THE VOICE OF THE CHILD
The Experience of Former Youth-in-Care in Having their Views Heard

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK

in the Department of Human and Social Development

We accept this thesis as conforming
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Abstract

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that the child who is capable of forming his or her own views has the right to express these views and to be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings This research study examined the experiences of three former youth in care in having their views heard by adults during their time in care The study aimed at exploring the experiences from the youth's perspective, to better understand how this right to be heard was experienced by children and youth

A phenomenological methodology was used in the study to collect and analyze the conversational data The research question that guided this study was what is the experience of youth in having their views heard by adults while in care? The aim of the research project was to explicate the phenomenon of 'being heard' and to describe the essential components of being heard as the participants experienced it This study tried to provide the reader with a deeper understanding of the nature and meaning of the youth's experiences in having their views heard

The findings of the study have described the experiences of being heard Five themes emerged from the participants' experiences based on the analysis of their descriptive stories These themes were caring commitment, feeling safe protected and not judged, help in getting what I need, help in dealing with my problems, and intuitive knowing The participants of this study felt heard by adults who cared about, respected and treated them with dignity, and who communicated to the participants a sense that they were safe to voice their opinions without fear of rejection or ridicule The participants felt heard when adults cared enough to help them get the supportive resources they needed and who gave them support and guidance in dealing with their problems The participants sensed intuitively that they were being heard, based upon the body language and genuineness of the adults with whom they were relating

The findings of this study were compared to Article 12 of the U N Convention on the Rights of the Child and to other literature in the areas of children's rights, support and empowerment Comparisons revealed that the participants of this study were not significantly different from any other

human beings, children or adults, in their desire to feel empowered, in control of their lives, supported by caring others, and to live with dignity The participants felt heard by adults who related to them as if they had rights - adults who were empowering and who treated them in ways that respected their right to be heard

The significance of the findings is that the participants' ability to exercise their right to be heard appears to be contingent upon adults allowing them to exercise this right The attitude of adults and the skill with which they communicated to youth was fundamental to the youth feeling heard

This study has given a direct voice to youth and includes recommendations for further research as well as implications for policy and practice for practitioners and policy makers in effectively meeting the needs of children and youth

Examiners

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

This thesis is dedicated to my brother, Patrick Daniel Sheehan and to my Mom, Jean Shaw Sheehan, both of whom died during the course of this research project I love you and miss you so much Pat and Mom - until we meet again

Thank you Eric, for your enduring love and support You helped me to find the courage and strength to finish this project Your professional contribution has been enormous and your thoughts and ideas on children's rights have been particularly helpful Thinking of spending more time with you and our children, Sarah and Paul, has been the light at the end of that long, dark tunnel

Thank you Brenda, John and Steve for agreeing to participate in this study, for your interest and enthusiasm, and for giving me such insight into your experiences in being heard Your stories have been both compelling and inspirational to me and have had a very powerful influence on me personally and professionally

Thank you Susan, for being there when I needed you, for being such a good friend, and for helping to make this rather challenging project sometimes a fun endeavour I shall always remember our luncheons with a smile!

And finally - to my Dad, Jack Sheehan - as a celebration of our new friendship

Chapter One
Introduction

In September 1990 a World Summit for Children was held at the United Nations in New York to focus on implementation of the U N Convention on the Rights of the Child which had been adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989 This document codifies the rights of children and has been described by Stephen Lewis, former Canadian Ambassador to the United Nations as a "tool for advocates" Seventy-one heads of state and government and other leading politicians gathered to pledge themselves to improve the lives of children in their own countries and throughout the world The World Summit has raised the profile of children's rights internationally Canada played a leading role in formulating the Convention and ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991 Ted Hughes, Deputy Attorney General at that time, reported that British Columbia was in substantial compliance with the Charter

The U N Convention sets standards for the protection of children and provides a framework for enhancing and evaluating programs to improve the situation of children The Convention recognizes the vulnerability of children, their needs for special safeguards, protection and care, and the reality that children do not have political rights or influence

In June 1994 Victoria hosted an international conference on the Rights of the Child This conference provided an opportunity for representatives of many countries in the world to reflect on their progress in implementing the Convention While the laws of many countries may conform to the articles of the Convention, in practice legal rights can fall short of meeting children's needs because of attitudes of indifference and complacency For example my practice experience leads me to question whether the views of children are seriously considered when social service providers are making important decisions about them Polish pediatrician and youth worker Janusz Korczak, stated

