support that has long been associated with the apprentice model of graduate education (Jacobi, 1991), and that has been identified as having a powerful and professional impact on students (Bowman et al., 1990). Several studies have defined mentoring relationships, either with faculty members or more experienced peers, as an important means of support in coping with the stress associated with academic roles (e.g., Conrad & Phillips, 1995; Kirk & Todd-Mancillas, 1991), and as a process of socialization important for gaining a sense of the significant issues in a discipline (e.g., Shannon, 1995). According to P. Boyle and Boice (1998), mentoring may be the most important variable related to academic and career success for graduate students.

Wyche and Frierson (1990) have described mentoring relationships as "informal but crucial system(s) that provide individuals with support and guidance during their graduate training" (p. 990). Although a widely accepted operational definition of mentoring does not exist (Jacobi, 1991), for the purposes of the current study, "mentors

are colleagues and supervisors who actively provide guidance, support, and opportunities for the protege" (Schmidt & Wolfe, 1980, p. 45).

In their reviews of research on mentoring, Jacobi (1991) and Kartje (1996) describe three functions of the mentoring relationship: (a) emotional and psychological support, (b) direct assistance with career and professional development, and (c) role modelling. Jacobi (1991) elaborates on her review by describing four theoretical models of mentoring in higher education, one of which includes social support and four of its functions (emotional, appraisal, information, and instrumental or material), which she links to the three functions of mentoring. According to Jacobi, emotional and appraisal support correspond with the emotional support functions of mentoring, while instrumental, or material, and information support correspond with direct assistance for professional development. Finally, Jacobi suggests that appraisal support perhaps best corresponds to the role modelling function of mentoring.

Mentorship has often been recommended as a means of providing women and minority students with the support, socialization, and direct assistance they need to succeed in an environment they may experience as alienating (Jacobi, 1991). York, Henley, and Gamble (1988) reported that encouragement by mentors was highly correlated with female graduate students' interest in pursuing advanced social work careers, while Johnsrud (1991) cited the benefits of mentoring for women in a doctoral program as they work through the graduate culture. In terms of minorities, Juarez (1991) described a graduate mentor program as a means of support for minority students, through the provision of individual counselling and advice. Finally, Phillip (1993) reported that the most successful institutions in graduating minority Ph.D. candidates were those where minority faculty were present as role models and mentors, and where a variety of support systems were included.

The majority of mentorship literature involving graduate students can be examined according to the source of support: either faculty members or peers. Each source of support has been identified as critical to graduate student success.

Faculty Members as Mentors and Sources of Social Support. Graduate education is a student socialization and development process mainly influenced by student-faculty interrelationships (Aguinis, Nesler, Quigley, Lee, & Tedeschi, 1996). Graduate students regard their relationships with faculty members as the most important aspect of the quality of their education, and feel that relationships and interactions between faculty and students are one of the most important factors affecting students' satisfaction with graduate programs (Aguinis et al.; Hodgson & Simoni, 1995; Polson, 1999). The impact of these relationships is both a good predictor of, and crucial to, the successful completion of a doctoral degree (Bargar & Mayo-Chamberlain, 1983; Polson).

The importance of faculty mentoring to the professional and academic development, in addition to the well-being, of graduate students has been described in several studies (e.g., Freeman et al., 1999; Holdaway, Deblois, & Winchester, 1995; Johnsrud, 1991). These studies also illustrate the three functions of mentorship earlier described according to Jacobi (1991) and Kartje (1996): emotional and psychological support, direct assistance with career and professional development, and role modelling.

Mentoring relationships between faculty members and students have been described as a significant means for identifying and developing students' scholarly potential (Johnsrud, 1991). Based on their study of 90 psychology graduate students who had completed a 40-item questionnaire to assess students' involvement in, and perceptions of, mentor relationships, Cronan-Hillix, Gensheimer, Cronan-Hillix, and Davidson (1986) found enhanced research and publication activity among graduate

students of psychology who claimed they had mentors.

In a longitudinal study in which graduate students (N=576) in preparation programs were asked about anticipated placement plans after graduation, Richmond and Sherman (1991) detailed the importance of mentoring relationships between students and faculty in aspects of professional development and involvement. Graduate students thought that mentors assisted in easing entry into the field, increasing their professionalism, and identifying specific areas of concentration. Respondents also indicated that, without the support of supervisors and mentors, they were often uncertain about how to integrate theory into their work.

Mentoring relationships between faculty members and students have also been found to contribute to students' perceptions of, and satisfaction with, student-faculty relationships. In interviews conducted with nine Master of Education students at Queen's University, Freeman et al. (1999) discovered that the encouragement and support encountered by students from faculty members contributed to participant satisfaction with student-faculty relationships. Similarly, in their survey of 565 doctoral students at the University of Tennessee, Lyons, Scroggins, and Rule (1990) concluded that doctoral students who had experienced a close working relationship with a faculty member had a fuller education than their counterparts who had not. Having a mentor was found to have a direct effect on the overall evaluations of students' academic life, and also helped students feel that they were learning the norms and methods of their respective disciplines.

Finally, mentoring relationships between faculty members and students have been described as an important source of personal support for students. In their study investigating effective practices in the supervision of graduate students from the perspectives of 736 supervisors of graduate students, Holdaway et al. (1995) indicated

the importance of supervisors acting as mentors, and reported that quality supervision involves personal support. Personal support also emerged as a major theme in Bruce's (1995) interviews with two female students in a college of education doctoral program. This study revealed the components of mentoring relationships that facilitate women's performance in higher education. Five themes emerged as significant for the women in the study: (a) encouragement and support (e.g., positive experience with professors, ability and freedom to express ideas); (b) role models (observation of women role models in action encouraged their own achievement for success and allowed them to share common orientations toward people and events); (c) professional development; (d) cross-gender relationships (e.g., the participants emphasized importance of a team approach that values nurturing relationships, collaboration, and negotiating); and (e) peer interactions (e.g., students supported, encouraged, debated, and shared personal experiences with each other).

Peers as Mentors and Sources of Social Support. Although faculty members are an important source of social support, especially in socializing students to their programs, peers also play a valuable role in supporting their fellow students. In an essay written from a phenomenological perspective of two recent Ph.D. recipients describing a procedure for being and having a dissertation partner, Monsour and Corman (1991) suggest that social support is most effective when provided by peers. According to Monsour and Corman, advisors are supervisors rather than peers and, therefore, may not share the same reality with graduate students as would peers who are also working on their dissertations. At the same time, since the dissertation process is outside of the experiences of most non-academics, support from friends and family is difficult to obtain; therefore, support from someone who is sharing in the experience is ideal. Russell and

Adams (1997) also described peers as important sources of psychological support because of their likelihood to share similar experiences.

Students' interactions with other graduate students have been related to academic achievement and career development (P. Boyle & Boice, 1998). Earlier studies reviewed by Goplerud (1980) concluded that peer support is a critical element in the emotional and academic development of graduate students. More recent studies (e.g., Conrad & Phillips, 1995; Kirk & Todd-Mancillas, 1991) continue to confirm the importance of peer support for graduate students. The advice and support graduate students receive from peers reduces the anxiety associated with academic roles (Kirk & Todd-Mancillas). In their exploratory study, Kirk and Todd-Mancillas interviewed 29 participants representing nine departments to investigate graduate student teachers' levels of identification with their departments and perceptions of events most significantly affecting their socialization within their departments. Three categories established from the interview data were found to influence graduate student identification within their department; one of these categories, socio-emotional identity, revealed acceptance, belonging, and emotional support between peers as enhancing graduate students' socio-emotional identity.

Conrad and Phillips (1995) also suggested the importance of peer support groups in emotionally supporting students. In their discussion paper, the authors reviewed research on postgraduate collaborative and support groups, and suggested that such groups are important for potentially countering intellectual and social isolation among postgraduate students. In a study conducted by Master's students and their supervisor of fellow classmates' perceptions of their program, Freeman et al. (1999) also identified peer support as an important means for students in fighting sentiments of isolation. Peers were found to not only provide academic and moral support, but

motivation as well.

Many of the studies investigating peers as mentors and sources of social support for other graduate students have described the development and success of programmatically initiated mentoring programs for incoming students (e.g., Allen, McManus, & Russell, 1999; Bowman et al., 1990; de Rosenroll, Norman, & Sinden, 1987; Gustitus, Golden, & Hazler, 1986). Miller and Dirkx (1995) suggest in lieu of one-on-one relationships, graduate programs can provide other opportunities that offer mentoring, but within small group formats, such as student organizations. Student organizations may provide an opportunity for the development of comradeship and sense of relationship among students that is seen as important.

Gustitus et al. (1986) described a support group initiated by graduate students in the counsellor education department at Marywood College. Since its inception, the organization has provided tutorial support, formed study groups, and organized trips to professional and community workshops. The organization has provided an opportunity for members to discuss issues related to juggling their academic, work, and family responsibilities. The organization has also organized student-faculty social events, which have helped personal relationships and have provided the emphasis for many professional accomplishments, such as convention presentations and published articles.

Bowman et al. (1990) described the initiation of a student-to-student mentoring program in response to concerns raised by students regarding the amount of stress involved in beginning and continuing in graduate school. The program was conceived and implemented by the graduate student organization in an effort to alleviate stress associated with beginning graduate studies. The goals of the program were to help students become oriented to the graduate program, to ease adjustment through the provision of social support, and to encourage active involvement. Each new student was

matched with an advanced student who acted as a mentor and provided emotional support, advice, and informal information; made introductions; and helped new students deal with personal concerns. A program evaluation was conducted one year after the induction of the program to assess the extent to which the mentoring program was achieving its goals. Questionnaire responses from 24 students indicated that those who met with their mentor three or more times over the course of the term felt that their mentor had positively influenced the stressful transitions to graduate school and rated the mentoring program as valuable. These students were also more likely to report their mentors as having a positive impact on the level of their involvement in the program.

In a similar manner, de Rosenroll et al. (1987) described a professional peer support group offered to incoming students in the department of Psychological Foundations in Education at the University of Victoria. Peer support was offered in the form of a non-credit seminar course based on past students' indications that a personal and professional peer support group would have been a valuable addition to their program. The non-credit seminar course, facilitated by two, second year students, was intended to provide a time-tabled opportunity for students to meet and discuss both personal and professional issues. Based on the findings from a post- seminar questionnaire, a majority of the 17 participants in the non-credit seminar course indicated that they felt it was a worthwhile experience which added to their personal and professional development, and involvement in the program and university community.

In their study, K. Boyle et al. (1996) described a student-initiated peer mentoring program designed to support incoming doctoral students in the School of Education at the University of Michigan. The paper conveys the reflections of two former mentees (Kristen and Todd) and one mentor (John), and the benefits the peer mentoring program provided them in their transitions to graduate students. Upon discovering that others

shared his sentiments of isolation in their first year, John became one of the founding members of the mentoring program. The goal of the program was to help new graduate students to foster an initial sense of belonging, and to realize that it is acceptable and encouraged for new students to seek out experienced students for information. As such, each new graduate student was matched with an assigned mentor who was a veteran student in the program. For one student, Kristen, the peer mentoring program played a critical role in providing her opportunities to establish connections during the first days and weeks at a new university. Knowing that there was someone officially designated to answer her questions and provide advice “excited and comforted” (p. 12) her. Kristen also realized how invaluable her mentor could be in providing her a “frank perspective on the program, politics, bureaucracy, and people at the university” (pp. 13-14).

Finally, Allen et al. (1999) examined formal peer developmental relationships within a graduate academic setting. The relations between short-term mentoring provided by more experienced peers, multiple aspects of socialization, and stress were investigated using data collected from 64 first-year MBA students working in teams of 5 to 6 people. Allen et al. concluded that formal group peer mentoring relationships contribute to the successful socialization of newcomers. The results also indicated that proteges who reported a greater degree of mentoring also were more likely to report that their mentors helped them cope with stress; that mentors who were perceived to have provided more role modelling, acceptance and confirmation, counselling, and friendship benefited proteges in terms of helping them deal with organizational politics; that psychosocial mentoring provided by formal group peers can help newcomers improve their work performance; and that the degree to which the mentor was engaged in sponsorship, exposure and visibility, coaching, and protection with the protege related positively to the degree the protege established successful and satisfying work

relationships.

Summary

The current review of the literature on social support and graduate students has outlined the importance of social support networks in the emotional and academic development of graduate and professional students. The literature reviewed, however, has several limitations. First, with the exception of the Munir and Jackson (1997) study, studies have excluded any investigation of the social support provided by family members and peers outside of the students' program of study. As such, the current study attempted to examine the contribution of family and peers outside of the students' program of study as potential sources of social support.

Second, research has concentrated on the support provided to students as a means for coping with stressful events and in fostering professional growth. Absent from this research is the contribution of social support in the development of graduate students as self-directed learners. Therefore, an attempt to determine how social support contributes to the development of graduate students as self-directed learners was undertaken in this thesis.

Third, several studies have investigated only doctoral students, or graduate students in general. In the current study, the focus was on participants who were working towards their M.Ed. degree.

Fourth, with the exception of the Freeman et al. (1999), and the K. Boyle et al. (1996) studies, lacking from this research are the voices of the students as investigated by students. As a student in the program alongside the participants in the study, I anticipated participants would share a more forthright opinion of their perceptions of the support they received in the program in comparison to responses they may have

provided a faculty member conducting a similar study.

Finally, studies have typically defined mentorship as a one-on-one relationship and have ignored the possibility of multiple mentors. As earlier suggested by Pines and Aronson (1988), different kinds of support are best provided by different kinds of people. For example, R. Pearson (1990) suggested that informational support is probably best provided by faculty members, while emotional and appraisal support are probably best provided by students. As such, participants were asked to describe the support they received from multiple individuals, including faculty members, family members, and peers both inside and outside of their program of study.

Self-Directed Learning in Formal Adult Education Settings

Although research investigating self-directed learning has spanned over 30 years, early research in this area has tended to ignore the influence of social settings, and the importance of learning networks and informal learning exchanges (Brookfield, 1984). In his 1984 discussion of the social context of self-directed learning, Brookfield identified only three studies that had been conducted that specifically investigated the social context of self-directed learning as conducted by working class adults. More recent literature considering the social context of self-directed learning, specifically within formal adult education settings, has proposed the use of strategies and techniques by educators to encourage, stimulate, and support self-directed learning.

Knowles (1975), early on, considered it the responsibility of educators to act as facilitators to help students develop competence as self-directed learners. Knowles emphasized the importance of developing techniques that would create environments conducive to maximizing self-directed learning among adult learners. More recently, Cranton (1992) has described how adults have a need to be self-directed, and it is the

job of educators to facilitate this process. The educator has a role in stimulating and encouraging self-directed learning, which facilitates students' growth in gaining the skills of engaging in self-directed learning. This growth involves a change in attitude and behaviour, which, in turn, enables students to engage in further self-directed learning activities with ease.

Use of Strategies and Techniques by Educators

Literature on the principles that educators may use to encourage, stimulate, and support self-directed learning has been limited, as the emphasis of research on self-directed learning has been "placed on more theoretical, conceptual, and research methodological topics to the exclusion of practice" (Long, 1989, p. 2). Those who have proposed principles, strategies, and techniques to encourage self-directed learning have done so on the basis of their experiences of, their reflections on, or their proposed methods for incorporating self-directed learning concepts within adult education settings (e.g., Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Brookfield, 1986; Skruber, 1982). In an effort to improve their educational practices to promote or enhance self-directedness among their adult learners, these authors have attempted to design, or report on, learning environments that facilitate self-directed learning. For example, Skruber (1982) proposed a model to enhance self-directedness in learners based on the concept of shared responsibility. Skruber suggested that educators adopt a more flexible approach and provide students with opportunities to participate in the design, implementation, and evaluation of their learning experiences. Meanwhile, Brookfield (1986) reported a number of different institutional initiatives to assist learners in becoming more self-

directed in their learning. These initiatives included the use of learning contracts² to negotiate learning activities, and the role of faculty in assisting learners in identifying resources, linking learners to these resources, and encouraging the formation of peer learning networks. Finally, Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) proposed three strategies for enhancing learner self-direction: facilitating critical reflection, promoting rational thinking, and using helping skills in the facilitation process.

The application of these strategies and techniques in encouraging self-directed learning within adult education settings is generally reported in the form of case studies (e.g., Bauer, 1985; Brockett & Hiemstra, 1985). Bauer described the Adult Education Guided Independent Study program offered by the Department of Higher and Adult Education at Columbia University as an alternative to the traditional program in the adult and continuing education specialization. The primary mission of the program, designed for a specific clientele (i.e., those with substantial experience in program development, administration of continuing education, staff development or training who wish to earn a doctorate degree in two to three years), was to assist practitioners to exercise and further develop their own self-directedness. The objectives of the program included helping participants to acquire an understanding of their own learning process and of the learning processes of the adults with whom they worked; facilitating the progressive transfer of the responsibility for designing, conducting, and evaluating their own learning programs to participants; facilitating the growth of participants' critical analytical abilities in examining assumptions about themselves and their practice; and promoting their interest and skills in discipline inquiry. Throughout their experiences in the program,

² Learning contracts provide a framework for describing what participants will learn as a result of a specified learning activity. They typically include five components: learning objectives, learning resources and strategies, evidence of accomplishment of objectives, criteria and means for validating evidence, and a time line for completing objectives (Caffarella, 1983).

participants engaged in various self-directed activities. For example, participants took the initiative, with the help of faculty and peers, in developing and implementing learning contracts, and in developing their skills of critical analysis of theories of adult learning and education. Within the program, contact with peers was an invaluable source of professional, academic, and moral support to these adult learners. Meanwhile, faculty members, among other functions, facilitated discussions of reading materials and shared their professional expertise in the analysis of adult education and literature.

Although primarily reported in a case study format, Bauer (1985) raised three problems encountered by faculty and learners involved in the program based on interviews she conducted as part of her doctoral dissertation study. These difficulties encompassed incoming participants' competencies for self-directed learning, the constraints posed by institutional and program requirements, and the role of the faculty. Despite assumptions that incoming participants would possess many of the characteristics of self-directed learners, varying levels of self-directedness among the participants demonstrated a need for a range of structure within the program. As the program was part of a traditional departmental structure, it was required to maintain institutional standards for doctoral study which placed limitations on the degree of self-directed learning offered to participants. Finally, the active involvement of faculty in participants' professional needs and interests limited the time faculty were able to dedicate to the pursuit of their own research interests.

A graduate adult education program, similar to the one reported by Bauer (1985), called the Weekend Scholar program, was run at Syracuse University (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1985). The program enabled participants to earn a Master's degree in adult education entirely through weekend courses. High levels of self-direction constituted a vital part of the program; it involved "a teaching and learning process whereby learners

and instructors negotiate[d] a learning contract establishing each individual's goals, strategies, and evaluation criteria for particular subject matter study" (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1985, p. 34). Brockett and Hiemstra reported that learners exhibited more positive attitudes about learning, the instructional process, and the program than had originally been anticipated. As with the Adult Education Guided Independent Study program, participants' interactions with their peers prompted them to form learning networks and peer self-help groups, and allowed them to achieve collaborativeness and cohesion not generally found in graduate education programs.

Empirical research investigating the use of strategies and techniques in encouraging self-directed learning within adult education settings is limited. In fact, there are generally few empirical studies examining self-directed learning in formal adult education activities (Van Zile-Tamsen, 1997). Brookfield (1986) proposed six contextual variables that appear to distort or alter the application of self-directed learning principles, which may provide reason for the lack of empirical research in this area. These contextual factors encompassed the following issues: faculty are untrained in this mode of education, learners are at different stages of readiness to work in a self-directed manner, institutional structural policies make attempts to encourage self-directed learning difficult, working in a self-directed framework is time-consuming which may lead educators to prefer standard educational procedures, the amount and degree of contact between facilitator and learner required in self-directed learning environments mean it is important for these individuals to be compatible, and reliable instruments to measure students' readiness for self-directed learning are lacking.