> We fail to see the child just as one time we were unable to see the woman, the peasant the oppressed social strata and oppressed peoples We have arranged things for ourselves so that children should be in our way as little as possible A child's primary and irrefutable right is the right to voice his thoughts to actively participate in our verdicts concerning him (1993, p ix)

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that

> States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child
>
> For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law

Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that

> For the purposes of the present Convention a child means every human being below the age of 18 years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier

In British Columbia the concept of giving voice to children has been examined quite closely In November 1990, the Ombudsman published Public Report No 22 which examined the situation facing children and youth in this province from a cross-government perspective This report called for strengthened child advocacy in B C intended to give voice to children In October 1992 the Community Panel, appointed by the Minister of Social Services to review child protection legislation in B C , published a report dealing with the state of children, youth and families The Panel reported that the child welfare system in this province was in need of major reform Consumers and service providers alike were dissatisfied and believed that children and families were inadequately served by the system This report also called for strengthened child advocacy

In light of Section 12 of the United Nations Convention, this study seeks to

> **examine the experience of youth who were formerly in the care of the Superintendent of Family and Child Services in B C , regarding having their views heard by adults, while in the care of the Superintendent of Family and Child Services**

Relevance of the Study

The vulnerability of children has been of significant interest to me during my 20 years of social work practice and 11 years as a parent Children, especially those in state care, are particularly vulnerable because they have no political influence, no right to vote and their developmental capabilities are not clearly or consistently reflected in law (Task Force on the Child as

Citizen, 1978, Verhellen, 1990) As a result, policies and programs impacting on children are rarely if ever designed from a child's perspective

Like all human beings, children need to feel a sense of control over their lives, the need to be consulted and informed about problems, issues or decisions that impact on their lives This requires adult sensitivity to the child's abilities Children also need to learn the skills of challenging adult authority in appropriate ways as a necessary component of learning how to stand up for their own interests and rights Rosenbaum & Newell (1991) state

> Our democracy is based on the premise that groups of people stand up for their own interests and rights, but generally speaking children and young people are not in a position to do this Children are a large but uniquely uninfluential sector of the population They are particularly powerless and vulnerable, and are generally highly restricted in both the extent to which they can take decisions about their own lives and the extent to which they can participate in society's overall decision-making processes (Of course as children get older they gradually acquire more control over their own lives The definition we use for children is anyone under 18, since that is the legal definition, and it is also the one used in the UN Convention But even though 17 year olds have more say over their own lives than younger people do, they are still excluded from the democratic process) (p 16)

Though not always the case, especially for those children who come into contact with the child welfare system, parents typically act as natural advocates for children, to ensure that their needs are met and their rights safeguarded Children, particularly those in state care, are more vulnerable when their parents are unable or unwilling to act as their natural advocates

Many children receive services through state authorities in the fields of health, education, youth corrections and social services Their dependence on adults who are hired to care for them further increases their disadvantage and vulnerability In November 1990, the B C Ombudsman's Public Report No 22 estimated that approximately 18,534 children and youth under 19 years of age with special needs were placed in government operated, funded or regulated residential facilities during a one year period This represents a significant number of children who often cannot rely on parents to ensure that their voice is heard in matters affecting them

Providing children with the fullest information consistent with their age, and access to decision making processes in society will enable them to achieve some independence and autonomy in identifying their own interests and understanding their rights and obligations Boyden & Hudson (1985) make the point that

> Strenuous efforts should be made at national and international levels to support self-advocacy, self-representation and autonomous organizations for children In part this means opening up our institutions to a much greater degree and in part it means responding to the demands of children and young people whose experience of adult patronage has been disturbing In the interests of these children and of countless other children worldwide who operate outside of families, the time is surely right to start to view children's rights as separate from those of the family (p 13)

This study will provide an opportunity to learn from 3 youth about how they have experienced the phenomenon of being heard as children in state care The study has been limited to 3 former youth in care aged 19 to 20 years

This study is particularly relevant to social work practitioners I believe that it will provide insight into practice issues from the youths' perspective This perspective is often overlooked by adult service providers and policy makers It is important for the social work profession to make a clear distinction between the "best interests" of the child and the "child's perspective" Social work policy and practise is often guided by adult interpretation of what is best for children and youth, rather than the child and youth perspective of what is best for them The study is timely due to the high profile attention given to the U N Convention on the Rights of the Child at the Stronger Families Stronger Children Conference held recently in Victoria In British Columbia today, there are a number of initiatives underway by government and child advocates intended to make services more meaningful and accountable to consumers His Honour Judge Gove of the Provincial Court of B C , for example, was appointed in 1994 by the Provincial Cabinet to review child protection services in the province of B C (British Columbia Order of the Lieutenant Governor in Council, 1994) The Inquiry was formed in response to public outcry at the death of a five year old boy at the hands of his mother The child and his mother were well known to the child welfare system I believe this study provides insight into the views of some former consumers of state services in B C which could influence the way in which service providers evaluate their policies for youth in care

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to find out about the nature of some youths' experiences in having their views heard by adults during their time in the care of the Superintendent of Family and Child Services Article 12 of the U N Convention on the Rights of the Child makes it clear that a child has a

right to be heard I wanted to explore the experience of youth in being heard so that I could better understand how this right is experienced by children and youth By exploring the nature and meaning of being heard for these youth, I was hoping to gain insight into the connection between having a right and exercising it This study does not examine the experience of youth when they are not heard, nor does it examine the totality of their experiences in the child welfare system

Values, Beliefs and Experience

My beliefs and experience, both personally and professionally, are that children's viewpoints are not typically heard or respected by adults I believe that children are marginalized members of our society, with little formal power, authority or enforcable right to make their views heard Canada's national and social policies reflect a complete absence of children's viewpoints Children are an invisible minority, seen but not heard

I believe that everybody has the right to be treated with respect, dignity and to have their views valued The disempowerment of children is, in my view, morally, if not legally wrong During my social work career, I have become increasingly concerned about the marginalization of children As a worker in a residential treatment centre for children in Montreal, I was disturbed with the focus on the deficits and problems of the children, rather than on the social, economic, political and familial deficits that contributed to or caused their anti-social behaviour

As a protection worker in Vancouver, I also felt concerned that my energies focused almost exclusively on supporting parents, some of whom I discovered had little motivation in improving the situation of their children Sponseller & Fink (1982) echoed my concerns

> Much action that has been provided comes only indirectly to children Its purpose has been to help adults, and as a by-product, children are supposed to be helped However, indirect solutions may not always be the best way to help children Indeed, indirect solutions often give an illusion of doing something for children but may be diffuse and unpredictable in effect (p 17)

I believe that the majority of families care about their children However, I believe also that children continue to be treated with paternalistic and maternalistic benevolence Consequently, their opportunities to develop life skills and to reach their full potential are undermined

My beliefs, values, interests and experiences as a professional social worker and a parent led me to this research study I wanted to better understand the experience of youth in having their views heard by adults, while they were in care

Chapter Two
Literature Review

Approach to Literature Review

This literature review focuses on the issue of legal and moral rights of children from both a historical and a contemporary perspective Much of the literature reviewed has been written by child advocates who have an interest in the area of children's rights There is a significant variation between the positions of these writers that is evident in the literature, depending on whether the self-styled advocate seeks to "save" or to "liberate" children (Freeman, 1986, Kamerman, 1989, McDougall, 1985, Melton, 1983) The dichotomy of a nurturance and a self-determination orientation can also be understood as protecting children versus protecting their rights (Freeman, 1986, 1992) Freeman (1986) states that

> The former stresses the provisions by society of supposedly beneficial objects, environments, services, experience etc for the child, the latter stresses those potential rights which would allow children to exercise control over their environment, to make decisions about what they want, to have autonomous control over various facets of their lives (p 11)

This literature review is divided into two sections The first section begins by discussing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Castelle, 1989), which is a key document in understanding and establishing that rights for children are important This section also deals with some of the more institutionalized and less obvious barriers to children's rights For example, themes like the historical absence of legal rights for children, inadequate legal remedies, and the cultural beliefs about the authority of parents will be examined The second section takes a more in-depth look at the rights that are more visible to the children - issues like participation in decision-making, respect for the uniqueness of the individual , and opportunities to exercise these rights This section looks at literature on social support and empowerment as it relates to the opportunities that children and youth have in exercising their right to be heard

Children's Rights

As a general rule of law, children are not persons in their own right (Ayim, 1986, Boyden & Hudson, 1985, McDougall, 1985, Rosenbaum& Newell, 1991, Sponseller & Fink, 1982, Task Force on the Child as Citizen, 1978, Turner, 1988, Verhellen, 1990) They are socio-economic dependents reliant on the benevolence of adult authority figures such as parents and teachers to meet their needs, skills and ability in a developmentally appropriate way Freeman (1983) believes that we have distanced ourselves from children and in doing so, we have to an extent dehumanized the young Benevolence or liberal paternalism directed at children is no substitute for the recognition of a child's entitlement to the right to equal concern and respect (Freeman, 1983)