The non-case study empirical research that does exist investigating the promotion of self-directed learning has commonly sought the opinions and beliefs of instructors, and their use of strategies and techniques to encourage self-directed

learning. Sisco (1988) conducted an exploratory study to investigate whether instructors of adult education promoted/facilitated competence for self-directed learning in their graduate students, and, if so, what strategies they used to enable students to develop such competencies. Sixty-two instructors teaching mostly graduate courses in adult education on a full-time basis completed and returned a self-report survey consisting of 12 self-directed learning competency statements, to each of which they gave a yes/no indication of whether they promoted each competency in their students. In addition, the instructors provided a list of the strategies they used to promote/facilitate self-directed learning competency. These instructors of graduate students in adult education believed they promoted/facilitated competence in self-directed learning among their students. In particular, four competency statements received an agreement score of 86% or greater; instructors indicated (a) that they helped students relate to peers collaboratively and to see faculty as resources for diagnosing, planning, and completing their learning; (b) that they helped students identify human and material resources appropriate to different kinds of learning objectives; (c) that, with their help, faculty facilitated students' abilities to diagnose their own learning needs; and (d) that they helped students view the role of instructor as one of facilitator, helper, or consultant. Only one statement was reported by a majority of respondents as something they did not do to encourage self-direction on the part of their students. Instructors reported that they did not help students renew their motivation for learning when it lagged. Finally, respondents employed a wide range of strategies to promote competence for self-directed learning among students. The use of learning contracts was mentioned most frequently. Other frequently mentioned strategies included individualized techniques, such as coaching, one-on-one conferences, and counselling.

Despite the reported efforts of, and methods adopted by, instructors to foster self-directed learning, instructors' beliefs and practices do not always support self-directed learning, as discovered by Wilcox (1996). Wilcox conducted a two-phase examination of the role of university instructors in fostering self-directed learning among their students. In the first phase of research designed to focus on instructional beliefs to determine the degree of attitudinal support for self-directed learning among a sample of university instructors, Wilcox distributed a 36-item Likert-type questionnaire to elicit instructor opinions and attitudes about students, the teaching/learning process, and the role of the instructor. Eighty-seven percent of the 139 respondents reported instructional beliefs, values, and expectations that did not support self-directed learning. The remaining 13 percent of the respondents were found to be supportive of self-directed learning and were participants in the second phase of the study designed to investigate instructional practices. These participants were asked to complete a second survey, The Practice Survey, consisting of 79 statements designed to describe instructional practices. Observations of instructional practice, the collection of course materials, and unstructured interviews were also used to determine the participants' approaches to teaching. The instructional practices these individuals adopted to foster self-directed learning were found to encompass four categories: structure, climate, learner engagement, and learner competencies. Most instructors provided a flexible course structure to meet the needs of a variety of students, actively expressed appreciation and support for their students, fostered a positive learning environment, and designed activities to engage students in learning. However, Wilcox concluded that the instructors' practice did not always exemplify their strong convictions about fostering self-directed learning and offered six explanations for this conclusion. Wilcox proposed that instructors were unaware of the ways their practice did not support their beliefs, lacked

the instructional skills to implement their beliefs effectively, adapted instructional practices to suit the characteristics of their students and demands of the instructional setting, had a different conception of self-directed learning than defined in the research model, did not really believe in self-directed learning, and had visions of self-directed learning that were limited by the conventions of the university setting.

Success of Strategies and Techniques Used by Educators

Although little research exists in examining how faculty members facilitate self-directed learning, there exists even less research investigating the success of the strategies adopted by instructors to foster self-directed learning among their students. A distinct approach to promoting and integrating self-directed learning into formal adult education programs has involved the use of learning contracts (Sisco, 1988). Caffarella (1983) and Caffarella and Caffarella (1986) conducted studies using the learning contract as a means of fostering self-directed learning competence among graduate students enrolled in formal adult education courses.

Interested in how students viewed learning contracts once they had completed formal course work, and the carry-over effects of using such a format in continuing learning experiences, Caffarella (1983) surveyed 42 graduate students enrolled in her graduate course in adult education over the course of two years. Results, based on students' completion of the Learning Contract Format Follow-Up Survey, indicated that they believed using a learning contract was both valuable and worthwhile, and should continue to be used in graduate level courses. Students strongly agreed that the format was worthwhile in that it placed responsibility for learning more on them and allowed their own learning needs and desires to be integrated with course requirements. Students also agreed that the use of learning contracts increased their competencies as

self-directed learners in primarily three areas: relating to teachers as facilitators or consultants, translating learning needs into learning objectives, and identifying human and material resources appropriate to different kinds of learning. Finally, students also reported using these competencies in present teaching and learning experiences.

Despite earlier evidence that indicated an increase in students' competence for self-directed learning as a result of the learning contract (Caffarella, 1983), using a multilevelled methodological framework, Caffarella and Caffarella (1986) discovered that the use of learning contracts only had an impact on certain competencies for self-directed learning. A pretest-treatment-posttest research design was used to investigate whether learning contracts in higher education enhanced adults' readiness and competencies for self-directed learning. Graduate students enrolled in adult education courses using learning contracts from six universities completed two surveys: the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS) -- a self-report instrument diagnosing self-directed learning readiness -- and the Self-Directed Learning Competencies Self Appraisal Form (SDLCSAF) -- a self-report instrument using a Likert-type scale to measure 12 self-perceived competencies for self-directed learning. Eighty-three students completed the SDLRS, while 130 students completed the SDLCSAF, at both pre- and posttest deliveries. No significant changes were observed in students' readiness for self-directed learning from having used learning contracts as measured by the SDLRS, while significant increases in 3 of 12 competencies, as measured by the SDLCSAF, were observed. Results from the SDLCSAF surveys demonstrated an increase in students' abilities to translate learning needs into learning objectives, identify human and material learning resources, and select effective strategies for using learning resources. Based on these results, Caffarella and Caffarella (1986) concluded that the use of learning contracts in graduate level education had no significant impact on

students' developing readiness for self-directedness in learning, and only had some impact on developing certain competencies for self-directed learning. Therefore, they suggested that learning contracts should not be viewed as a major tool for the enhancement of skills and competencies of self-directed learning.

Although the results of their 1986 study led Caffarella and Caffarella to dismiss the use of learning contracts as a tool for the enhancement of skills and competencies of self-directed learning, the students in Caffarella's (1983) study appeared to respond positively to the use of learning contracts. In fact, Caffarella's (1983) study is one of the few studies that reports from the perspectives of students the use of strategies by educators to encourage self-directed learning.

Students' Perspectives on the Use of Strategies and Techniques by Educators

The literature reporting students' perspectives of the strategies and techniques that their educators adopt to encourage their growth as self-directed learners in a formal educational setting is, for the most part, non-existent. In addition to Caffarella's (1983) investigation of students' initial reactions to the use of learning contracts, I was unable to find many empirical investigations of the use of strategies and techniques by educators from the perspectives of students. Taylor (1987) reported on a graduate course on facilitating adults' learning designed to promote self-direction in course work based on reports of the learners themselves. Based on her analysis of 14 interviews with eight learners in the course, Taylor described four phases (disorientation, exploration, reorientation, equilibrium) and four transition points (disconfirmation, naming the problem, reflection, sharing the discovery) involved in the process of moving toward self-direction. Although learners may have entered the course at equilibrium, they quickly encountered their first transition point: disconfirmation. At this time, learners

encountered major discrepancies between their expectations and their experiences. For example, learners expected to receive an outline of the course highlighting objectives, but instead were asked what they wanted to learn. The first phase, disorientation, involved a period of intense confusion accompanied by a crisis of confidence and withdrawal from others who were associated with the source of confusion. During this stage, each learner believed that he or she was the only one experiencing confusion. This phase was followed by the second transition point, where learners were able to name the problem without blaming self and others. The second phase, exploration, followed. Exploration involved intuitively guided, collaborative, and open-ended exploration of learning which led to insights, confidence, and satisfaction. Once learners understood that they were not the only ones confused and began to feel better about the course, they engaged in a time of reflection, the third transition point. This process led to the third phase: reorientation. Upon entering this phase, learners experienced a major insight or synthesis experience that occurred simultaneously with a new approach to the learning task. Before entering the final phase, learners tested out their new understanding with others through a sharing of discovery, the fourth transition point. Once they had reached the final phase, that of equilibrium, their new perspective and approach were elaborated, refined, and applied. Taylor (1987) concluded that learners proceeded at different rates through the cycle, although the sequence of experiences for the learners did not vary.

Although Taylor (1987) sought the perspectives of adults on their development as self-directed learners within a formal educational setting, she did not report their perspectives on the use of strategies and techniques to encourage their self-directed learning. Instead, she described the pattern of learning she observed and recorded in students' taking responsibility for their own learning. Still lacking from this area of

research are the perceptions of students as they see the support they receive from their instructors and others (e.g., peers, family members) as contributing to their growth as self-directed learners.

Summary

One of the difficulties in conducting a review of the literature on self-directed learning was understanding and applying the multiple definitions of the concept to fit my own research. Despite the multiplicity of definitions given, these definitions are rarely substantiated with any data regarding the existence of the concept, the type of people who are prone to be self-directed, or if people can be taught to be more self-directed (Van Zile-Tamsen, 1997). Because of the numerous definitions offered to describe self-directed learning, I chose to focus my search for literature on formal adult education settings and how individuals within these settings supported self-directed learning. Although there were several studies that have examined students' self-directed learning skills based on other selected constructs (e.g., locus of control, Van Zile-Tamsen, 1997; level of education, Herbeson, 1991), there has been limited research examining how students describe themselves as self-directed learners, specifically, within the context of formal adult education settings. In addition, I could find no qualitative research investigating how students describe their sources of social support as contributing to their growth as self-directed learners.

Social Support and Self-Directed Learning

Having reviewed both the literature on social support and self-directed learning, I found that a connection between the research domains clearly emerges. Based on the social support literature, I have gained an understanding of how mostly faculty and peers

act as sources of social support for graduate students. Faculty members have been shown to provide graduate students with support for professional development (e.g., Richmond & Sherman, 1991), academic development (e.g., Cronan-Hillix et al., 1986), and the maintenance of well-being (e.g., Bruce, 1995). In fact, graduate education is a student socialization and development process mainly influenced by student-faculty interrelationships (Aguinis et al., 1996). Relationships and interactions between faculty members and students are one of the most important factors affecting students' satisfaction with their graduate program (Aguinis et al.; Hodgson & Simoni, 1995; Polson, 1999). Meanwhile, peers have been shown to provide their fellow classmates with emotional and academic support (e.g., Conrad & Phillips, 1995), largely in the form of peer support groups (e.g., Bowman et al., 1990; de Rosenroll et al., 1987). Miller and Dirkx (1995) suggest that the implementation of peer support groups may provide an opportunity for the development of comradeship and sense of relationship among students that is seen as important. Monsour and Corman (1991) and Russell and Adams (1997) believe that social support is most effective when provided by peers because of their likelihood to share similar experiences.

Within the self-directed learning literature, I have reviewed how course instructors' adoption of instructional strategies and techniques can facilitate students' growth as self-directed learners (e.g., Bauer, 1985). The application of these strategies and techniques in encouraging self-directed learning within adult education settings has been generally reported in the form of case studies (e.g., Bauer; Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991). The non-case study empirical research investigating the promotion of self-directed learning has commonly sought the opinions and beliefs of instructors, and their use of strategies and techniques to encourage self-directed learning (e.g., Sisco, 1988). Of the few studies that report from the perspective of students (e.g., Caffarella, 1983;

Caffarella & Caffarella, 1986), the use of learning contracts, a strategy designed to foster competence for self-directed learning among students, was viewed positively by students but found to have only some impact on developing competencies for self-directed learning. Although literature on self-directed learning appears to be limited, it does provide a connection between the provision of social support and self-directed learning. For example, Bauer (1985) spoke of how peers and faculty provided support for participants in their development and implementation of learning contracts.

What appears to be missing from this formula is a specific understanding of what functions of social support are responsible for facilitating specific dimensions of self-directed learning, and the individuals most likely to provide this support. An understanding of the more personal interactions among graduate students, faculty, and peers that contribute to graduate students' growth as self-directed learners may provide a better understanding of how a supportive formal adult education environment can be created to facilitate students' learning. Beyond this environment, an understanding of the roles of family members and peers outside of the program could also assist universities to understand their roles in supporting students and, in particular, their self-directed learning.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

This chapter present the methods I used in conducting the current study. I first describe the context in which the research was conducted, including the community and the researcher. I next review the sampling procedures used in participant selection and provide a description of each of my participants, Steven, Heather, Paula, and Sabrina (all the names are pseudonyms). Finally, I give and overview of the data collection and analysis strategies.

Context of Research

Community³

The current study was conducted at the Faculty of Education, Queen's University, located in Kingston, Ontario. The M.Ed. program at Queen's is designed to develop leadership and teaching abilities that emerge from critical inquiry (including critical reflection) and from research and development activity. Each year, approximately 20 full-time students and 25 part-time students are admitted into the program. Each student is assigned to a program advisor whose responsibilities include developing with the student a program of study that coheres with the student's professional goals and with the program's aims. Students must earn a minimum credit value of 10 half courses which can be completed by choosing one of two program patterns, either a thesis or project pattern. The initial step in this process involves the selection of a thesis or project supervisor whose role is threefold: to advise, monitor, and act as mentor. Supervisors

³ Information in the following two paragraphs has been taken from the Graduate Studies in Education: A Handbook (1998), and from personal communications with the Graduate Studies Office at the Faculty of Education.

not only provide guidance, instruction, and encouragement in the research activities of their students, but also take part in the evaluation of their progress and performance. It is the responsibility of supervisors to foster the intellectual growth of their students so that they can become competent contributors to their field of knowledge.

As of the 1999-2000 academic year, 146 students were enrolled in the M.Ed. program. Ninety-five of the students were female (52 part-time and 43 full-time), while 51 students were male (34 part-time and 17 full-time). The average class size was approximately 7.5.

Researcher

As I am the primary tool of data collection and analysis (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999), my construction of the community and of myself as a researcher may interact with other people's constructions or interpretations of the phenomenon being studied. As such, presenting my position vis-a-vis the group being studied is important in determining whether the results reported are consistent and dependable (Merriam, 1998).

At the onset of data collection, I was a full-time student in the M.Ed. program enrolled in my final course. I began the program in September 1998, having come directly out of my Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) program. One of the reasons I decided to pursue an M.Ed. degree was because of my sense of lack of preparedness to teach in the classroom. I hoped to obtain from my Master's a greater knowledge of educational theories that would inform my practice as a teacher. My experiences in the program up until this point were extremely positive. I was involved in committee work and held both teaching and research assistantships. These experiences provided me with an opportunity to interact and become familiar with a number of faculty members and

support staff within the Faculty. I was also given many opportunities to participate in paper presentations at conferences. All these experiences, among others, gave me the opportunity to grow both personally and professionally. As such, I chose to conduct this study as a way to find out about my topic and myself, specifically my transformation as a learner.

Participant Selection

This study employed purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is used when an understanding of cases is desired without needing to generalize to all cases like the ones being studied and is done to increase the utility of information obtained from small samples (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). It is also designed to generate a group that is information-rich (Wiseman, 1999). Once permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Faculty of Education, four professors in the Faculty, who taught three different courses (two professors taught a mandatory research methods course), were approached and asked if they would be willing to give me the opportunity to present my proposed research during class time. Once the cooperation of professors was ensured, I briefly described the nature of the proposed research to students at the beginning of class. Sixteen students indicated their willingness to participate by disclosing their consent on a sign-up sheet following the brief presentation. The four students who were selected to participate in the current study were chosen using maximum variation sampling, and were later contacted via the telephone to review the purpose of the study and the time commitment involved. Maximum variation sampling was used to obtain maximum differences of perceptions about the topic of study among information-rich informants (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). As graduate students' sources of social support may differ for individuals depending on gender and status (part-time or full-time),

the sample of students selected to participate in the study was chosen to contrast the different possible backgrounds and perceived experiences that may be encountered within the program. To be considered for the study, participants were required to meet five criteria. Students: (a) were required to be in their first year of the program; (b) could not be teaching courses in the Faculty as a member of the instructional staff, although teaching and research assistantships were acceptable; (c) were intending to remain in the program for more than one year; (d) represented a maximum variability in status and gender; and (e) volunteered to participate in the study. Students were required to be in their first year of the program to be considered as a participant in the study because of my personal familiarity with many of the students already involved in the program. As well, many of the students already in the program had participated in the Freeman et al. (1999) study, for which I was one of the principal investigators. As a result, one part-time female, one full-time female, one part-time male, and one full-time male were selected to participate in the study.

Following the first set of individual interviews and the onset of data analysis, I realized there were some ethical concerns about interviewing one of my participants. The full-time male participant I had chosen was an individual with whom I was involved in a research group and who also worked for my thesis supervisor. Because of my familiarity with this individual, I felt I could not remain objective during data analysis. This participant was chosen initially because he was, at the time, one of two full-time males who fit the criteria established for participant selection. The other full-time male student was not chosen as a participant because he was used in a pilot investigation of my interview questions. During the pilot investigation, notes were taken recording any problems this student had with the wording of questions in attempting to respond to them. In addition, he worked with my supervisor and myself. Based on these difficulties, I

established a new criterion for participant selection; the new participant, regardless of status or gender, could not be working with my supervisor or myself. Following the establishment of the new criterion, I returned to the sign-up sheets where another full-time student was contacted who originally showed interest in participating. Based on the new selection criteria, three females, two full-time – Paula and Sabrina – and one part-time, Heather, and one part-time male, Steven participated in the current study. The inclusion of the third female, in fact, did establish a more representative sample of the program as the majority of students registered in the program are female.

Participant Description

A description of each of the participants (Steven, Heather, Paula, and Sabrina) is presented in a similar format through the description of: (a) status in program, (b) amount of teaching experience, (c) reasons for entering the program, (d) initial impressions of the program, (e) length of time in the program, (f) number of courses completed at the onset of participation, and (g) number of meetings.

Steven

Steven, a full-time secondary school teacher, husband, father, and part-time student, began the M.Ed. program in the summer of 1999. Steven had always wanted to complete a Master's degree, but was unsure of the future directions or career aspirations he would pursue with his degree. At the time of our first meeting, Steven had completed two courses and was enrolled in a third. In comparison to both his undergraduate and B.Ed. degrees, Steven enjoyed his experience in the M.Ed. program because of the freedom he felt in being able to pursue his own interests. As this was his second year of teaching, Steven found the experience of being a full-time teacher and part-time student

as “busy,” “a bit hard,” and “a bit tiring” (l p. 4).

Steven and I met on only two occasions. He was unable to meet for the focus group discussion. We therefore met at length during our final interview to explore his responses to issues raised by Heather, Paula, and Sabrina during our focus group discussion.

Heather

Heather, both a part-time M.Ed. student and a full-time secondary school teacher, began the M.Ed. program in the summer of 1999. At the time of our first meeting, Heather had completed two courses and was enrolled in a third. Having taught for seven years, one of the main reasons Heather decided to pursue an M.Ed. degree was to become a better teacher. She also desired the opportunities to grow professionally, to commit to academics, and to dedicate time to discussing issues with professors and fellow students: things she felt were missing in her life.

During our first meeting, Heather described her experience in the program as “really good, positive, enriching, [and] enjoyable” (l p.1). Balancing both a full-time career and the part-time pursuit of academics, Heather felt that there was a lot of extra pressure and work added to all the other tasks for which she was responsible as a teacher. In addition to her already hectic schedule was the reality that Heather travelled 2 hours and 30 minutes each way from another city to pursue her degree at Queen's. Heather and I met on two additional occasions after our first meeting, once with Paula and Sabrina during our group meeting, and once during our final interview together.

Paula

Paula, a full-time student, began the M.Ed. program in September of 1999. At the

time of our first meeting, Paula had completed three courses and had begun her second term in the program. Our first meeting was delayed in comparison to the other three participants as she was a late addition to the study. During our first meeting, I learned that Paula had been teaching for two years and had been considering returning to pursue her Master's degree during that time. Had it not been for the encouragement of a professor at the Faculty, Paula felt she might not have begun the program this year. Her intention to pursue an M.Ed. degree was primarily for two reasons: (a) to find out if she was suited for a future career in academics, and (b) to become specialized in an area that would allow her to contribute to the school system detailed knowledge of a particular topic, which she felt she was not previously able to do.

Paula was involved in activities both outside the Faculty in the larger community and in the Faculty. In the Faculty, she participated in committee work and held both teaching and research assistantships. Paula described her experience in the program during our first encounter as "very positive" (I p.1). She found her readjustment to academic reading and writing a struggle at first, but described her growth in these areas as constantly improving. After our first meeting, Paula and I met on two additional occasions, once with Heather and Sabrina during our group meeting, and once during our final interview together.

Sabrina

Sabrina, a full-time student and former elementary school teacher for six years, began her program in September of 1999. Sabrina shared many reasons to describe why she decided to pursue an M.Ed. degree. First of all, she felt obtaining a Master's degree was a way of increasing her options, whether that be one day to pursue academic or administrative endeavours. Perhaps the largest reason Sabrina decided to

continue her education was to become more involved in, and focussed on, her own thinking and academics, as opposed to extracurricular activities with which she was heavily involved during her undergraduate and B.Ed. degrees. Sabrina described this desire as a means of refueling and recovering from a profession, which she described as "a challenge in itself" (I p.1), where one is constantly giving out. Despite viewing teaching as a challenge, Sabrina felt that the actual content she was delivering had become stale and highlighted her need for a break from teaching.

Sabrina, at the time of our first meeting, was enrolled in three courses. She described her experience in the program as "great" (I p.1). She also indicated how the program was meeting her expectations, which was an opportunity to focus on her topic and areas of interest. Sabrina and I met on two additional occasions subsequent to our first meeting, once with Paula and Heather during the group meeting, and once during our final interview together.

Data Collection

Data collection began in late November of 1999 and ended in mid-March of 2000. Two forms of data collection methods were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the research. These methods included: (a) scheduled semi-structured interviews (both individual and group) and (b) a fieldwork journal.

Interviewing, as a data collection technique, facilitates an understanding of the meaning participants have constructed of their experiences (Merriam, 1998; Seidman, 1991). Interviews were semi-structured (Merriam; Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999) in nature, and interview questions were of two types: (a) preformulated and (b) unstructured. Preformulated questions were developed from issues or concerns that arose during data collection and through prior investigation of the literature. An interview

guide approach was adopted to provide a framework of questions to develop a profile of each participant (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997; Merriam). The order of questions was not determined in advance, but rather followed the flow of the interview. Besides the use of an interview guide, unstructured questions also emerged from topics or ideas that arose from participants' responses to questions. To minimize challenges to internal validity, all interviews were audiotaped (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993) and later transcribed.

The first stage of data collection involved introductory individual interviews with each participant. It was on this occasion that participants were again given a description of the study and asked to complete a statement of informed consent (see Appendix A). Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The interview questions, which had been previously piloted as a means of enhancing their validity, focussed on developing an understanding of each participant's past and current experiences, learning preferences, and social support networks. The questions specifically targetted how faculty, family members, and peers, both in and outside of the program, provided support for the participant's involvement in the M.Ed. program (see Appendix B for list of questions).

As data analysis procedures occurred simultaneously with data collection, information from the individual interviews informed the set of questions created for the group interview. The group interview, or the systematic questioning of several individuals simultaneously, was conducted because of its ability to "provide another level of data gathering or a perspective on the research problem not available through individual interviews" (Fontana & Frey, 1998, p. 54). There are several advantages in conducting group interviews. Group interviews are inexpensive, data-rich, flexible, stimulating to

respondents, recall-aiding, and cumulative and elaborative over and above individual interviews (Fontana & Frey; Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1988; Schensul, 1999). As a result, a formal, field group interview using a semi-structured interview format was conducted to investigate how the participants' social support systems had facilitated their growth as learners while in the program (see Appendix C for list of questions). The group interview lasted approximately one hour. As previously mentioned, Steven was unable to attend this session, and, therefore, only Heather, Paula, and Sabrina participated.

Final interviews with each participant provided me the opportunity to address issues that had emanated from the focus group interview, as well as an opportunity to clarify information received during the first interview. Questions posed to each participant at this time varied as a result of information received during the previous interviews (see Appendix D for a list of questions). Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes with the exception of Steven's interview, which lasted approximately 60 minutes. It was at this time that Steven and I spoke about the issues that arose from the group interview from which he was absent.

In addition to data collection through interviewing, the inclusion of a fieldwork journal allowed for the recording of issues, concerns, and insights that emerged throughout the research. Miles and Huberman (1984) suggest that the qualitative researcher keep a diary, which tracks what was done over the course of the research design as a means of being able to draw valid meaning from the data collected. As the researcher is identified as the instrument in qualitative research (Richardson, 1998; Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999), making an introspective account of the field work enabled me to take into account personal preconceptions and feelings, and to understand the extent of my own influence on the research (Spradley, 1979). As one of the purposes of this study was to understand my own development within the M.Ed.

program, my fieldwork journal was primarily used to record my reflections on comments participants had shared about their own growth in the program. These reflections helped me to think more deeply about the issues that arose during interviews with my participants and facilitated the development of future interview questions.

Data Analysis

Three stages of data analysis were conducted. First, data analysis proceeded along the lines of inductive analysis as described in Boyatzis (1998), Bogdan and Knopp-Biklen (1998), and Coffey and Atkinson (1996). Second, data were analyzed using categories adopted from the literature. To determine the functions each participant's source of social support characterized, categories from the Birch (1998) and Pines and Aronson (1988) models were adopted. Similarly, categories from the Candy (1991), Brockett and Hiemstra (1991), and Garrison (1997) models were used to determine how each participant could be described as a self-directed learner. Finally, data were analyzed according to how each source of support was described in helping the participants develop as learners, thereby providing a connection between social support and self-directed learning. In both the second and final stages of data analysis, individual cases were analyzed followed by cross-case analysis.

Data from each interview were analyzed by first identifying and colour-coding units of information throughout the interview transcripts. For example, each participant's description of support they received from their peers in the program was colour-coded yellow. The creation of these preliminary codes was facilitated and informed by my familiarity with the data in both conducting and transcribing the interviews, and with the understanding that there were two major categories, social support and self-directed learning. Additional codes that were developed specific to social support included:

descriptions of support from peers both in and outside of the program, from family members, and from faculty members. Codes developed specifically related to self-directed learning included participants' descriptions of: themselves as self-directed learners, their personal growth, and their motivation.

Once data were coded, the data were re-categorized to create sub-categories that were informed by the Birch (1988), Pines and Aronson (1988), Candy (1991), and Brockett and Hiemstra (1991) models. Sub-categories that did not fit into these models emerged as new properties. Within each participant's description of her or his sources of social support, sub-categories were created that described each function of support that was provided according to Birch's and Pines and Aronson's models. For example, all data coded identifying family members as sources of social support were examined to determine the function of the support they provided, for example, either material, appraisal, or emotional support.

For the data coded relating to self-directed learning, sub-categories were initially formed based on Candy's (1991) and Brockett and Hiemstra's (1991) models of self-directed learning and learner self-direction. Sub-categories within these constructs included participants' descriptions of themselves as personally responsible for their own learning and descriptions of themselves as self-directed learners. These models, however, proved to be inefficient in gathering detailed knowledge of the participants as self-directed learners. I found these models difficult to separate and apply to the data. Also, the models did not accurately represent the data. Therefore, I returned to the literature in search of another model to further investigate how data analysis of self-directed learning could be accomplished. At this time, I discovered Garrison's (1997) model of self-directed learning, which integrated both the Candy and Brockett and Hiemstra models and proposed three dimensions of self-directed learning. Because of

the complex nature of self-directed learning and the intimate relationship among self-monitoring, self-management, and motivation (Garrison, 1997), an analysis of representative quotes was conducted to investigate self-directed learning. During this process, I discovered that one dimension of self-direction appeared to be more prominent than the other two dimensions for each participant, although each dimension could be identified and described for each participant. Therefore, to facilitate data analysis, I chose to concentrate each case study on the dimension of self-direction that was prominent for a participant.

Finally, the data were analyzed to determine how participants' sources of social support contributed to, or facilitated, the development of the dimensions of self-directed learning. Any references to sources of social support within participants' descriptions of themselves as personally responsible for their own learning and descriptions of themselves as self-directed learners, or references to their development as learners within their descriptions of their sources of social support, were examined.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The cases of Steven, Heather, Paula, and Sabrina are each presented in a similar format through an examination of: (a) sources of social support and (b) evidence of self-directed learning. In describing sources of social support, I indicate the participants' main sources of social support and the kinds of support provided to them by each. For self-directed learning, I highlight the most salient dimension of self-directed learning for each participant, whether self-management, self-monitoring, or motivation. Finally, I examine the contribution of each participant's sources of social support to her or his self-directed learning.

Passages from participants' descriptions of their sources of social support and descriptions of themselves as self-directed learners are offered as evidence. These passages are identified from interview transcripts by parentheses where the first character represents the source of the passage, either the first interview (I), the second interview (II), or the group interview (G). The second set of characters represents the page number where the passage can be found in the respective transcripts. For example, in a passaged identified as (G p. 2), the 'G' represents the group interview and 'p. 2' the page number of the group interview transcripts where the passage was found.

Steven

Social Support

"My wife's doing her Master's, my sister's doing her doctorate, my brother-in-law's doing his doctorate, that helped point out flaws in my own type of writing, my own type of research" (II p. 6). Steven's family played a large role in supporting his efforts and his development in the M.Ed. program. As such, he identified them as his main

source of social support. Peers and faculty members were also seen as providing social support. Finally, Steven drew little support from his peers outside of the program.

Family. Steven's main source of social support was his wife, whom he described as "really flexible" and helpful (I p. 1). As a graduate student herself, Steven's wife also relied on him for support. Steven recognized the reciprocal nature of their relationship. "We try to support each other as much as we can, and give as much time to each other, and proof read our work, and this and that, and take care of the house, and all this other stuff" (I p. 1).

Not only did Steven depend on his wife for appraisal support in the form of feedback in proof reading his work, but also appreciated her understanding.

I think if you're going to do this part time and if you're going to do anything else as well as a Master's, like I am, with working, with this, she [wife] has been so flexible and so supportive, and you need a spouse who is like that if you're going to be doing this because if you have any other type of spouse, you're in trouble because this, it becomes a very selfish endeavour almost at some point. So like I have an essay due. 'I don't really care what you have to do right now I have an essay that's due on Thursday.' And you have to have that. The flexibility to be able to do that with each other. And she does it with me too, like 'I have a paper due tomorrow. [Steven], can you read it?' We'll stay up until two a.m. to do it and that's how it happens. So it's great, it's been, she's been really great about the whole thing. (I pp. 3 - 4)

Along with his wife, Steven's sister and brother-in-law, who were also doing graduate work, provided appraisal support in the form of feedback in proof reading his work.

My sister is doing her Ph.D. in Psychology, her husband's doing his Ph.D. in Chemistry and live next door to us so, it's great. I have a research paper, 'hey [sister's name] you want to read this over for me.' So she'll read it over and then my brother-in-law will read it over, and my wife will read it over and so between the four of us we usually bounce our papers back and forth between each other. (I p. 3)

Steven's father was initially unsupportive of Steven's thoughts of pursuing his M.Ed. Once Steven was accepted into the program, his father acknowledged the difficulty and importance of pursuing an M.Ed. degree: "you know, that's a really

important thing. It's a hard thing" (II p. 6). Generally, Steven described his parents as emotionally supportive in that they could relate to the endeavour he was aspiring to complete.

My parents are both really supportive. They're both university grads. My mother has a Master's degree, so I think it's a known quantity for all of them. They know what it's about. It's a matter of giving me the appropriate support when I need it. (II p. 6)

Peers In the Program. Steven described the support he received from peers, specifically, from two women who were in both of his summer courses, as occurring as "a natural sort of progression" (I p. 3). Although he did not rely heavily on their support, Steven described his relationship with these women as "a friendship, and [as] supportive" (I p. 3). Steven did not rely heavily on his peers in the program because he was just beginning the program and was reluctant to "burden" them with his research topic.

We all just started out in the summer, and so, again we haven't really had a chance to do a lot of really deep stuff that needs support. Like you're doing an essay in class you don't go to a friend to find out about your topic because they're not doing the same thing at all, and you don't want to burden them with it ... they're both working full-time as well. But it's been good to bounce ideas off them and they've been good to talk to. (I p. 3)

Despite these sentiments, Steven generally described his peers as providing him with appraisal support in the form of feedback and technical challenge in giving him other "angles" to consider in his work. Steven appreciated the positive feedback he received from his peers.

Most people are open enough to listen to each other's research just to give some positive feedback, and say, so what about this angle, what about that angle, and that's what most of the people I talk to have been like that. At least I can't think of anybody that hasn't. (I p. 3)

In providing each other with technical challenges through small group discussions, Steven and his peers were able to facilitate the development of each

other's ideas. Steven felt these interactions contributed to his personal and academic skill development.

I found that really helpful from the point of me saying to somebody else 'here's an idea, critique it,' and then the other point of him saying to me, 'here's my idea critique it.' And that really helped me with probably personal skills and academic skills. (II p. 2)

One of the more helpful forms of support peers provided Steven was in acting as a source of knowledge, specifically in helping him conduct research.

They've helped a lot with learning about research ... it's been very helpful to have people who knew how to work with databases and knew the Queen's library system, and knew all that kind of stuff. And they could help me along with my research skills more than anything else. (I p. 5)

Finally, peers also supported Steven in providing him with emotional support.

This support was comforting to Steven in that it was generally related to the experiences of other part-time students who shared similar experiences.

It's more of a sounding board for each other because we're all at the same point, we're all, like we're sitting there at break time, 'have you started this assignment,' 'no have you,' 'no', 'have you,' 'no,' 'okay good.' We all have the knack of this course. None of us have done anything yet, good, and it's really nice to have that ... it's nice to be able to bounce just everything about the program or about a class in particular or about assignments in the class. It's really nice to be able to bounce that off classmates. (I p. 6)

Faculty. Generally, Steven didn't see "anyone in the Faculty who I couldn't approach ... I haven't had anybody who was closed down or anything which is really nice" (I p. 2). However, having a shared interest with professors was important for Steven in maintaining contact with them.

[Course instructor] taught me my [course] this summer and, I've actually kept contact with her, and when I find something interesting about math, I send it on to her sort of thing just because we have the same sort of interests. (II p. 1)

Steven's course instructors normally provided him with appraisal in the form of feedback: "I found a lot of avenues for research through my profs using them to point out

different things. Assignment comments really helped, I really like to have comments" (II p. 1). Steven described his relationship with one professor in particular, who was also his program advisor.

We just hit it off and I talked to him last year quite a few times about educational things and then, it's just been natural sort of. I'm comfortable talking to him and he seems to be comfortable with me and he's very open. He's a very open person so it's no problem to say what I think. (I p. 2)

Steven's program advisor not only provided him with information support in helping him plan his program, but was also a good source of knowledge in providing him with resources.

He has helped me along obviously with the planning of my Master's, but he also is always there to point to a direction for me. It's nice that we're both math. I ask him if he can point or actually grab a book you go in and say do you have a book on, and he'll say 'of course I do, right here,' he just grabs it off the shelf. But he has helped a lot as a learner with, as a resource more than anything else. (II p. 2)

Steven's program advisor also provided emotional support in the form of understanding, specifically, in understanding the multiple roles for which Steven was responsible outside of the program.

I just handed in my assignment last week that was due three weeks ago sort of thing, and [professor] understands. He's, 'like new parent again, you have a busy household, your wife's studying for her MCAT's' ... and so he understands that, which is really nice. (II p. 5)

Peers Outside the Program. Steven did not openly share his pursuit of a graduate degree with his colleagues at school, with the exception of those who could share in the experience with him. For example, "my vice-principal is doing her Master's as well, here, and we talk about it all the time" (II p. 6). Generally, Steven explained that:

you don't talk about your Master's degree. There's another woman in my office, I have a small office, and she's doing course work as well. It's something you don't talk about with people who are not doing course work. They don't look down on it, but they sort of say, 'why are you doing that when you should be doing this' ... I think colleagues expect you to do only teaching, and it's sort of taboo to talk about it. (II p. 6)

While Steven viewed support from colleagues as “very minimal,” he also described school as “not a place where you look for support” (II p. 6).

Self-Directed Learning

It's hard to distinguish what profs have done for me and what I have done for myself. I did a math/computer undergrad, and I did it just to get it done. My B.Ed. I did half the classes, if that, so my drive to do it myself was very low ... my Master's courses I've actually taken it upon myself to drive myself to get interested in the course. So possibly my change of perspective or their change in teaching style has allowed me to learn better. With that, my Master's the first time I've ever read research how to read it, how to critique it. I haven't done that since high school so, and so that's really helped me learn. (II p. 1)

Although there was not one obvious dimension of self-directed learning that stood out for Steven, he appeared to value the freedom to self-manage his own learning. Being given the freedom to manage his development in the program also acted as a source of motivation for Steven.

Self-Management. Unlike his previous experiences in working toward his undergraduate and B.Ed. degrees, Steven discovered that “I'm actually enjoying what I'm doing” (II p. 1). Part of the reason he enjoyed his experiences in the M. Ed. program was because it involved choosing his own focus: “this is what I want to go talk about and I'll go talk about it. It's really nice” (I p. 1).

In self-managing his growth, Steven often spoke of learning being a matter of attitude and the ability to apply his strengths to a learning situation.

I think once you get to your Master's your learning, or your style of learning has been set, and so it's a matter of how you apply your strengths and your weaknesses to meet the needs of the course, or meet the needs of what you want. I don't think I learn a lot differently. My style of learning is different now than it was my first year. It's a matter of attitude. It's a matter of how you apply your strengths to it I think. (II p. 3)

In describing himself as an auditory learner (I p. 4), Steven valued the discussion-based nature of the classes: "I like that way of learning" (I p. 5). The structure of courses and assignments by professors also gave Steven a forum whereby he could apply his strengths and his interests.

Obviously assignments, obviously how you take the course and apply it to your own personal situation. The curriculum is very loose, as I've seen, and the courses are usually tailored towards the class' strengths and the class' abilities, which is very interesting. I like that idea, but the ability to say, okay here's an open-ended assignment, do it on whatever, and apply it to something that you're interested in, in your field, allows you to change your learning style. (II p. 2)

The structure of assignments not only contributed to Steven's professional development in an academic way, but in a practical way as well.