Freeman (1983) suggests that to understand why rights are important, one might consider a society where rights did not exist It would be a society in which relationships would be similar to those between a master and his slave Might would be right The powerless could make no demands at all There would be moral impoverishment (p 32) Freeman (1983) believes that rights are important because they enable us to stand with dignity, to demand what is our due without having to plead, beg or grovel Rights allow us to express indignation when what is our due is not forthcoming

The children's rights movement has grown and gained momentum in recent years because of the recognition of the necessity to acquire a better insight into the views, needs and ideas of a large segment of society, namely, children This is a population about whom we know very little (Farr, 1985) The study of children's own perspectives is therefore thought to be the most valuable contribution possible to support the conceptual expansion of the rights of children that would be based on rights instead of needs (Verhellen, 1990)

A U N Convention (or covenant)(Castelle, 1989) is a legal document setting out universally acceptable standards, agreed among nations by consensus A U N Convention is first adopted by all the member governments sitting together in the U N General Assembly Individual nations signify their intention to comply with the provisions and obligations it contains by ratifying it and making it law The U N Convention on the Rights of the Child is a document that has been ratified by Canada The role and usefulness of the Convention in providing a basis for examining and ensuring that children's rights are respected has been established by virtue of Canada's ratification of

the document Its importance, relevance and connection to the concept of children's voices is emphasized throughout this thesis The U N Convention, specifically Article 12, has been used as a point of reference in this study It provides a means of understanding the impact of the Convention on the everyday lives of children in state care Reference to the U N Convention will be made throughout this thesis to enhance the visibility and importance of issues regarding the status of children in the world generally and in British Columbia in particular and the problems inherent in this status It will be used as a means of understanding the reasons for and issues about children's special vulnerability and particular disadvantage in an adult-focused world A distinction will be made between the vulnerability of children living with parents, their natural advocates, and those children receiving services from the state where access to a natural advocate may be, for various reasons, compromised

Barriers

There are many barriers to children's rights being met and their voices being heard This section of the literature review will provide a context for the legal and socio-political status of children and youth today Some of the most obvious barriers to children exercising their rights are listed below These barriers are examined in more depth following this list

1 The historical absence of legal rights for children and/or the lack of enforcement of these rights (for example, the period when children were viewed as chattel) (Aries, 1985, Ayim, 1986, Bronfenbrenner, 1985, Boyden & Hudson, 1985, de Lone, 1979, Rosenbaum & Newell, 1991, Task Force on the Child as Citizen, 1978, Verhellen, 1990),

2 Cultural beliefs about the sanctity of the family and the authority of parents making state authorities reluctant to act, in other than residual ways, to safeguard children's rights (Ayim, 1986, Boyden & Hudson, 1985, I C C B News, 1992, Melton, 1983, Rosenbaum & Newell, 1991, Sponseller & Fink, 1982, Task Force on the Child as Citizen, 1978, Turner, 1981, 1988, Verhellen, 1990),

3 Societal assumptions about the incompetence of children (Ayim, 1986, Freeman, 1986, Goldstein, Freud & Solnit, 1979, Raychaba, 1988, 1993, Task Force on the Child as Citizen, 1978, Turner, 1988, Verhellen, 1990) and inconsistent definitions in law and policy of developmental competence,

4 The relative absence, or inconsistent interpretation, of information provided to children concerning their rights (Ayim, 1986, Bill M 234, 1989,

Boyden & Hudson, 1985, Turner, 1988, Verhellen, 1990), or appropriate training to exercise them,

5 Inadequate or residual legal remedies for enforcing children's rights (Ayim, 1986, Boyden & Hudson, 1985, Turner, 1981, 1988),

6 The limited attractiveness of children and children's issues (Ayim, 1986, Boyden & Hudson, 1985, Kamerman, 1989, Freeman, 1986, Rosenbaum & Newell, 1991, Sponseller & Fink, 1982, Task Force on the Child as Citizen, 1978, Verhellen, 1990) for politicians whose constituents are usually perceived to be voting age adults The Canadian federal government's lack of commitment to a national day care policy illustrates this state of efforts

In-depth Look at the Six Barriers

Absence of legal rights

Bronfenbrenner (1985) stated in his article The Future of Childhood that "one telling criterion of the worth of a society - a criterion that stands the test of history is *the concern of one generation for the next*" (p 185) Aries presents an article on the Concepts of Childhood in Greaney's (1985) book, Children Needs and Rights, that would seem to indicate that the worth of our society today is in question