[Course A], very applicable, and it was designed to be applicable to the classroom, you made rubrics. You learned how to make assignments to go with them. We talked all about the new Grade 9 math curriculum, perfect that's what I'm teaching this year, one of the courses I'm teaching. The [course B] issues, theoretical I think affects the way you teach, opens your mind up to different aspects of your classroom ... that's been really helpful as well. The ability to reflect, that sort of comes from the theoretical. Sort of the ability to send information back and forth from a different perspective. [Course C] class, I'm not teaching computers this semester. It hasn't really had any effect on my math teaching, but the assignments, or the theoretical framework behind the assignments that I've done, have really helped my teaching. Again that's because of their applicability to my own work. (II p. 7)

Motivation. For Steven, instructional strategies adopted by course instructors facilitated his learning. Steven was motivated when he could apply his interests to class assignments.

I think a lot of it helps that being your Master's you apply your assignments to what you're interested in, as opposed to what the course is interested in. And so where you're learning the information and the theoretical stuff, all your practical stuff is on something you want to be learning about, so it helps that way. (II p. 1)

Part of the difficulty Steven experienced in trying to understanding how he had developed as a learner was in trying to understand the contributions of the Master's program versus his increasing teaching experience on his learning.

Last year as a first year teacher, before I was in the program, I did my job, I did it with enthusiasm and now, after having taken Master's courses, I do my job, I do it with enthusiasm but I also look for that next step down, their understanding. Do they get the concept? Is there another way I could approach this concept? Now is that because I'm a Master's student, or is that because I'm a second year teacher? I don't know. My Master's work has allowed me to introduce a lot of stuff to my classroom, because I'm forcing myself to do assignments on stuff that will work in the classroom ... Again is that because I'm a Master's student that I'm forcing myself to learn this or is it because I'm a second year teacher and I wanted to learn it? On top of that, I see how my 19 month old daughter is learning, and I see how she has the small steps towards a concept and then I try to apply that to the classroom ... So pull in whether that's Master's, pull in what's second year teacher, pull in what's father. I think it's impossible, but all the above sort of make me grow in my job and my ability to do a good job in the classroom. (II p. 3)

Self-Monitoring, Self-Management, Motivation, and the Social Milieu

Steven generally feels that he is growing as a learner and as a teacher, but he seems unable to pinpoint the source of his growth as a self-directed learner, either within his remarks on social support or on self-directed learning. He does, however, offer glimpses of the connection between the two concepts. First, Steven monitored his growth by seeking appraisals of his work from his family, peers, and course instructors. Seeking critique of his work "helped point out flaws in my own topic, my own type of research." Second, the flexibility in course structure provided Steven a forum whereby he could apply his strengths and interests. Part of the reason Steven was enjoying his experiences in the program was because he was given the freedom to pursue his own interests: "this is what I want to go talk about and I'll go talk about it."

Heather

Social Support

I may have a different perspective on this being part-time ... but I found generally students are extremely supportive. And I think that the heart of that comes back to everyone's doing their own thing. It's self-directed. Everyone's here for themselves. I'm here to improve myself. I'm not in a competition with anyone and I think most people feel that way. Very different from undergraduate work, or probably even

other disciplines, although I can't really speak for those. So I think it's a supportive kind of group or cadre. (G p. 3)

In comparing her undergraduate experience with her current graduate experience, Heather described the supportive nature of the program. Whereas during her undergraduate experience, she perceived a competitive environment, while pursuing her graduate degree, she noticed the support she received from the individuals within the program. When asked upon whom she relied the most for support in the program, Heather first described the support she received from her peers in the program. Then, she identified faculty members, her family, and herself as important sources of support. Generally, she did not seek support from her peers outside of the program.

Peers In the Program. Heather described "feeling a camaraderie" (I p. 1) with her peers in the program. She described her peers as "very friendly and approachable and willing to help" (I p. 1). Although she identified other students in the program as her main source of support, one peer was an especially important source of social support for Heather. She not only provided Heather with company on their weekly travels from their home town to classes in Kingston, but also acted as a source of appraisal and information support in exchanging ideas, perspectives, and interpretations of assigned readings or class presentations.

There's one girl in particular who, we drive together from our town to Kingston so that's good, especially good because then, not only do we share the driving, but we discuss what we're doing and what we're working on and stuff that we're doing in the course which is good, very, very, good ... it may be specific course things like did you get, did you understand what he was saying when he said this, and then she'll give me her interpretation, and then I'll give her my perspective or if we had to do a reading, we will discuss the reading on the way down. On the way home we'll, again, debrief about what happened in the class that night. When we were preparing book reviews or things, we'd kind of summarize our book reviews for each other, so that's how it's helpful. (I pp. 3-4)

In addition to the one peer who travelled with Heather, other peers in the program also provided her with appraisal and emotional support. Peers provided appraisal support in the form of feedback. For Heather, this feedback often came as a result of class presentations of papers, or in response to her questions or concerns.

If you don't understand a question or an assignment, or you have some concerns, you can go to another student and talk to them. Generally that is what I found and they'll give you feedback. They'll give you answers or help. We've also done in a couple of courses a lot of, you know presenting to your peers a paper that you're working on, present it to your peers to get feedback. And at first I thought, I don't know if that's going to be very useful but it turned out, so far, that it's been really good. That I got good constructive, positive criticism or feedback about my work. (I p. 2)

Heather's peers provided her with emotional support through the sharing of experiences. Among the peers in the program who provided her with support were those students who were working part-time toward their degrees as well as teaching full-time.

In the courses I've been in a lot of the people are part-time and working as well, so they kind of understand my perspective and we talk about the same kinds of things, you know, 'do you have this done,' 'no, I didn't get it done, I need an extension,' 'well, we'll both ask for an extension' and that kind of thing. (I p. 2)

Heather's peers also provided her with emotional support in sharing a common goal.

This common goal -- caring about education -- created a sense of community.

One of the things that impressed me about the people that I've met, they're all very nice people. They're here because they care about education, so I think that's the thing that kind of draws us together ... they care about what happens in schools; that common ground helps. (I p. 3)

This perception of a common goal also negated any sentiments of competition among Heather and her peers. An understanding that all individuals were in the program to experience their own growth and development created an environment where peers could learn from each other by drawing on each other's experiences. "There isn't so much competition for grades or who's going to outdo each other. I think a lot of people are driven by personal growth. They want to learn. They want to become better. They're

here to learn" (I p. 3).

As opposed to a competitive environment, Heather enjoyed the supportive environment where peers acted as sources of information in addressing each other's questions and concerns.

Nobody is competitive. When you did your undergraduate there was a lot of competition, who's going to get the best marks and that kind of thing. Here, there, at least from my experience, there's none of that. If you don't understand a question or an assignment or you have some concerns, you can go to another student and talk to them. (I p. 2)

Faculty. Although Heather primarily relied on the support of her peers in the program, she also understood the importance of drawing on the knowledge of faculty members.

I think well, it's the people at the faculty. It's the professors and the people here who have this, kind of extra expert knowledge. And I'm going to rely on them when I need to ask questions and I need support. (I p. 4)

Heather appreciated faculty members' helpfulness and availability. "The professors are amazing, they'll bend over backwards to help you. They're always available. I mean you e-mail them and they e-mail you right back. So very, very supportive" (I p. 1).

Heather perceived faculty members as "tremendously supportive," as helpful, and willing to "foster and nurture" the growth of all students (G p. 1). For Heather, faculty members, particularly her course instructors, were "great role models" (II p. 1). She perceived faculty as "supportive [and] willing to do anything they can do to help you" (II p. 1). She described them as "available and friendly" (I p. 2). Heather held her course instructors in great esteem. They were "articulate, insightful, and so tremendously well read that, that can only be a help and inspiration" (G p. 1).

As a part-time student, Heather had most of her faculty contact with her course instructors who were "very supportive in guiding me and giving me advice" (II p. 1).

Heather's course instructors provided her with information and emotional support. The information support came from course instructors acting as a resource, or as providers of direction and advice.

In all three of the courses that I've taken, they've [professors] been very supportive. For example, you have the set assignments that you have to complete so I'm new to all this so I went in and talked to [professor]. Well, we sat down in her office and first talked about personal things, and, you know, how things are going generally in the program and then she directed me, 'well this is probably how you want to tackle this', 'what's your specific interest.' 'Well, these are some good resources to go to,' for example. So that's a good start on an assignment and that's probably the main source of stress. (I p. 2)

Heather's course instructors gave her emotional support in two ways: through easing sentiments of anxiety and by providing her with encouragement. In easing her sentiments of anxiety, Heather's course instructors demonstrated their confidence in her, and, in doing so, made her feel comfortable.

They [professors] make you feel at ease and comfortable and they have confidence in you. I guess, 'Well, you got into the program so you must have something going for you.' So anyway, they put you at ease and that's a great support right there. (I p. 6)

Heather's course instructors also provided emotional support by encouraging and motivating her to complete assignments. In remaining in contact with one of her course instructors, Heather was able to receive support throughout the difficulties she experienced while completing a course assignment.

I've had so much trouble finishing my essay. And we e-mail back and forth, and just through that, I mean it seems trivial and almost inconsequential, but that's your one way of communicating with people and using it right. So it's very important leaving room for lots of encouragement and kind words, to try and motivate me to do the work. (II p. 1)

Although Heather primarily relied on her course instructors for support because of her frequent interactions with them, she also perceived her program advisor as an individual whom she would be comfortable contacting, and who would be available to provide her with support if needed. Overall, she described her program advisor as

“wonderful” (I p. 5).

He's wonderful. When I first came, which was July of '99, I went to see him and he was fabulous, you know. We sat down and we talked about all kinds of things. So, but I haven't taken a course with him yet. He's just my advisor so far. But I guess if I really needed advising, I'd go to him, but I also feel comfortable going to [course instructor A] or [course instructor B]. (I p. 5)

Family. Beyond describing her family as extremely important, Heather viewed her family as a great source of strength. Heather's family provided her with two forms of social support: emotional and appraisal. Her family offered emotional support in two ways: through understanding and in showing interest in her course work. In acknowledging the extra responsibilities Heather incurred while pursuing her M.Ed. degree, her family understood and adapted to the reality that the extra pressure would, at times, affect her mood. “My family, like my brother, my mom and dad, are very supportive. They know that I've got this extra stuff on so they try to help me or, you know, they're pretty understanding when I'm crabby” (I p. 1).

In showing an interest in her course work through helping her monitor her progress and in participating in discussions with her, Heather's parents validated her decision to pursue graduate work.

Well first of all they show interest in what I'm doing. They think it's valuable that I'm doing it. They'll keep reminding me or asking me, 'you have assignments, why aren't you doing them' or 'what did you do this week.' And actually, it sounds kind of weird, I mean being 30 years old, but ... I'll take the books over to my parents' place that I'm reading, I'll show my mom and dad, you know, 'this is what we're doing' and I'll talk about it, and some of the issues that we've raised. So we'll have little discussions about stuff that went on in school, even though I'm an adult, you know, still like when I was in school as a little kid. So that, I guess, validates it. They take it seriously too, so for me that's important. For some people it wouldn't be. They wouldn't even talk to Mom and Dad about it but I do and for me that's, that's a source of strength. (I p. 2)

Heather's family, particularly her parents, also provided her with appraisal support in the form of feedback, which acted as a motivator for her.

I'm almost done my essay for [course instructor]. They both wanted to read it. They both read it and gave me some feedback. So they're very, very supportive, and we even discuss the ideas ... we had some interesting conversations back and forth ... they really get involved, they like to know what's going on and want to be a part of it. Very excited that I'm doing this. I mean it's very important and valuable when you share the ideas they say 'that's a pretty good essay.' 'You've got some really good ideas.' 'It's well written,' you know. Their opinion matters to me so of course it feels good when they say that. So I'd say, for me personally, it's [support of family] an important motivator. (II p. 3)

Peers Outside the Program. In contrast to her peers in the program, Heather did not feel she could share her experiences of the Master's program with her colleagues for fear they would not be supportive. In fact, to protect herself, and to avoid questions and speculation that she was pursuing an M.Ed. degree for administrative purposes, Heather had not told many people with whom she worked about her academic endeavours (I p. 3). Because of these sentiments, Heather instead relied primarily on support from her peers in the program.

I think it's [support] only here with these graduate students in education because I don't think you find the same kind of, and this is a bit cynical, even in your school that same support. And that's why I was saying that I didn't share my plans with my colleagues. I don't tell them that I'm doing graduate work, because there isn't the support in the school. And that's just my view of it. But I don't think it's as supportive among non-graduate students, let's say, for graduate students who go back to their high schools because you're perceived as somebody who either wants to move ahead, or you think you know everything or whatever. (G p. 5)

Not only did Heather fear that colleagues would perceive her efforts as "threatening," and that she was "somehow questioning their professionalism " (G p. 5), but she was also concerned of the opinions her colleagues would hold of her had she discussed her plans with them. She feared her colleagues would interpret her efforts as: "she thinks she's better than everyone else, or she's climbing the ladder" (II p. 1). Although she did not share her experiences with her colleagues at work primarily out of fear of their opinions, Heather also sensed that her colleagues would not understand her desire to improve herself as a teacher, but misinterpret her efforts as self-serving.

While many of her colleagues were unaware she was pursuing graduate work, Heather described two colleagues, her principal and former department head, as being very supportive. Despite having little contact with her principal, Heather appreciated her principal's initial efforts in helping her into the program.

My principal is way too busy, way, way too busy ... really she has no time. To see her you have to make an appointment way in advance. It's very difficult. So although I'm sure she would be supportive, if she were able to, because she's tremendous, she would be, and she was very supportive because she got me into the program by writing me a great letter of reference and letting me go on certain days when I needed to come up here. So she helped initially, but now she doesn't have a lot of time. (II p. 2)

In spite of having little time to share her experiences with her principal, Heather took advantage of opportunities to share her experiences with her former department head who provided her with appraisal and emotional support. He was able to furnish Heather with emotional support in that he could relate to, and sympathize, with the experiences Heather was encountering. "He did his Master's at U of T, OISE, so he's supportive because he's been there. He knows about driving, and about trying to balance everything, and trying to get everything done" (I p. 3).

Because of his previous experiences, Heather's former department head was also able to provide her with appraisal support in the form of feedback. Heather described this feedback as distinct from the feedback she received from her parents in that she was sharing this information at an academic level with someone from her profession whom she respected.

The extent of his support is 'how's it going, what courses are you taking.' We'll talk stuff over, if I've read something that doesn't really make sense I'll run it by him, see what he thinks, because he's kind of been through this stuff before. And I mean we kind of discuss things in a different way than I could discuss it with my parents say, because you're discussing it with another professional so we do it from a slightly different perspective. And he's interested and thinks it's a good idea and encourages me as well, so he's supportive ... I look up to him as well, very smart guy, very good at what he does, professional, very intelligent, so it feels good to have that support. (II p. 2)

Finally, Heather sought and expected little support from her peers who were neither from the program or from work.

They know that I'm doing it and we share what we're doing. But it's hard to get that same, you know, they really don't know a lot about the program and I don't want to go on and on about it, so I'd have to say, that no I don't discuss it a lot with them. They know and they'll ask, oh, are you still driving to Kingston, you know, but besides that, not a whole lot, no. (I p. 3)

'Myself'. Heather also identified herself as an individual who supported her own growth. Heather primarily supported herself in a physical and emotional manner: "I support myself. I make sure that I take care of myself, that I'm healthy, that I'm balanced, that I leave time for things that are important to me" (I p. 4).

Self-Directed Learning

It's highly personalized. It's not like the undergraduate work where you're jumping through hoops, do this, do this, do this; it's what is of interest to you, and self-directed because the people here show you the way, or guide you. It's up to you to actually get the job done, and you get out of it what you put into it. (G p. 2)

In describing the M.Ed. program as self-directed, Heather emphasized the importance of taking ownership and personal responsibility for her own learning. However, she acknowledged the role other individuals played in guiding her development. Within Heather's descriptions of herself as a self-directed learner, her growth in the program, and how faculty and peers facilitated her development as a self-directed learner, Heather's abilities and desires to embrace self-management were evident. Not only did Heather self-manage her development academically, but personally as well. In making sacrifices to pursue her M.Ed. degree, Heather displayed personal self-management. She demonstrated her abilities to academically manage her growth by taking ownership for her own learning as facilitated by her instructors. In doing so, she described a sense

of empowerment.

Personal Self-Management. Heather's desire and ambition to pursue her degree encouraged her to make great efforts toward achieving her goal. These efforts included many sacrifices.

I need to do this and I want to do this. you make time and other sacrifices because it's worth it, I really need to do it. So I have sacrificed. They're well worth it. Well worth it. Well worth the money, the time, the driving, the work. I mean, it hasn't been tremendously hard work but at times it's, at times it's rigorous, not constantly, but I think something like this that's worth having is worth working for and fighting for. (II p. 4)

In self-managing her time and money, Heather accommodated her life to include the new demands associated with pursuing a graduate degree.

The first great length was driving from [place] every week. It's kind of a big thing in my life to drive 2 ½ hours one way and 2 ½ hours back. I did split it, of course with my friend but, that was one thing. And secondly, in making time in, not such a busy schedule, but a schedule that's full of other things, you know, my job, my family, extracurricular responsibilities, making time to go to classes, time for reading and research and all those things. Also, kind of budgeting for it because it is so expensive. And I guess ultimately making that decision, that this is something very important to me. It's worthwhile, it's valuable, and I want to pursue it, and make everything else fit into place. (II p. 4)

Two individuals supported Heather in this respect; her friend who drove down with her to Kingston for classes, and her principal who "let her go on certain days" (II p. 2) when she needed to get to Kingston.

Academic Self-Management. Heather felt a sense of empowerment in being able to direct her own learning within the program, in developing new skills, and in experiencing personal growth.

I feel that I've grown personally. Part of it is empowerment through developing new skills for example, better research skills that, that area of personal growth. Better, I think vocabulary, diction, I can articulate my ideas better. Because it's something that I'm constantly practising. Like reading and writing and talking about things so

that's another area. And then kind of philosophically, like my ideas of what it is to be a teacher. I've reflected a lot more on things, why am I doing this, how could I improve it or, you know, where did the way we do things come from. Things that I've never really thought about before so. And that's all that this is about is personal growth. (II pp. 2 - 3)

In describing herself and the program as largely self-directed, Heather highlighted how the structure of the program facilitated her freedom to make choices and maintain a sense of ownership over her development.

I would say that I am a self-directed learner because this program is largely, that's what it's dependent on. That you can govern yourself. That you've got the discipline and that skills and everything together to really do much of it on your own. I think there's a lot of support certainly, role models and examples set for you but, ultimately the work, the researching and the reading, the writing, the thinking, the problem-solving, right, if something doesn't make sense, you kind of have to tease apart a problem yourself. But you know you feel a sense of accomplishment once you've solved this problem and you've made sense of it and then that raises more questions. I think that's a big part of a self-directed learner. Someone who takes ownership, and that's facilitated here also by, you know, you get to choose what you're interested in and even you can choose the different concentration, or all those different things. And then within that, you can still choose further, specific areas that you're interested in, so it's facilitated but it's up to me to make my way, and find what I want to do, and then to do it. (II pp. 3 - 4)

For Heather, a large part of this development was facilitated by professors who, not only provided materials such as resources, but also adopted a flexible approach and gave students opportunities to participate in the design, implementation, and evaluation of course assignments.

In my [course], I'm looking at [her chosen topic]. So, I am in control of what I'm learning about. Things I'm not in control of are maybe how it's done, but even that is up for negotiation. Most professors will say if you want to do a project, like [course instructor A] has said, 'if you want to do a project, go out and do the project.' You can do a project. You can structure it however you want. If you want to do a paper, do a paper; marks, we are going to self-assess and she will assess. So even that is partly under my control. It's not, I don't think, rigid and prescriptive and structured here. There's always a lot of negotiating and, so I feel that very, very much of this is in my control, under my control. Even when there are things, okay, you shall do a book review, [course instructor B] brings in, no joke, two big trolleys of books, well choose something from here or you can go and still choose something you want, so there's even control there. I think at every step there are choices, so you have control. (G p. 8)

Heather described how she saw faculty members and her peers contributing to her development as a learner facilitated by the discussion-based nature of classes. For Heather, "learning is supported by peers ... largely through discussions; talking about the ideas of the people in the course" (G p. 4). Through classroom discussions with her peers, Heather hoped she was "becoming a better thinker and more articulate and thoughtful" in how she expressed her views and opinions (I p. 7). She appreciated these discussions largely because they had facilitated her growth in the program. "It's through a lot of this kind of pointed intense discussion where you really have to think on your feet and be articulate, and justify your position and really give your rationale, that's probably helped me develop" (I p. 7). Heather valued these discussions and identified them as being specific to the environment created in the program. She felt these discussions were missing in her interactions with her colleagues at school.

I don't think that you can get that anywhere else, well, no, but not easily, certainly not at school. Not at school. At school it tends to be, you know, just general banter and a lot of, in this climate, negativity, you know, this kid and that kid, 'oh we're working too hard, and I'm fed up and I have an on call.' Whereas here, you get to talk about ideas. (I p. 7)

Faculty members helped Heather develop as a learner by not only being supportive and providing her with "resources and opportunities" (I p. 7), but also in their interactions with her that motivated her to improve herself.

There's a lot of polishing up to do and a lot of learning. I'm pretty limited. When you come in contact with these really very well educated, very, I mean brilliant people like a lot of professors that I've had. It's good because it's good to surround yourself with people you look up to, to set your expectations higher, that maybe that I can achieve this too, or maybe, I'm not going to be that. I don't want to be a professor but certainly be more thoughtful, articulate, insightful, well read, well rounded kind of a person just to improve myself. So if anything I've found out about myself, there's a lot to improve but I'm on the road to improvement, and I've already seen changes that I'm happy about. (II p. 3)

In pursuing a graduate degree in education, Heather experienced personal growth in seeking and finding information and resources, with the help of others, that

she would not have originally sought on her own.

We're in an information age and if I hadn't been forced to do these things ... to really pound the Internet and get out there and search and search and dig and do different things, you know, I never would have done it and I wouldn't have those skills, and today those are important skills. So, I think that's an important part of it, that I've done it for me. Plus a lot of pondering and reflecting on things that I never would have thought about ... I would definitely keep reading them [professional journals] and keep getting them and pursue it because it's valuable and it's very important. (G pp. 5 - 6)

Beyond the interactions with faculty and peers in courses that facilitated Heather's personal growth, course content also encouraged Heather to self-monitor her practice as a teacher. "I think more deeply about what I do and how I do it, and why I did it that way" (G p. 8). Heather's desire to improve herself as a teacher, to take advantage of the opportunity to grow professionally, and to commit to academics, initially motivated her to pursue a graduate degree in education. In realizing that she did not want to stagnate in her growth as a professional (self-monitoring), Heather was motivated to grow to become a better teacher.

It's very important for me because, again, I guess what I'm afraid of is like seeing in schools teachers who, and this is still admirable, who can go in and teach for 25 years in the same schools, in the same rooms and maybe they've developed new things, and they've reflected on how they taught, but when you keep it in too little an area it's, I think it's still stifled. So, I thought I don't want to be a teacher who teaches for 25 years in the same school, in the same room, doing the same kinds of things. I want to kind of push myself and stretch, have a different perspective and learn as much as I can. (I p. 3)

Although Heather acknowledged the importance of how faculty members and her peers in the program helped her to become a better learner, she also described how she was ultimately responsible for managing her own learning experiences.

By this stage I think a lot of, you also have to, I also have to take a lot of responsibility for me, for my preferences as well, and I think maybe that's assumed. That you're coming in and you know what your needs are and the onus is on me to make sure that they're met and there's support there, you know. There's help from all over, to help you do that but, the person who drives the process has to be me, and the opportunities and the resources are available, but, I'm the one, I think, that has to do it. (I p. 7)

Self-Management, Self-Monitoring, Motivation, and the Social Milieu

Whether she spoke of social support or self-directed learning, Heather had a central role in managing and being responsible for her own learning. As such, throughout her interview responses, an indirect relationship between social support and self-directed learning was established. For example, when Heather spoke of self-directed learning, she generally spoke of the flexibility of the program structure in allowing her to manage her own learning experiences: "it's up to me to make my way, and find what I want to do, and then do it." Within this environment, faculty acted as role models and provided examples. Seeing faculty as "articulate, insightful, and so tremendously well read" augmented Heather's desire to improve herself. In addition, one of Heather's self-management strategies was to seek support during those times when she needed assistance. Heather generally sought this support from her course instructors and former department head.

Heather only directly linked social support and self-directed learning when she spoke of the social support she received from her parents. By "really getting involved," Heather's parents showed an interest in her work. In taking the time to inquire after and discuss with her, her involvement in the program, Heather's parents helped her to monitor her progress and acted as "an important motivator."

Paula

Social Support

I feel supported but I think that's just because we all do this together, and it's the conversations we have either directly about school or not about school, from our peers to the professors to even the other staff in the building. I think just what everybody's doing, what they do naturally, that seems to create the support that I sense. (G p. 10)

Paula generally felt supported within the M.Ed. program. However, when asked directly about whom she drew upon most for support in the program, Paula stated that she herself was the individual foremost responsible for motivating and monitoring her own progress in the program. She also identified her family, in particular, her partner, as an important source of emotional support. Finally, peers and faculty members fulfilled various functions of social support that have helped Paula's experience in the program to be a positive one.

Myself. Paula identified herself as being the one individual from whom she drew the most support for being in the program. Paula saw herself as "the one that motivates me and that keeps doing checks to see if this is what I want to do and if I'm enjoying it" (I p. 5). When asked to describe how she motivated herself, Paula indicated that interest played a major role.

Once I found something I was really interested in, that I mean almost solved it for itself, and I think I have to keep reminding myself it's almost one of those things where the hardest is to get started. And I just keep reminding myself that once you get into something, once you get used to reading or an assignment it kind of carries the weight and I look to the future and what I've done in the past. (I p. 6)

Besides interest, having a strong sense of purpose for her involvement in the program also inspired Paula's motivation. She had: "a good sense of why I'm here and what I want to get out of it" (I p. 6).

Family. Paula selected her family, more specifically, her partner, as an important source of social support. Her partner provided her primarily with emotional support in the form of encouragement. He was "extremely supportive in letting me get away when he sees I need a break, but at the same time giving me a quiet space to work and pushing me to go and get on to it and not procrastinate" (I p. 5). Together with Paula's sister,

Paula's partner was also "good for emotional support and when I need extra time to just go and do reading they were good to encourage me to do that" (I p. 5).

In general, Paula described her family as an important source of material, specifically financial support, as well as a good social reality touchstone. Paula explained that "all through my university career my family has been very financially supportive, and has never, like if I've needed to do something or wanted to do something, they've been great all the way" (I p. 5). Her family, as individuals not involved in the program, also helped to remind her of the "larger perspective" (I p. 2). Finally, Paula described her family as generally emotionally supportive: "just knowing they [family] believe in me and what I'm doing and want me to succeed has been great" (I p. 5).

Peers In the Program. Paula recognized the different roles various individuals fulfilled in providing her with support:

I guess I go to [family and outside friends] for different things, for general support, for people who are going to say you're great no matter what. Whereas peers you can be more specific with, they can give you more direct feedback on what you're doing. (I p. 2)

While Paula sought general support from her family, she sought specific support for her involvement in the program from her peers. Paula's peers in the program supported her in four ways: through the provision of material, information, appraisal, and emotional support. Not only was receiving support from her peers important to Paula, but just meeting new peers and learning about their experiences provided her with a larger view and understanding of the field of education (I p. 2).

Paula identified her peers as helpful in providing her with resource materials, specifically journal articles, that she might find helpful in her own research.

Articles can be huge and so expensive to photocopy instead of standing and waiting for the photocopier I found that people are amazing at saying, or you're talking about something that you're working on, 'I have an article that may help you.' They are so willing to pass them around and share them and that kind of thing. I find that really helps. (I p. 4)

Peers were also a good source of knowledge for Paula. For example, when fellow students were researching similar issues as Paula, they were willing to give her old papers that they had written as a way of providing her with information on her research topic (I p. 3).

Paula relied on her peers for appraisal support in the form of feedback. She found it helpful "to just talk to them and get their feedback just to make sure that you're not lost" (I p. 3). Generally, peers' appraisal also came in the form of interest in, and suggestions for, her research; "people are interested and willing to give you suggestions and really seem to want to find out how you're doing those things as they progress" (I p. 5).

Perhaps the largest function of social support that peers in the program fulfilled was emotional support, specifically, through the sharing of experiences. For Paula, peers were important in helping "blow off steam," as well as for comparing progress or brainstorming how to tackle a problem. For Paula:

really only someone else who's going through what you're going through, even if you need to just have complaining sessions ... it really helps to talk to someone who's going through the same thing, you know, if you're feeling overwhelmed by the amount of reading it's so good to talk to someone who feels the same way ... it's important to have someone who really understands what you're going through. (I p. 2)

Faculty. Paula appreciated the efforts faculty members made to remain available to students. In providing her with their home phone numbers and leaving their doors open, faculty members remained accessible and were, therefore, perceived by Paula as being supportive (I p. 1). Faculty members primarily provided Paula with two forms of

social support – information and appraisal – although, at times, they also provided her with emotional support. Paula looked to faculty members to provide her with information in the form of guidance on how to proceed with a research topic or in choosing a course of study. She found their experiences to be an important resource.

It's mostly their experience that I look for. I don't look for shortcuts, but again it's this big overwhelming thing. I prefer a little bit of direction, and also as the research kind of starts to loom up. You know I've never done any kind of data collection, so I've started already maybe drawing on their experience and how they go about that. (I p. 3)

The most important source of social support that faculty members provided Paula was appraisal in the form of feedback. For Paula, "the support I appreciate most from professors is the feedback, like they will take the time to give you a lot of comments on papers, or go out of their way to talk to you about readings and that kind of stuff" (I p. 3).

Two faculty members who were important sources of support for Paula were her program advisor and thesis supervisor. Paula described her program advisor as "great" and "wonderful" (I p. 3), and as demonstrating emotional support in the form of encouragement.

I feel like she respects me, you know, and wants to see me succeed independently, but she seems to know the right amount of support to give and encouragement to get me going, but she never makes me feel like I'm dependent on her, but she's very good at offering support to me. (I p. 3)

Paula explained how her program advisor was an important source of information in leading her to specific resources helpful in pursuing a research topic, and in guiding her to specific courses she might find of interest. "She's given me advice about courses, she knows what I'm interested in. She's made sure that I'm choosing courses that will keep my foot in the door of the areas I want to be in" (II p. 1).

Paula described her thesis supervisor as "very encouraging," supportive in providing her "lots of positive feedback," and as "open and honest" (II p. 1). She relied

on him as an excellent source of information in, for example, taking her through data analysis techniques. Paula summarized her relationship with her thesis supervisor as “a two way supportive relationship” (I p. 4).

Peers Outside the Program. Finally, peers outside of the program, specifically friends who were teachers, acted as a social reality touchstone for Paula. They not only helped to keep her in the “larger perspective” (I p. 2), but also kept her in touch with the realities of the teaching profession and with the interests of children.

I think I assumed coming in from teaching that it would be so great because I could apply everything I know to the classroom setting and I already feel like I'm kind of losing touch with that so that's one way it's been good, just to keep in touch with what kids are interested in, not necessarily just academically, but the games and the shows and stuff that they're interested in. (I p. 5)

Self-Directed Learning

They [classes] don't necessarily set out a curriculum of stuff that you have to learn and you're going to be tested on it at the end that kind of thing. Really they're more to give you little pushes every week about new things that you might not have considered, you know, or paths that you might never have considered, that would be important to you or can be. So that is a big part of the way we learn here. (G p. 9)

In describing the structure of the program and the way students learn within the program, Paula recognized the value of classes in providing direction and expanding students' understanding of issues raised. Within this structure, Paula appeared to self-monitor her development in two ways: by using her peers as a gauge to monitor her own progress, and by setting standards for herself to consciously monitor her own growth. Encompassed within the discussion of Paula's abilities to self-monitor her progress was how this dimension also influenced her motivation and her ability to self-manage her own growth.

Using Peers as a Gauge to Monitor Own Progress. Throughout our discussions, Paula's use of her peers as a gauge against which to monitor her own progress in the program emerged. At times, comparing her own progress to the progress of others acted as a source of motivation.

I know that everybody here, on average, does very well and that's a good way, that's a good push, because everybody seems very motivated and wanting to do well, and seeing what other people produce gives you ideas of where you should be at. And that's one way, everybody pushes each other in a positive way to do well. (I pp. 7-8)

In discussing how she tackled problems and assignments, Paula found seeking feedback from peers in the program helpful in monitoring her own progress. "It makes me feel like I'm still doing okay ... that you're not, I wouldn't consider myself a competitive person. I'm just as happy to see the next person succeed but it's nice to know that you're somewhere with everybody" (I p. 3). Comparing her own progress against the progress of others comforted Paula in allowing her to determine if she was still on track and working through the program in a fashion similar to her classmates.

This comparison also occasionally created a sense of anxiety and made Paula feel that she was falling behind. "Everybody's going through a similar process in one way or another and sometimes it's intimidating if you feel like you're starting to drag behind" (G p. 4). However, what brought comfort to Paula was the realization that "in most cases, everybody's hit the same stumbling blocks" (G p. 4).

Setting Standards to Consciously Monitor Growth. In describing herself as a learner, specifically herself as a self-directed learner and how she demonstrated personal responsibility for her own learning, Paula recognized the need for her growth to continue in certain areas. For example, Paula believed she had to grow "in setting a more definite course for myself as far as work goes" (II p. 4), meaning, in this case,

leaving the majority of large assignments to the last minute. Paula visualized this need increasing in the coming year when she would be working independently on her thesis.

For Paula, an important part of taking responsibility for her own learning was setting standards for herself and monitoring whether or not she was achieving those standards. "I think part of [taking personal responsibility for own learning] is setting standards for yourself and I know what I can live with as far as a product at the end, so I'm taking responsibility for meeting that" (II p. 5).

Monitoring her own progress, at times, led Paula to feel that she was not meeting others' expectations, particularly those of faculty members.

Do you ever feel you're a fake sometimes, not a fake, but, I don't know, like other people can have the impression that you know what you're doing, and that you're here, 'oh you must be so smart' and you know, even professors who think you've got it under control. And sometimes I just get into this, like 'oh my God they're going to find out that I don't know what I'm doing, that I'm not as smart as they think I am.' And that can kind of get me down. (II pp. 2-3)

Paula's fear of her inability to meet the expectations of faculty members seemed to affect her level of motivation. Although her thoughts of not meeting faculty members' expectations "makes me feel like shutting down" (II pp. 2-3), these thoughts also sparked motivation.

I talked a bit earlier about how sometimes I feel like I'm not going to be able to meet the expectations of the faculty that, you know, invest their time and their interests in what I'm doing. But at the same time, that gives me the push that I've needed. You know, they believe that I can do this and maybe I'm not there yet, but it's given me that push to get there. (II p. 4)

Although Paula spoke of her capabilities and desires for setting her own standards and tracking her own growth, on occasion, if given the choice, she preferred to have more direction from faculty.

One of the hard things for me to get over this year is sometimes I still cling to that. I just want to be told some things, and sometimes I feel like I want to go into a class and not always construct my own ideas about things. Sometimes I feel impatient because there is so much expertise here. You know, instead of having to go through

agonizing every process and figuring it out for yourself, I just want the people who are experts to say, 'oh I've already learned this and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah,' you know. But slowly I'm realizing that, like that's not the point and there never is one authority on anything. (II p. 4)

In acknowledging her desire to have more direction provided by faculty, or in recognizing her need to, from time to time, have more direction provided, Paula demonstrated her abilities to self-manage her own learning.

I felt like I was doing so much reading and a little bit of writing and got the pilot study going. But I didn't know if it was the right thing to be doing, and, like there's so much out there to read and to get into. And I didn't know if it was what I needed. And if we had all the time in the world, then sure it doesn't matter, you know, get into whatever you want. But I started feeling a little panicky like I just needed, I know as a graduate program you have to direct your own learning and make your own decisions, but sometimes you just need someone to say, 'go in this direction', or you know, 'you're on the right track here.' (II p. 3)

Self-monitoring her progress in the program encouraged Paula to take initiative for self-managing her own learning, thereby allowing her to meet the standards she had set for herself. For example, realizing that she needed more direction in her efforts toward writing her thesis proposal prompted her to organize a meeting with her thesis committee members. This meeting, it appears, also helped Paula refocus during a time when her level of motivation was lagging.

I had my first official thesis committee meeting today and that really helped just to hear people say 'we're questioning what you're doing all the time but, it's because we think you've got something good here, and keep going, and you're on the right track.' I'm so glad that I have that because it's really helped me to refocus where I was going. I was thinking like, I knew I needed to do stuff but I wasn't sure what. And I just needed to hear, 'well you're on the right track with this.' 'You haven't looked at this.' 'This is the next step to go with.' (II p. 3)

Self-Monitoring, Self-Management, Motivation, and the Social Milieu

The two major themes of social support and self-directed learning overlapped in Paula's interview responses. When she spoke of social support, she gave evidence of self-directed learning. For example, in identifying herself as the individual foremost

responsible for supporting her development in the program, she described herself as "the one that motivates me and that keeps doing checks to see if this is what I want to do." In seeking and receiving "more direct feedback" from her peers, Paula's peers acted as a social comparison against which she was able to measure her own progress in the program "just to make sure that you're not lost."

Similarly, when Paula described her self-directed learning, she mentioned the social support provided by peers and faculty members. In sharing her experiences with her peers, Paula was able to assess her own progress in the program: "seeing what other people produce gives you ideas of where you should be at." Although faculty members provided a structure within which Paula could be self-directed, the support they provided was either indirectly related to self-directed learning or not responsive to Paula's needs. In some ways, Paula appeared to perceive a lack of support from faculty. Paula, at times, "just want[ed] to be told some things." For Paula to be more self-directed, she requested more direction from faculty: "sometimes I feel like I want to go into a class and not always construct my own ideas about things."

Sabrina

Social Support

I find support in understanding, and I find understanding in the people who are in a similar position. And I guess we have different ways of finding support. There're maybe people who get support from somebody who is totally removed from the situation and, who then, who makes everything better. But I don't think that's where I find support as much. I think I find it from people who are feeling the same thing. (I p. 6)

Sabrina generally found support in understanding; those who could support her were those individuals with whom she was sharing an experience. As such, Sabrina's primary source of social support was received from her peers. Sabrina felt a sense of community

within the program and suggested this feeling was due to the nature of education and the role of educators.

It just seems to me that's what a community is about. And it seems to me that's what educators are about and how can we be studying at a Faculty of Education and not understand the need to support one another, you know. And I think we do. (I p. 5)

Beyond the support she received from her peers in the program, faculty members, family, and peers outside of the program fulfilled various functions of support.

In addition, Sabrina described the reciprocal nature of support, in particular, with her peers and family. In recognizing that these individuals provided her with valuable support, Sabrina was also aware of the support she accorded to them. Sabrina demonstrated an understanding of the importance of seeking support from a variety of individuals to address specific needs, specifically, with reference to the support she sought from faculty members.

I don't think in absolutes or superlatives. I mean I can think of three people I guess or more, who I probably draw on mostly, and to varying degrees at varying times. And that would probably shift and change. (II pp. 5 - 6)

Peers In the Program. Sabrina had a friend who was in her second year of the program. This friend provided a realistic view of what Sabrina could expect when she entered the program and acted as a source of information in providing Sabrina with an understanding of what a Master's program comprised. "Having a friend in the second year of the program, I had some sense as to how the first year, the kinds of things that a Master's program is about, that I don't think I would have had otherwise" (I p. 1).

Thus, before beginning, Sabrina had formed realistic expectations of the program, and also of the individuals who would eventually play a large role in her development.

As I said knowing someone in the second year there was a ton of support there in that I really understood where things were coming from and the process that things

would follow. So I didn't go into it as blind as I might have otherwise. And so that was a big one and then I also, I think that also helped me to understand the role people play here. So that I didn't have expectations. I don't think I did have expectations beyond which could be met realistically and therefore I knew who to go to for what. I guess what I'm saying is I knew what I could expect from an academic supervisor, versus a thesis supervisor which I'm not at that stage yet but, versus professors in my class. But I think if I had not known that the supervisor was not necessarily somebody who carried on through your whole term here, I would have found that tougher because I would have expected more from that person than I think is realistic. (I p. 2)

Generally, Sabrina described her peers in the program as supportive. She provided several examples of how other peers provided her support in the forms of appraisal, material, and emotional support. One means of appraisal support came in the form of feedback through peer editing.

I've just found people to be very supportive. I mean, after we finish this [interview], I'm going to meet with someone and we're reading over each other's papers ... it's great to have someone else go through it with a critical eye and see if the logic flows. And I've just found there to be a lot of support in that sense. (I p. 3)

According to Sabrina, peers were also an excellent source of material support in that they provided each other with resources.

I came across an article in the paper that I knew would pertain to somebody's work, and so I clipped it and I got there and someone else had clipped it for that person too. And within two days it was, there was this whole chain where somebody gave me the name of a person to contact for my area of interest. Meanwhile I had given her the name of somebody to contact for her area of interest and this article and I thought that just seemed to me, given that we're in a Faculty of Education, which should be about the support of one another, it was really great to see that happening. (I p. 3)

Sabrina's peers provided her with a tremendous amount of emotional support. In being able to share the same experiences, Sabrina described the ability of her peers to empathize with her.

I think with peers versus faculty, you're on the same level and there's, I think it's easier to get support generally from people who are going in the trenches with you, in that you are all in the same position. And as you said, the give and take makes it easier to take support. When you know you can give it back. So I think that's, and there's an empathy, because we've all got the same papers due, or not the same paper, but we've all got work to do. So I think that just makes it natural for finding the

support there. (I p. 5)

In describing the many examples of how she perceived her peers as supportive, Sabrina pondered the nature of the teaching profession, and how it contributed to the supportive atmosphere she perceived amongst her peers.

I've just seen that [support] in so many ways and I don't know if that it's because we come from a profession, whether it's, you know, nursing or teaching or other backgrounds people have. We come from professions where we're about supporting one another. And I don't think it's something you can just turn off and so, I can't, I mean socially as well, you know, we've done things. And with my peers, I can't think of times when people haven't been supportive. (I p. 4)

Faculty. Although she drew most of her support from her peers in the program, Sabrina also spoke of relying on support from faculty members. Sabrina recognized that, while faculty members were there to support her growth, she was the one person ultimately responsible for her own growth.

Professors I have specifically ended up taking courses from, and getting to know better and working with my thesis, have always reinforced the fact that they're there to help out but it's within my control. And I think that is so important. (II p. 2)

Generally, Sabrina felt faculty members were helpful and approachable. "I went to speak to people who I felt would be able to help me and I never once was turned away or never once felt that somebody didn't have the time for me" (II pp. 5 - 6). Sabrina was pleasantly surprised by the information she received, in the form of advice, from faculty members who had no vested interest in her.

I'm also very grateful to professors who helped out when there's been no, they aren't specifically tied to me. There isn't a specific relationship there that's been defined or anything like that, but they just. I find with all the people I've encountered here that support or that advice is just there even though you've got your thesis committee and it's not going to be a recognized relationship. I find people are more than willing to spend time. (II p. 6)

She appreciated being able to approach "various professors to tap into their knowledge as they became relevant to my work" (II p. 4).

In addition to providing advice, faculty members contributed appraisal support in the form of feedback for work Sabrina had completed, and offered her support in guiding her professional development.

I think I look for interesting conversation and direction academically and help in shaping and thinking about the work I have to do whether it's papers or thesis. And also about where I'd like to go eventually. I think that kind of support is important; support that can help to shape what you might want to do in the future, given that faculty have had a chance to get to know you as a person, and get to know your abilities, and get to know your interests. And I think that kind of support is important. (I pp. 6 - 7)

When asked to describe any faculty members whom she would feel comfortable approaching to support her in a particular problem, Sabrina described two faculty members she would feel comfortable contacting because:

I feel have the kind of integrity that respects your privacy, and that if things are confidential, they remain confidential. So that's how I would describe these two people. As people who I feel have integrity and wouldn't betray that trust, and also have integrity in that they're able to give advice that fits where I'm at. (I p. 3)

One of these individuals was Sabrina's thesis supervisor whom she described as being a "tremendous" source of support (II p. 6). Beyond being available and a tremendous source of support, Sabrina's thesis supervisor was helpful in directing her thinking in various ways.

I knew that I could make appointments to see this person and that's very important. I knew that there was the opportunity to go to this professor for help and clarification in the sense that 'these are the kinds of things I'm thinking.' 'Well have you thought in this direction?' Which gives me fodder to then go off and think it through again. (II p. 5)

Sabrina's program advisor also contributed support; however, she did not rely on this individual for anything more than "guidance regarding which professors to go with for my courses" and "signing papers" (I p. 2). One reason why Sabrina did not depend on her program advisor for support was because she initially did not recognize the similarity of their interests, and the support he could provide her.

When I met my [program advisor], a great person, but my thinking was [topic A] and I wasn't seeing connections right away so I didn't make as much use of that professor as a resource as I think I might have. And he gave me a lot of direction initially which I accepted and then I didn't pursue that initially. And what's interesting is that in the areas that I was involved with outside of [the Faculty] ... he'd end up being there because, and it made me realize where our interests did cross over which wasn't as apparent initially when I was thinking [topic A]. And since then I've talked to him a few times ... I didn't see, I didn't have the questions yet to ask of him directly in his area because I didn't see that. Whereas as I've gone through my courses and as I've developed my thinking, I see now why he was assigned to me as an advisor and how it does tie into what I'm interested in. (II p. 4)

Family. Sabrina's description of the support she received from her family, specifically her mother, clearly demonstrated her understanding of the reciprocal nature of supportive relationships.

I think just like in all relationships, it sort of goes up and down. And there were certainly times when she was supportive. When I had an all day assignment ... I got in and there was supper made and stuff like that ... I feel that she's gone out of her way to recognize the times when it's really hit and to really make that allowance and give me a little bit of room; however, you know, no situation is separate, or an entity unto its own. So just because I'm back and going to school, the world didn't stop and it suddenly didn't become a one way street. I mean it's a two way street. So when she's stressed out or something, while I have more support, the times I'm stressed out living there, I also have more demands for support from me because I'm living there so nothing exists in isolation. (I p. 5)

Sabrina described her mother as "really supportive" (I p. 5). One way Sabrina's mother demonstrated this support was welcoming Sabrina to live with her: "Because I have absolutely no cash, I moved into my mother's house and so I think that my mother ... I think that she's been really supportive" (I p. 5). Sabrina not only described how her mother supported her while pursuing her M.Ed., but also described the emotional support her family provided her while growing up that encouraged her to follow her aspirations.

I think back to how I was brought up. I was brought up to be independent ... I was brought up to believe anything is possible, and if you want it, you go get it and when I make up my mind I want something well then. So that's I think, that would be the biggest way. And doing my B.Ed. I wanted to be a teacher, and doing an

M.Ed. this is something I really wanted to do so I have a vested interest. And I think that's probably the biggest aspect. (II p. 6)

Peers Outside the Program. Sabrina saw the support she received from her peers outside of the program as consistent with the support they provided her before her involvement in the program. Sabrina's sentiments of being fortunate enough to pursue a graduate education influenced the amount of support she expected to receive from these peers.

I don't really go out with an expectation that they're going to do anything different [to provide support], because to be honest, I feel so lucky to be able to do this how I choose to be busy and the time of intensity I have more control over that than when I did as a teacher. So in that sense I feel very lucky and I don't mind working hard and having periods of intensity when I get to choose when they'll happen and how they'll happen. And so in my interactions with people who are doing full-time jobs, they don't have that flexibility that I have, and so, in a sense, I feel almost, that in my interactions with them, I need to be saying, 'wow, a job is often not an investment in yourself and going back to school is an investment in yourself.' So in those relationships with my friends, I'm always aware of the lucky position that I'm in. (I pp. 4 - 5)

Although she did not expect her peers outside of the program to provide her with any different support than they would have normally, they did express interest in her new role as a graduate student.

I guess just by expressing interest. I think it runs parallel because my friends were out in the working world. It's really just like it was when I was working only instead of me talking about work and they talk about work, I talk about school, they talk about work. So, and work has its highs and lows too, just like school does, so I think that really hasn't really shifted. I mean I didn't live in Kingston before so it's shifted in that they're sort of, although they're friends I see more of them here now and less of the people in Toronto which is obvious, but I don't think, I don't think they do anything different. Well, I think they pick up the tab more often. (I p. 4)

Self-Directed Learning

I can't get over how great it is from going from the person who is about facilitating learning and who's concerned about the growth of [students] the last few years, to the person who can go to people who will help facilitate with my learning. (I p. 1)

Sabrina delighted in the opportunities she was given to focus on her interests within a

setting where she had “such a sense of support” (II p. 2). Sabrina also appreciated the degree of control she was able to exercise within the program (G p. 9).

I knew a Master’s program was a chance to focus on my topic and my area and my interests versus all the schooling I’ve done till now which has been fairly dictated. And in that sense it’s met my expectations and it is exactly what I wanted. (I p. 1)

The ability to self-manage her program provided Sabrina with a sense of personal control, while her interactions with peers and faculty were a source of motivation, specifically, in refuelling and re-energizing interest in her topic.

Self-Management as Control. Sabrina enjoyed the freedom she was given to focus course requirements on her own interests. She not only felt this freedom provided her with a sense of ownership over the process, but also made the process more interesting. These sentiments were expressed as a comparison between obtaining her undergraduate and graduate degrees.

It feels so different to me than an undergraduate degree which, my undergraduate degree was 10 years ago, but it still feels really different in that I have a very strong sense of that I’m here to learn what I want to learn what we’re learning in class, we’re encouraged to take from it what relates to our own areas and to write papers that then help us. And all that gives me a stronger sense of ownership and frankly makes it much more interesting. (G p. 2)

Sabrina’s interactions with professors aided in her understanding of the self-directed nature of the program. In informing her of the flexible structure of the program, Sabrina’s instructors encouraged her to become a more self-directed learner.

The various courses I’ve had, the professors I had, spent a lot of time emphasizing the fact that it is self-directed and helping me to see how to approach it as a self-directed learner ... and certainly for me one of the most helpful things was just talking generally about how a graduate program works because so much of it I wasn’t aware of. And maybe that’s something others knew about but I didn’t. I wasn’t aware, for example, how you could do an independent study. I wasn’t aware, and all those things together help me to have more information with which to then be more self-directed. (G p. 1)

Although she was aware of the structures that existed within the course requirements,

Sabrina accepted these requirements because she was satisfied with, and was given the freedom to modify, the framework. Above and beyond this framework, Sabrina embraced the freedom she was given to invest in her own thinking.

I quit my job to do this full time, so it has to be self-directed and it has to be about me. And there are certain bureaucratic realities about doing a graduate degree which are understandable because it has to have a framework for something that you're earning. But I'm comfortable with the framework One professor said to me, you know, this is a spa for the mind. And that's what I feel I'm at is it's a spa for my mind. In a spa you get to lie back and it's passive, but it is spa in the best sense that you're actively involved in your own thinking and more than anything I'm able to learn about myself and what I think about things. (G p. 9)

Sabrina also recognized that it was her responsibility to direct her own learning in the program if she hoped to benefit from the various opportunities it presented to her.

I think this program as well, the fact that as a grad program you can take it in so many directions. And not only that, you have to, because if you don't take it in a direction it doesn't go anywhere. And I think that, that is really important. (II p. 1)

Sabrina's understanding of the need to take responsibility for providing her own direction in the program came from a sense of purpose she had for her involvement in the program.

I wanted to do my Master's to begin with. So I want to get back into it. So it's all very much a result of a sense of where it is I'm going and what it is I want. And, I think that's a very, very important aspect of the program here. (II p. 2)

Sabrina's desire to self-manage her growth in the program was rooted in her ambition to create a relevant learning experience. "I'm doing this as an experience for myself so I want to put a package together and a learning experience together that is relevant to me" (II p. 3). This "package" also included involvement in committee work and teaching assistantship responsibilities that she felt: "enriched the entire process it enriched, it informed the studying as well and it's part of where I want to be moving. And it's part of what I want from a Master's degree" (II p. 3).

Motivation. Despite periods where she felt “disconnected” (II p. 2), Sabrina recognized that these periods were part of the process. She relied on the emotional and material support from her peers, specifically, in the form of interest in and in the provision of resources for her work which served to refuel and re-energize her enthusiasm.

When your interest lags and your friends are excited and interested in talking about what interests them and then that ignites your own interests. Talk about the different conferences people are going to, different bits of information people have picked up. And I don't know if it's the same in each year but, I was finding in our year that a lot of people were very supportive in terms of picking up, clipping articles and sticking them in people's boxes or passing them along. And I think that also serves to fuel my own enthusiasms for my work when somebody else takes an interest. (G p. 3)

In being able to be “actively involved in her own thinking” (G p. 9), Sabrina felt she was able to activate her own learning. Her interactions with others facilitated this process. “I'm able to fuel that learning, and partly fuel that learning via talking about it with others” (G p. 9).

In recognizing the self-directed nature of the program and that individuals would progress through the program at their own pace, Sabrina made a conscious effort to not use her peers as a gauge to measure her own progress.

We all do go at our own pace. That is part of being self-directed and that, that's okay. And I don't feel badly about where I'm at in my program. I don't even feel badly about the few weeks where I feel disconnected because that seems to me to be part of the process and I feel revitalized now and I'm re-energized and ready to go for it. And it's not like I wasn't doing anything, but I think that's all okay. And I think it's okay that some people are doing it in a year and other people are taking more than two years. (II p. 2)

Instead, Sabrina relied, not only on her peers, but on professors and support staff, to help her become “impassioned” and excited about her progress in the program.

I find that I'll get really excited about what I'm doing and I'll go a distance with it and either at that point I've come to the end of that strain or the rest of my world takes over and I lose that passion, not lose it completely but it flounders a bit. And I find opportunities to talk to professors outside of the class time, events that are organized, just the e-mail connection where, of getting news from [graduate office

staff] on different conferences and just talking with one another, that can ignite that flame again. And so that I feel that passion which is the fuel that you then run on. And I think that's a really important part of it. (G p. 3)

Self-Monitoring, Self-Management, Motivation, and the Social Milieu

Throughout our conversations, Sabrina never spoke of self-direction without reference to social support, and vice versa. Having been brought up to be independent and "to believe anything is possible, and if you want it, get it," Sabrina's family facilitated her development as a self-directed learner. Her pursuit of an M.Ed. degree was part of her continuing growth in becoming a self-directed learner. Within the structure of the program, Sabrina was encouraged to be self-directed and sought reinforcement for her learning by using faculty members as a resource. For example, she sought the assistance of "various professors to tap into their knowledge as they became relevant to my work." As well, constant reinforcement through formal and informal conversations with faculty members helped Sabrina to see the program as "self-directed and helping me to see how to approach it as a self-directed learner." In interactions with her peers outside of the program, Sabrina was able to contrast her situation from a year ago as a classroom teacher, and her new role as a graduate student within a self-directed environment. As such, she recognized the importance of having personal control within the program "because if you don't take it in a direction, it doesn't go anywhere."

Sabrina generally did not view self-directed learning as occurring in isolation. Rather, she viewed it as a collective endeavour within a "community." She emphasized that this learning was "reciprocal," saying "how can we be studying at a Faculty of Education and not understand the need to support one another." Sharing experiences and resources with her peers was an important part of "refueling and re-energizing" her enthusiasm for her own work.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This thesis examined the sources of social support on which graduate students rely over their first seven months of study in the M.Ed. program at Queen's University, the functions of these supportive relationships, and the importance of these relationships in contributing to graduate students' development as self-directed learners. This chapter connects the data from the current study with the previous literature on social support and self-directed learning. The participants' sources of support and the functions of support provided by each source are reviewed, as are the dimensions of self-directed learning and evidence of how graduate students describe their learning experiences within these dimensions. I also discuss the manner in which the participants indicated how their sources of social support facilitated their development as self-directed learners. Finally, I address the influence of context, the limitations of the study, and my final thoughts and reflections on the current study.

Social Support

In citing a variety of individuals as sources of social support, the participants recognized, like Pines and Aronson (1988), that not any one individual is able to perform all of the functions of social support. Each participant received support from peers in the program, families, and faculty members; however, only the full-time students received support from peers outside the program.

Many of the participants' comments about support encompassed four categories: emotional (Birch, 1998; Pines & Aronson, 1988), information (Birch), material (Birch), and appraisal (Birch). Therefore, the Birch model was adequate for understanding the social support participants described. The Pines and Aronson (1988) model had three

additional categories that were applied to the data: listening, social reality touchstone, and technical challenge. Listening can be assumed as listening would be required for participants to share experiences with their peers. The function of social support as a social reality touchstone was only mentioned by Paula when she described the support she received from her family and peers outside the program. Since Paula's family and peers outside the program were not involved in the program, they were able to provide her with a "larger perspective." Finally, only Steven described the technical challenges he received from his peers in the program; specifically, they provided Steven with other "angles" to consider in his work.

The participants spoke of emotional support in four different ways: in sharing experiences, in understanding, in showing interest, and in providing encouragement. Sharing experiences with others generally provided all of the participants with a sense of comfort. For example, Paula described how "it really helps to talk to someone who's going through the same thing" (I p. 2). Because of the multiple roles they were enacting, as full-time teachers and part-time students, Steven and Heather appreciated others "understanding my perspective" (Heather, I p. 2). For Heather and Paula, individuals who "really seem to want to find out how you're doing" (Paula, I p. 5), and who left "room for lots of encouragement" (Heather, II p. 1) for completing course tasks, were an important part of emotional support. For all participants, the emotional support they received was comforting, eased anxiety, and often validated their decisions for pursuing a graduate degree.

The information support received from faculty members, either through the provision of advice or direction, was important for Steven, Heather, Paula, and Sabrina in being guided through the program. For example, program advisors were generally helpful in giving "advice about courses" (Paula, II p. 1), while course instructors provided

direction that was “a good start on an assignment” (Heather, I p. 2). Information support provided by peers, regarding program structure, how to search for resources, and where to find books and journal articles, was also an important source of support. For example, Steven found it very helpful “to have people who knew how to work with databases and knew the Queen’s library system” (I p. 5).

Participants described the material support they received as either academic or non-academic. All participants provided examples of the material support they received in the form of resources (e.g., books, journal articles) that aided them in their academic endeavours. Sabrina described how “I came across an article in the paper that I knew would pertain to somebody’s work, and so I clipped it and I got there and someone else had clipped it for that person too” (I p. 3). Only Paula and Sabrina spoke of the non-academic material support they received from their families, specifically, the financial support they received. Sabrina articulated the financial support her mother provided in welcoming Sabrina to live with her. Paula also indicated how “all through my university career my family has been very financially supportive” (I p. 5).

All participants in the study received and sought appraisal support in the form of feedback from faculty members and peers in the program. The “positive feedback” (Steven, I p. 3) peers and faculty provided on assignments was helpful to “see if the logic flows” (Sabrina, I p. 3) and “to make sure that you’re not lost” (Paula, I p. 3). Paula and Sabrina only relied on individuals involved in the program (i.e., peers and faculty members), while Steven and Heather also relied on the support of their families for feedback. For Steven and Heather, the feedback they received from their families was more important than the support they received from their peers. For example, Steven described the feedback he received from his wife, sister, and brother-in-law, while Heather described how her parents “read it and gave me some feedback” (II p. 3) on

course assignments.

Peers In the Program

Peers played a valuable role in supporting their fellow classmates. Congruent with the literature describing peers as important sources of support (e.g., Conrad & Phillips, 1995; Kirk & Todd-Mancillas, 1991), for Steven, Heather, Paula, and Sabrina, peers were crucial in providing emotional and academic support. As indicated by Monsour and Corman (1991) and Russell and Adams (1991), and for the participants in the current study, peers acted as important sources of support because of their likelihood to share similar experiences. In sharing their experiences with their peers, the participants discussed problems, confided in each other, provided suggestions, and helped to reflect on successes and problems encountered in the program. Being able to “get support generally from people who are going in the trenches with you” (Sabrina, I p. 5) was important for all of the participants. For Steven and Heather, peers were able to share experiences “because we’re all at the same point” (Steven, I p. 6). Paula believed sharing experiences with her peers helped her to monitor her own progress in the program, while Sabrina felt sharing experiences with her peers helped her to “refuel” her motivation for her research.

Beyond emotional support, peers also provided each other with academic support in giving each other valuable resources and information, whether about program structure or research, as well as feedback on each others’ work. For example, having a friend in the second year of the program was important for Sabrina in helping her understand “where things were coming from and the process that things would follow” (I p. 2). Paula described how peers were “willing to pass [articles] around and share them” (I p. 4). Finally, Steven and Heather felt that “most people are open enough to listen to

each other's research just to give some positive feedback" (Steven, I p. 3) and that "if you don't understand a question or an assignment, or you have some concerns, you can go to another student and talk to them" (Heather, I p. 2).

Faculty

Faculty members have been identified as important for supporting the professional and academic development, as well as the well-being of graduate students (e.g., Freeman et al., 1999; Holdaway et al., 1995; Johnsrud, 1991). Within the current study, faculty members supported graduate students' professional and academic development, and well-being in providing four functions of social support: emotional, appraisal, information, and material. Consistent with the findings reported by Freeman et al. (1999), the support faculty members advanced contributed to the participants' satisfaction with student-faculty relationships. Faculty members were described as approachable, as "tremendously supportive" (Heather, G p. 1), and as "great" and "wonderful" (Paula, I p. 3).

The emotional support Steven, Heather, and Paula received from faculty members, in the form of encouragement and understanding, was generally related to their well-being. For example, Steven spoke of the understanding his course instructor demonstrated in sympathizing with the multiple roles for which Steven was responsible outside of the program as a full-time teacher, father, and husband. This understanding was important for Steven in that the course instructor gave him leeway in submitting assignments beyond the due date. Heather, meanwhile, described the encouragement she received from faculty members and how they "make you feel at ease and comfortable and they have confidence in you" (I p. 6). Finally, Paula described the encouragement her program advisor provided in helping her to "succeed independently"

(I p. 3).

The appraisal support Steven, Paula, and Sabrina accepted from faculty members, in the form of feedback, aided in their academic development. The comments they received on assignments “really helped” (Steven, II p. 1), and participants appreciated the time faculty took “to give you a lot of comments on papers, or go out of their way to talk to you about readings” (Paula, I p. 3). Feedback received from faculty members was especially important for Sabrina who described faculty members as helpful “in shaping and thinking about the work I have to do” (I p. 6).

The information support received from faculty members in the form of guidance and direction was helpful in supporting Paula and Sabrina’s professional development. Paula described how the information and direction she received from faculty members was helpful in guiding her in choosing a course of study. For Sabrina, this support was important in helping her “to shape what you might want to do in the future” (Sabrina, I p. 6). The information support faculty members provided was also helpful in guiding Steven and Heather’s academic development. For example, Heather described how faculty were helpful in directing her to “some good resources to go to” (I p. 2).

Faculty members introduced the participants to materials, specifically resources, that contributed to both their academic and professional development. For example, Heather explained how being encouraged to “get out there and search and search and dig and do different things” (G pp. 5 - 6) was important for her academic development in the program. She described how “I would definitely keep reading them [professional journals] and keep getting them and pursue it because it’s valuable and it’s very important” (G pp. 5 - 6).

Families

Although the literature is silent in describing the social support graduate students receive from their families, in the current study, family members provided three functions of social support: emotional, material, and appraisal. The support participants drew from their families seemed to be influenced by their status, either as full-time or part-time, in the program. Paula and Sabrina, both full-time participants, generally sought emotional and material support from their families. In contrast, the support Steven and Heather drew from their families included appraisal as well as emotional support.

Paula and Sabrina gave up full-time jobs as teachers to pursue their M.Ed. degrees, and, as such, relied on their families for material support, specifically, financial support. Beyond supporting Paula and Sabrina financially, Paula and Sabrina's families provided them with emotional support in the form of encouragement. For example, Paula's family, specifically her partner, was "good for emotional support and when I need extra time to just go and do reading, they were good to encourage me to do that" (I p. 5). Meanwhile, Sabrina described the ongoing support she received from her family in encouraging her to "believe anything is possible, and if you want it, you go get it" (II p. 6).

Like Paula and Sabrina, Heather and Steven's families also supported them emotionally. For example, Heather described the emotional support she received from her parents as a "source of strength" (I p. 2). However, unlike Paula and Sabrina, both Heather and Steven relied on their families for appraisal support. For Heather, her parents played a large role in helping her to monitor and remain motivated in her studies. In Steven's case, a large part of the support he drew from his family appeared to parallel the support Heather, Paula, and Sabrina primarily sought from their peers in the program. Although Steven did not rely heavily on peers for appraisal support, he did rely

on his family for this support. Steven's wife, sister, and brother-in-law, having all been involved in graduate education themselves, were able to help Steven "point out flaws in my own type of writing, my own type of research" (II p. 6). As part-time students, Steven and Heather generally did not have the same opportunities to seek appraisal support from their peers as did Paula and Sabrina. This being the case, they sought appraisal support from their families with whom they generally had more contact.

Within their discussions of the support they drew from their families, Steven and Sabrina recognized the reciprocal nature of support. Although they received and appreciated the support provided to them by their family members, Steven and Sabrina also recognized the demands placed on them to be supportive as well. For example, Steven's wife was an important source of support, but, at the same time, he also supported his wife in her pursuit of a Master's degree. Meanwhile, Sabrina described the supportive, two-way relationship she had with her mother: "So when she's stressed out or something, while I have more support, the times I'm stressed out living there, I also have more demands for support from me because I'm living there so nothing exists in isolation" (I p. 5).

Peers Outside the Program

Like family members, the literature is silent in describing the social support graduate students receive from their peers outside of the program. In the current study, when asked to describe the support they received from their peers outside of the program, Steven, Heather, Paula, and Sabrina all spoke of their relationships with either their former or present colleagues. Perhaps the most disheartening trend was the reluctance Heather and Steven, both secondary school teachers, expressed in sharing their graduate experiences with their colleagues at work. Not only was the subject of

graduate work considered “taboo” (Steven, II p. 6), but Steven and Heather also feared a lack of support, or did not expect support at all, from their colleagues. For Heather especially, fear of hearing colleagues’ opinions, either their opinions that “she thinks she’s better than everyone else, or she’s climbing the ladder” (II p. 1) led her to keep her experiences to herself. Whether this trend is only among secondary school teachers, or present within all schools, including those in the elementary panel, or is specific to these two participants, is unclear.

Although Steven and Heather emphasized the support they did not receive from their teacher colleagues, they did provide evidence that they received some support from administrators. For example, Heather indicated that she relied on the support from two administrators: her former department head and her principal. Heather’s principal was supportive in “letting me go on certain days when I needed to come up here” (II p. 2); however, due to her principal’s busy schedule, “she doesn’t have a lot of time” (II p. 2) to support Heather. Heather also described the support she received from her former department head, who was able to provide support because of his previous experiences as a graduate student. Beyond sharing experiences, Heather’s former department head was helpful “if I’ve read something that doesn’t really make sense I’ll run it by him, see what he thinks” (II p. 2).

Paula and Sabrina, both elementary school teachers, felt supported by their former colleagues to pursue graduate education before they departed on their new endeavours; however, they no longer interacted with these individuals on an everyday basis within a professional setting. Generally, Paula relied on the support of her former colleagues in helping to keep a “larger perspective” (I p. 2) and in keeping her informed of the interests of children. For Sabrina, beyond expressing interest in her new role as a graduate student, her peers outside the program provided her with the same support

they did before her involvement in the program.

'Myself'

Although the literature on social support does not often consider the ways students support themselves, two participants in the current study, Heather and Paula, described how they supported their own involvement in the program. Heather and Paula supported themselves in three distinct ways: physically, emotionally, and academically. Heather explained how she supported herself in a physical and emotional manner: "I support myself. I make sure that I take care of myself, that I'm healthy, that I'm balanced, that I leave time for things that are important to me" (I p. 4). Meanwhile, Paula reported how she supported herself academically by being responsible for motivating and monitoring her progress. Paula saw herself as "the one that motivates me and that keeps doing checks to see if this is what I want to do and if I'm enjoying it" (I p. 5).

Self-Directed Learning

In describing the personal growth they experienced over the course of their involvement in the program, and how they took responsibility for their learning, the participants provided evidence of themselves as self-directed learners. Within these descriptions, one of Garrison's (1997) dimensions of self-directed learning was prominent for each of the participants. For example, Steven, Heather, and Sabrina each described the importance of being able to manage their own learning, while Paula spoke of her ability to monitor her own growth. For Steven, Heather, and Sabrina, the ability to manage or direct their own learning experiences was also related to motivation. Garrison suggests that motivation and responsibility are reciprocally related and facilitated by collaborative control of educational endeavours.

Self-Management

Empirical research to date has concentrated on how instructors can encourage and support self-directed learning through the adoption of various strategies. Strategies that have been suggested have included: learning contracts (Caffarella, 1983; Cafarella & Cafarella, 1986), the formation of peer learning networks (Brookfield, 1986), and the promotion of rational thinking (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991). In the current study, only Sabrina described the use of independent study as a strategy applied by faculty members. However, the flexible course structure adopted by faculty members did provide Steven, Heather, Paula, and Sabrina with control over their learning endeavours. Consistent with the findings reported by Bauer (1985), varying levels of self-directedness among the participants demonstrated a need for a range of structure within the program. Based on his own observations of students' varying abilities to respond to teaching that requires them to be self-directing, Grow (1991) proposed a model, the Staged Self-Directed Learning (SSDL) Model, that suggests how teachers can actively equip students to become more self-directed in their learning. This model proposes that learners advance through stages of increasing self-direction and that teachers can help or hinder that development. According to Grow (1991), good teaching matches the learner's stage of self-directedness and helps the learner advance toward greater self-direction. Problems arise when teaching style is not matched to the learner's degree of self-direction. Within the current study, Steven, Heather, and Sabrina's instructors appeared to match their stage of self-directedness. For Steven, Heather, and Sabrina, the ability to exert personal control over their experiences in the program: facilitated enjoyment (Steven, I p. 1), was "empowering" (Heather, II pp. 2 - 3), and encouraged students "to take from it what relates to our own areas" (Sabrina, G p. 2). Meanwhile, Paula's instructors were a near match to her stage of self-directedness but presented

her with a freedom that she seemed not ready or willing to immediately accept. Although Paula recognized that the nature of graduate work was meant to be self-directed, she would have appreciated more direction within this structure. Paula felt that “sometimes I feel like I want to go into a class and not always construct my own ideas about things” (II p. 4).

Similar to how the instructors in Sisco’s (1998) study reported promoting and facilitating competence in self-directed learning, course instructors in the current study, from the perspective of the participants, also helped students identify material resources and view the role of instructors as one of helper or consultant. Instructors were important sources of support in directing participants to material resources. For example, Steven described how “you go in and say ‘do you have a book on,’ and he’ll say ‘of course I do, right here,’ he just grabs it off the shelf” (II p. 2). By generally being available and helpful, the participants viewed their course instructors as consultants in “guiding me and giving me advice” (Heather, II p. 1).

Unlike the reports provided by learners in Bauer’s (1985) study, the constraints posed by institutional and program requirements were not considered to be limitations to the degree of self-directed learning these participants experienced. Heather recognized the presence of a program structure, but described her ability to negotiate these requirements so that “very much of this is in my control” (Heather, G p. 8). For example, in one course, Heather described the freedom she experienced in being able to contribute to the design, implementation, and evaluation of a course assignment. This example is consistent with what Skruber (1982) described as shared responsibility: educators providing a flexible course structure within which students are able to participate in the planning of their learning experiences. Sabrina also recognized the presence of a framework but described the necessity of this framework “for something

that you're earning" (G p. 9). Sabrina accepted this framework because she was satisfied with, and was given the freedom to modify, it.

When asked to describe the strategies or methods that facilitated their learning, Steven, Heather, and Sabrina all identified the importance of being involved in discussions with other individuals. Generally, course instructors provided weekly readings as an aid in understanding concepts and as a basis for the next week's discussion in class. The discussion-based structure of classes appeared to be successful, as well as meet the needs of these learners.

Although faculty members adopted a flexible course structure which enabled the participants to exert control over their own learning, each individual also managed her or his own growth. The literature assumes that by adopting a variety of strategies, faculty members contribute to graduate students' abilities to self-manage their learning; however, the literature does not address how individuals self-manage their growth on their own. In the current study, Heather and Sabrina, in particular, recognized the importance of taking responsibility for their own learning if they hoped to benefit from the various opportunities presented within it. Heather explained that "you get out of it [program] what you put into it" (G p. 2). Sabrina understood that "if you don't take it [program] in a direction, it doesn't go anywhere" (H p. 1). Heather provided evidence of how she managed her learning beyond the course structure adopted by faculty members. One of Heather's self-management strategies was to seek support during those times she needed assistance. Heather generally sought this support from her course instructors and former department head. Beyond being encouraged to be self-directed, Sabrina also sought reinforcement for her learning by using faculty members as a resource.

Self-Monitoring

Self-monitoring is difficult to observe because it is an internal process. However, according to Garrison's definition, self-monitoring is not independent of contextual factors but involves both internal functions and external feedback. In the current study, each participant described the appraisal support they received in the form of feedback from peers in the program, faculty, or family members. Based on this feedback, and according to Garrison's definition of self-monitoring, one can assume that participants were involved in monitoring their own progress.

In sharing experiences and seeking feedback from her peers, Paula was able to monitor her own progress in the program, thus allowing her to determine if she was still on track and working through the program in a fashion similar to her classmates. Although not as obvious as Paula's description, glimpses of how Heather, Steven, and Sabrina monitored their own growth can also be identified. For example, Heather's parents aided her in monitoring her progress, while feedback from peers helped Steven self-monitor. Although Sabrina, beyond seeking feedback from peers and faculty members, did not explicitly describe how she monitored her progress, she provided evidence that she did in fact do so. In order for her to assess if she was "where I want to be moving" (ll p. 3), it would have been important that she self-monitor.

Motivation

To consider the participants' motivation, it is necessary to rely on Garrison's (1997) model, as the previous literature has not yet addressed how graduate students' motivation is related to their self-directed learning. Garrison described two types of motivation: entering motivation and task motivation. Entering motivation involves the processes in deciding to participate in a learning process. It involves the commitment to

a goal and the intent to act. In describing their reasons for pursuing an M.Ed. degree, either to “become a better teacher” (Heather, I p. 1); to focus on their own thinking (Sabrina, I p. 1); to discover if a career in academia was in the future (Paula, I p. 1); or simply because it was something “I’ve always wanted to do” (Steven, I p. 1), participants demonstrated their commitment, effort, and persistence in wanting to pursue their Master’s degree.

The support offered to participants within the program generally affected what Garrison (1997) termed task motivation, or their tendency to focus on and persist in learning activities and goals. Whether participants described their period of lack of motivation as a “dip” (Sabrina, G p. 7); as “peaks and dips” (Heather, II p. 2); as “spurts and starts” (Steven, II p. 2); or as “stalled” (Paula, II p. 2), each participant experienced difficulties in sustaining task motivation at one time or another. For Paula and Sabrina, difficulties in sustaining their motivation were associated with the commencement of the second term and a shift they experienced in their interactions with their peers. As full-time students, they described the second term as a period involving more independent work, whereas the first term was described as a period when, along with their peers, they were exploring the program together. Heather and Steven, as part-time students, also claimed they experienced difficulties in sustaining their motivation; however, they provided little evidence of when these periods occurred.

In contrast to the findings reported by Sisco (1988), according to participants in the current study, instructors did help students renew their motivation when it lagged; however, they did not do so in an explicit way. For example, Paula reported how her thesis committee meeting was helpful “because it’s really helped me to refocus where I was going ... I knew I needed to do stuff but I wasn’t sure what. And I just needed to hear, ‘well you’re on the right track with this’” (II p. 3). Although Paula’s committee

members may not have been aware that they were helping to renew Paula's motivation, in telling her that "we think you've got something good here, and keep going, and you're on the right track" (Paula, II p. 3), they, in fact, did do so. For Sabrina, simply speaking with instructors outside of class time helped to "ignite that flame again. And so that I feel that passion which is the fuel that you then run on" (G p. 3). The course structure adopted by instructors also helped the participants' motivation. For example, Steven explained how being able to "apply your assignments to what you're interested in" (II p. 1) motivated him to exert control over his own learning.

Paula's motivational difficulties were not only associated with a shift in interactions with her peers during second term but were also influenced by what Garrison (1997) described as competency and contingency characteristics. When Paula described how she feared she was not meeting the expectations of faculty members (II pp. 2 - 3) (contingency), she doubted her abilities to meet these expectations (competency), and therefore experienced difficulties in motivation. The difficulties Paula experienced in this respect might have contributed to her desire to have more direction provided to her in the program. According to Garrison, together competency and contingency represent "anticipated control" which reflects a learner's perceived ability and opportunity to exercise control over a learning process.

Self-Monitoring, Self-Management, Motivation, and the Social Milieu

For the participants in the current study, it appears that social support contributed to self-directed learning. However, the extent to which this connection existed depended on the individual. For example, Steven provided glimpses of an indirect connection between social support and self-directed learning, whereas, for Heather, evidence of a connection between the two research domains appeared only in her discussions of the

social support she received from her parents. Meanwhile, Paula identified the same sources of support within her remarks on social support and self-directed learning. Finally, for Sabrina, the two concepts of social support and self-directed learning were interconnected. When she spoke of social support, she made reference to self-directed learning, and vice versa.

Although Steven offered glimpses of a connection between social support and self-directed learning in his interviews, he generally was unable to pinpoint the source of his growth as a self-directed learner. Steven may not have provided a more direct link between social support and self-directed learning in his remarks for various reasons. It seemed that Steven was not as reflective in responses as was Heather, Paula, or Sabrina. There are several differences between Steven and the other participants that may have effected his reflectiveness. It is unclear whether Steven's lack of reflectiveness was because he was a male or the youngest participant in the study. Also, as a father of two, husband, and full-time teacher, the M.Ed. program was not a focus of his life. Within his busy schedule, it is unlikely that Steven had the time to ponder his part-time experiences in the program. Steven was also absent from the group interview, which may provide an additional reason for his lack of reflectiveness in comparison to Heather, Paula, and Sabrina.

Heather only directly linked social support and self-directed learning when she spoke of the social support she received from her parents. Generally, when Heather spoke of either social support or self-directed learning, she identified the central role she took in managing and being responsible for her own learning. Unlike Steven, Heather appeared to give considerable thought to her experiences in the program. Although, like Steven, Heather was a part-time student in the program and a full-time teacher, unlike Steven, she was neither married nor had children. She also had considerable time in her

travels to class each week with a peer in the program to reflect on her experiences.

Both Paula and Sabrina provided the strongest evidence of a connection between social support and self-directed learning. When Paula spoke of social support, she gave evidence also of self-directed learning. Similarly, when she spoke of self-directed learning, she generally mentioned the social support she received from peers and faculty members. Meanwhile, Sabrina did not view self-directed learning as occurring in isolation, or social support as independent of self-directed learning. One reason Paula and Sabrina may have provided strong evidence for a connection between social support and self-directed learning was because of their status in the program. As full-time students, Paula and Sabrina were heavily enculturated into the program. They were involved in a variety of opportunities within the program, including teaching assistantships, research assistantships, and committee work, to create a very focussed experience. Paula and Sabrina were also able to interact more frequently with their peers in the program, as well as with faculty members.

The range of evidence linking social support and self-directed learning appears to lie on a continuum, with Steven at one end of the continuum where the link between the two concepts is subtle, to Sabrina at the other end, where the two concepts overlap. In his work, Candy (1991) described how self-direction is a quality that may be present in varying degrees. As such, in practice, educators can adapt their strategies to different levels of self-directedness that learners exhibit. Candy also claimed that, at the request of the learner, educators can help increase or improve learners' abilities to be self-directing.

Context

Within the group discussion, the context of studying in a Faculty of Education appeared to influence the sentiments expressed by Heather, Paula, and Sabrina. Heather, Paula, and Sabrina felt that individuals enrolled in the program to pursue their own interests. This entering motivation appeared to diminish the level of competition they experienced. Not only did the subject of lack of competition arise in the group interview, but also during the initial interviews with Heather, Paula, and Sabrina. It was, however, during the group interview with Heather, Paula, and Sabrina, and in the final interviews with each of them, that the dynamic of “educating ourselves about education” (Sabrina, G p.4), and the context within which they were studying facilitated an understanding of this lack of competition. This sense of a lack of competition came in a comparison between their experiences of pursuing their undergraduate versus graduate degrees.

There was a sense that the same type of support each of the participants reported in the present context was not a reality for other graduate students in other disciplines. Heather provided an example of her brothers and their experiences:

My two brothers, I have a brother who's in health sciences doing his Ph.D., tremendously competitive. The stories he tells are frightening. Another brother who's an engineer and also tremendous competition. So I think in other disciplines, in other areas, it is different. (G p. 4)

The nature of the teaching profession, that as teachers we support the learning of students, appears to have carried into the current context, and has created for Heather, Paula, and Sabrina a supportive environment where peers in the program support each others' learning.

Limitations

There are four major limitations within this thesis. The first limitation is that the current study only provided a snapshot of the connection between social support and self-directed learning. There is no indication of how participants' sources of social support will evolve beyond their first seven months in the program, and how this change in structure will contribute to their self-directed learning. This progression is especially critical as the structure of the program becomes 'more' self-directed in that students are required to complete a final project or thesis to fulfil their degree requirements. With the exception of the frequent contact students have with their thesis or project supervisor, the final part of the program is mostly a solitary endeavour. Although the participants recognized this component of the program, they had yet to experience it and the effect it will have on the support they receive within the program.

A second limitation of the current study concerns my understanding of self-directed learning. At the time of data collection, I had a narrow understanding of self-directed learning and the conceptual framework that I would eventually adopt. As such, I now wonder about the value of some of the questions I posed. More relevant questions now spring to mind that would have provided a better understanding of how social support contributes to self-directed learning, for example, probing students to specifically describe how the structure of classes facilitated their learning. Although my understanding of self-directed learning has progressed, this growth was largely through analyses conducted of the data in combination with an ongoing investigation of the literature. Given this growth, I would be in a better position now than when I started to conduct a study such as this one.

A third limitation of the current study concerns the positive nature of the participants' responses to the support they received in the program. When asked if there

were any ways in which faculty members or peers in the program were not supportive, participants replied, for example, "I've had really good luck so far, I haven't had any problems ... so it's really nice" (Steven, I p. 2); "I can't say that there's been a time when I went and they weren't helpful" (Heather, I p. 2); and "well I don't want to say no because it sounds pretty Polyanna, but I ... can't think of areas where people aren't supportive" (Sabrina, I p. 4). Only one participant, Paula, briefly described the ways she viewed faculty members as unsupportive. One way Paula considered some faculty members as unsupportive were in their interactions with students. For example, Paula described how a "professor has been less than professional in dealing with students' responses to some questions ... I know that happens everywhere but it's hard to see that in people that are supposed to be teaching teachers" (Paula, I p. 4). Another way Paula considered faculty members as unsupportive were in their vocalized opinions of one another that were shared with students. The tension she discovered that existed between professors:

kind of made me, maybe tip the scales if I was considering taking a class and that kind of thing, and it's just, and I never really got a lot of impressions that way but I can't say I haven't been totally uninfluenced by it. (I p. 4)

Despite examples of how she viewed faculty members as, at times, unsupportive, Paula generally perceived a supportive environment in the program, as did Steven, Heather, and Sabrina. One reason for the participants' positive responses to the support they received may have been that the interviews were conducted early in their experiences of the program. At this point, their experiences included sharing of similar experiences with classmates and participation in activities such as an orientation session to the program and a student-faculty social gathering. Were I to interview the participants beyond the first seven months of their involvement in the program, their responses may not have been as positive. Also, one of the reasons Steven, Heather, Paula, and Sabrina might

have volunteered to participate in the current study was because of the positive nature of their experiences in the program thus far.

The final limitation of the current study was how participants described their development as self-directed learners. Similar to the problem I encountered within the literature, participants spoke of self-directed learning in various ways. For example, Heather described her personal growth in the program and the ownership she invested in her learning experiences: "I think that's a big part of a self-directed learner. Someone who takes ownership" (II pp. 3 - 4). Meanwhile, Sabrina spoke of the choices she was given within the program that provided her with an opportunity to "focus on my topic and my area and my interests" (I p. 1). It is this view of self-directed learning that most closely parallels the definition I adopted in the current study: "a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes" (Knowles, 1975, p. 18). Had I asked each participant to define her or his understanding of self-directed learning, perhaps a more in-depth understanding of them as self-directed learners could have been established.

Final Thoughts and Reflections

Although the structure of the current program seems to work well, instructors need to remember the individual differences students bring to the program. Students enter the program at varying degrees of self-directedness. As such, not all students will appreciate, or be successful, within the current structure. Instructors must provide a flexible structure that will accommodate students' orientation toward either end of the learner-control continuum: from highly teacher-directed to highly learner-controlled

(Candy, 1991). For example, more than either Steven, Heather, or Paula, Sabrina delighted in the opportunities she was given to focus on her interests. In contrast, Paula described how, at times, she “just want[ed] to be told some things” (II p. 4). One reason for the contrast among participants' need for a flexible course structure is the difference in magnitude of personal responsibility they accept in guiding their own learning experiences. For example, although Heather and Sabrina recognized the support they received within the program, they both understood the importance of their taking responsibility for directing their own learning in the program, “because if you don't take it [program] in a direction, it doesn't go anywhere” (Sabrina, II p. 1), and “it's up to you to actually get the job done ... you get out of it what you put into it” (Heather, G p. 2).

While the current study provided empirical evidence of a connection between social support and self-directed learning, a supportive climate may not be the only condition characteristic of a self-directed learning experience. According to Wilcox (1996), there are four categories characteristic of a self-directed learning experience conducted within a group setting and facilitated by an educator: structure, climate, learner engagement, and learner competencies. One of the categories, climate, is directly related to social support. The conditions described in the climate category include the presence of a supportive, collaborative environment. It is this condition that was frequently addressed by my participants, although Steven, Heather, and Sabrina also spoke of the importance of their ability to make choices within the structure of the program; an essential condition within the structure category. Wilcox proposes that the conditions described in the structure category are essential and necessary conditions for self-directed learning, while the conditions described in the climate, learner engagement, and learner competencies categories are facilitative of, but not essential to, self-directed learning. Because climate is facilitative, and not necessary for self-directed learning, it is

not surprising that participants in the current study did not always associate social support with self-directed learning.

The current study makes three contributions to the research fields of social support and self-directed learning. First, the current study provides an alternative method for investigating the social support graduate students receive while pursuing a graduate education, and their growth as self-directed learners, by investigating the perspectives of graduate students themselves. Earlier research has had a tendency to investigate these concepts only from the perspectives of course instructors and has been conducted by instructors, rather than by graduate students. In this study, a graduate student investigated the perspectives of fellow graduate students. Second, this study provides empirical support for Garrison's (1997) theoretical model of self-directed learning. Within the participants' interviews, they provided strong evidence of one of Garrison's dimensions of self-directed learning: either self-management or self-monitoring. Regardless of their prominent dimension, motivation, however, appeared to be an underlying dimension within each of the participants' descriptions of self-directed learning. Given that many models of self-directed learning exist (e.g., Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Candy, 1991; Garrison, 1997), it is important to ascertain the usefulness of the Garrison model. Finally, this study links two distinct research fields: social support and self-directed learning. Although each participant provided a varied view of the link between these two concepts, within each participant's interviews, evidence that a link does in fact exist was presented.

Future studies should include a more lengthy investigation of the relationship between the concepts of social support and self-directed learning. A two-year longitudinal study investigating how graduate students' social support changes over the course of their study as the program becomes more self-directed and the effect of this

shift on their abilities to self-direct their learning would be informative. Future studies should also include an investigation of the influence of research and teaching assistantships on graduate students' self-directed learning, which present students with various opportunities to lead and direct research and teaching projects under the supervision of faculty members. As well, an investigator who started from a self-directed perspective, rather than from the social support view with which I was most comfortable, would bring new insight to this topic.

It has been through the sharing of experiences with my four participants that I have broadened and facilitated my understanding of how I have grown throughout my experiences in the M.Ed. program. As Paula described how her personal growth involved developing the language to talk about her area of study, conversations with my participants have helped me develop the language to discuss and understand my own growth. Like my participants, my ongoing journey as an M.Ed. student has included many "peaks and valleys." Throughout these peaks and valleys has been the support of a number of individuals. Although the support I have received from these individuals has changed over the course of the last year and a half, this support still remains at the core of my experiences in the program. During my first year in the M.Ed. program, I had a sense of the tremendous gains I made as a learner. The support I received encouraged me to become more confident in my abilities, to express my ideas, and to explore issues and concepts I would originally not have considered. However, over the course of the last year, I had become frustrated and upset with the feeling that my growth as a learner had stagnated. I have now come to realize that it has not been my growth as a learner that has changed, but, like Paula and Sabrina described, a shift in my social support has occurred. Those to whom I originally looked for support were no longer those who could provide me with the material, information, and appraisal support I needed to complete

the program.

While involved in course work with my peers in the program, material, information, and appraisal support were easy to access. Most peers were happy and willing to support each other as best as they could, whether directing each other to helpful resources or peer editing each others' assignments. In sharing a very similar experience with my peers, they were the individuals from whom I drew the most support. Similarly, many of my course instructors who provided me with valuable knowledge were important in guiding me through my first year as an M.Ed. student. However, once I undertook a very specific study designed to complete my thesis, the number of individuals from whom I could draw support became reduced. My peers in the program were no longer able to provide me with the support necessary that was specifically tailored to my needs. Although my peers could provide useful information on, for example, the colloquium process, only those individuals who were experiencing the same occurrence at relatively the same time were helpful. My former course instructors were helpful in guiding me toward individuals who would be important to contact for more specific information regarding my study, but were not able to provide me with the specific information necessary to work toward the completion of my thesis. Despite the limited support peers and course instructors could provide me in working toward the completion of my degree, they were, and are, tremendously supportive emotionally. Not only peers, but faculty members as well, have been important in providing me with encouragement throughout my course of study in the M.Ed. program. In inquiring into the progress of my thesis and providing me with helpful suggestions, both faculty and peers have contributed to my success.

As the course to completing one's thesis becomes a reality, the support one receives appears to vary from breadth — the number of individuals who can support

progress in the program are numerous — to depth — the number of individuals who can be involved in one's development becomes reduced, given the need for support tailored to one's specific needs. It seems, then, that the support graduate students receive is not more or less, but rather different, according to their individual needs and their point of progress in the program.

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Appendix A

Letter of Informed Consent

My name is Julie Berndt and I am a student at the Faculty of Education at Queen's University. I am asking you to participate in a formal research study I am undertaking to fulfil the requirements of my degree. Under the supervision of Professor John Freeman, Faculty of Education, I am completing a thesis that will involve the collection and analysis of original data collected through interviews with M.Ed. students.

The focus of my research is to examine the sources of social support that you depend on during your time at the Faculty and how this support is helping to foster your development as an independent learner. The research involves an initial interview, a focus group interview (with you and three other participants), and a final interview. Participation in this study would require approximately three or four hours of your time over a period of about three months.

The initial interview will be approximately 60 minutes in length and will be audio-taped. I will prepare an exact verbatim transcription of the interview, concealing your identity by using a fictitious name. Once all the data are collected and analyzed, if you wish, I will present you with a copy of the transcripts and analyses to ensure that I have interpreted the data appropriately and that I have correctly represented the information you have provided.

The interview will be conducted at a time and place agreeable to you. I may discuss the transcripts with members of my thesis committee for the purpose of interpreting the data, but your name will not be revealed during these discussions nor appear in the thesis or in any related publication.

In asking you to participate in this study, I am assuring you that I will protect your identity and that you may withdraw from the study at any time without pressure. If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please feel free to contact myself (547-3003), or my supervisor, Dr. John Freeman (533-6000 ext. 77298), or Rena Upitis, Dean of the Faculty of Education (533-6000 ext. 77238).

Sincerely,

Julie Berndt

If you are willing to participate in this study, please sign the following:

I have read the above description of the information of the research exercise and understand my rights as a participant in this study, that the information I provide will be treated as confidential, that my identity will be protected, and that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Participant's name: _____ Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix B

Initial Interview Questions

Could you describe what you were doing before you entered the program?

Why have you decided to pursue an M.Ed. degree?

How would you describe your experience in the program thus far?

What are your overall impressions of the program so far?

How important is having any type of social support for you? How would you describe your sources of social support?

What different kinds of support have you sought in the past? Who have you sought this support from?

Since your involvement in the M.Ed. program, have you sought different types of support?

Who would you turn to if you needed advice about a research topic? Why?

Who would you turn to if you needed someone to talk to if you were having a problem adjusting to graduate school? Why would you choose this person - what is it about your relationship with them?

Is there someone whom you trust to give you objective feedback about how you are handling problems? Why would you choose this person - what is it about your relationship with them?

FACULTY

Can you give examples of how the faculty has given you support? Can you describe other ways in which faculty members are supportive and how they show this support? Any ways they are not supportive?

Is there a faculty member with whom you feel close? Can you describe your relationship with this individual?

PEERS (IN PROGRAM)

Do you feel you have established social support among your M.Ed. peers? If so, how? Can you describe your relationship with this (these) individual(s)?

Can you give examples of how your M.Ed. peers have given you support? Can you describe other ways in which your peers in the M.Ed. program are supportive and how they show this support? Any ways they are not supportive?

Do you feel you can discuss your research and assignments with your fellow classmates? Why or why not?

PEERS (OUTSIDE THE PROGRAM)

Can you give examples of how your peers have given you support? Can you describe other ways in which your peers outside the M.Ed. program are supportive and how they show this support? Any ways they are not supportive?

FAMILY

Can you give examples of how your family has given you support? Can you describe other ways in which your family are supportive and how they show this support? Any ways they are not supportive?

Whom do you draw upon the most for support for your involvement in the program?

LEARNING

What strategies/methods do you feel facilitate your learning?

What type of resources do you commonly use, for example, if trying to complete a research paper?

Do you prefer teacher-directed or self-directed learning opportunities?

Could you describe your learning preferences?

If you had a choice, would you structure the classes you are currently taking in a different way? How would you structure them?

How have you developed as a learner over the course of your involvement in the program thus far?

Could you describe how faculty meets your needs as a learner?

Could you describe how your M.Ed. peers have helped you develop as a learner?

Appendix C

Group Interview Questions

1. What kinds of things have professors done in class that have made you a better learner?
2. How have you grown as a learner from opportunities outside the class structured by professors?
3. How have you grown as a learner from things/opportunities brought about by your peers?
4. How have you grown as a learner from things you have done on your own?
5. What aspects of your own learning are more under your control and what aspects are less under your control?
6. Are there any other comments you would like to add?

Appendix D

Final Interview Questions

Steven

What kinds of things have professors done in class that have made you a better learner?

How have you grown as a learner from opportunities outside the class structured by professors?

How have you grown as a learner from things/opportunities brought about by peers?

How have you grown as a learner from things you have done on your own?

What aspects of your own learning are more under your control and what aspects are less under your control?

What kind of support has your program advisor offered you as a learner?

How will you go about identifying someone as a thesis supervisor or potential thesis supervisor?

To what extent do you feel you have been mentored in the program?

Can you describe ways in which you have grown personally since your involvement in the program?

probe: Who or what has facilitated (or sparked?) this growth?

What have you learned about yourself since your involvement in the program?

How would you describe yourself as a self-directed learner?

Can you describe how you demonstrate personal responsibility for your own learning?

Have you experienced any motivational difficulties toward your studies since entering the program?

What kinds of things have your family done that have helped you become a better learner?

What kinds of support do your colleagues at school/work offer you?

How are you negotiating theoretical information you receive with the practical, classroom teaching experiences?

Heather

Can you describe ways in which you have grown personally since your involvement in the program?

probe: Who or what has facilitated (or sparked?) this growth?

What have you learned about yourself since your involvement in the program?

How would you describe yourself as a self-directed learner?

Can you describe how you demonstrate personal responsibility for your own learning?

What kind of support has your program advisor offered you as a learner?

How will you go about identifying someone as a thesis supervisor or potential thesis supervisor?

To what extent do you feel you have been mentored in the program?

Have you experienced any motivational difficulties toward your studies since entering the program?

What kinds of things have your family done that have helped you become a better learner?

What kinds of support do your principal and former department head offer you?

How are you negotiating theoretical information you receive with the practical, classroom teaching experiences?

Paula and Sabrina

Can you describe ways in which you have grown personally since your involvement in the program?

probe: Who or what has facilitated (or sparked?) this growth?

What have you learned about yourself since your involvement in the program?

How would you describe yourself as a self-directed learner?

Can you describe how you demonstrate personal responsibility for your own learning?

What kind of support has your program advisor offered you as a learner?

How have you gone about identifying someone as a thesis/project supervisor or potential thesis/project supervisor?

What kinds of support does your thesis supervisor offer you as a learner?

To what extent do you feel you have been mentored in the program?

What have you learned through your TA/RAships?

What have you learned through your committee work?

In our focus group discussion, we discussed this notion of a 'motivational dip.' Could you describe how this 'dip' has affected you as a learner?

probe: What have you done to gain your motivation back?

What kinds of things have your family done that have helped you become a better learner?

How do you see yourself negotiating the theoretical information you receive with the practical, classroom teaching experiences?

probe: What may help you in this process while studying full-time?