Aries discusses childhood in terms of four periods Roman (Latin period), Traditional Christian up to the 19th Century, 19th and Early 20th Century, and the last half of the 20th Century The Roman period was characterized by adult attitudes of indifference towards children Children were not seen as gifts but were accepted only if the family chose not to abandon the baby These attitudes of indifference and abandonment gradually shifted over the centuries to the point where abandonment was eventually seen as morally and legally wrong Society became more child-focused and recognized the importance of schools in teaching children

The traditional Christian period up to the 19th century was characterized by attitudes of indifference and neglect towards babies The period of childhood was very short and lasted only until a child could support itself, usually around 7 years of age Beyond that age, children were considered a "category" of adulthood The important social unit was the community rather than the family Children did not go to school but rather apprenticed, and were thus continuously in the company of adults

The status of children improved significantly at the end of the 18th century Children moved from the position of being neglected and ignored to

becoming the centre of affection and interest Society became very family oriented and the sanctity and privacy of the family was emphasized This period also showed a marked decrease in the number of children per family

The last half of the 20th Century has been characterized by an excessive emphasis on the privacy of the family Children no longer enjoy high status Aries (1985) states that there is wide-spread and increasing frequency, across all socio-economic levels, of the occurrence of child battering Aries believes that children are becoming strangers to adults There is a communication breakdown both within and outside the family The excessive emphasis on the privacy of the family and the de-emphasis on public sociability has contributed to the breakdown of the family unit Aries (1985) states that

> At the beginning of the great urbanization movement the family was considered a haven While the haven image persists to some extent today, in many cases it has been replaced by the image of a prison, even if it is a prison with broken bars where people can come and go quite easily (p 20)

Freeman (1986) is critical of Aries' material on the evolution of the concept of childhood While recognizing that Centuries of Childhood is an important document of cultural history, he cautions against conclusions being drawn by writers working within the children's liberation paradigm Specifically, Freeman states that children's liberationists might legitimately conclude that, if at earlier stages of history children were not treated differently from adults, this warrants the conclusion that children today should be treated like adults

Until fairly recently, children were perceived as properly dependent on their parents who possessed the "right of control" over them Minors were seen to be incompetent to exercise self-determination based on their age alone (Canadian Council on Children and Youth, 1979, Canadian Mental Health Association, 1992, Goldstein, Freud & Solnit, 1979, Raychaba, 1988, 1993, Verhellen, 1990) Melton (1983) suggests that although children are now considered to be entitled to fundamental constitutional rights, the scope of these rights is significantly narrower than for adults Freeman (1986) suggests that altering the "law in the books" achieves nothing if the "law in action" (p 33) is not altered as well There are still many justices who continue to believe all children are incompetent to make informed decisions (Ayim, 1986, Melton, 1983) Courts have not typically stated their assumptions about children's capacities clearly and consistently There is a lack of standards for determining the competence to consent As Melton (1983) points

out though, this ambiguity means that there is the potential for the courts to recognize the actual competencies of children and youth and to respect their privacy

Cultural beliefs

Melton (1983) has stated that

> Much of the lack of clarity concerning the rights that children do have emanates from the fact that recognition of independent rights for them disturbs the traditional concept of inviolability of parent-child and, to a large extent, school-child relationships except under the grossest threats to the child's health and safety (p 5)

The courts have traditionally supported the sanctity and the privacy of the family and have shown reluctance to disturb the parents' rights to socialize their children as they see fit (Freeman, 1983, Melton, 1983) This assumption was originally grounded in economic interest However, the assumption that parental and children's interests are one and the same and basically unified is based more on ethical grounds The underlying belief is that children are helpless and incompetent beings in need of guardianship of autonomous parents within the privacy of the family Melton points out that, the "failure to recognize the multiplicity of interests involved and their independence, or at least partial independence from one another, leads to continuing confusion concerning what children's rights really are" (p 6)

Melton makes the point that for many adults, the idea of children having rights is particularly disturbing because these adults perceive children's rights as threatening to their personal freedom (Ayim, 1986, Boyden & Hudson, 1985, Verhellen, 1990) If one lacks confidence in one's parenting abilities and bases one's parenting style largely on the assertion of authority, then the expression of ideas by someone perceived as dependent and small may be unacceptable (Melton, 1983)

Competence of children

The extent to which a child's participation is valued in matters affecting him or her correlates strongly to the problem of informed consent and competence to make such a decision (Arthur, 1983, Ayim, 1986, Franklin, 1986, Freeman, 1986, Melton, 1983, Raychaba, 1993, Goldstein, Freud & Solnit, 1979) Even assuming competence, there is still a question of how realistic it is for a child to give consent in the face of a rather significant power differential

between children and adults Children learn to obey their parents and other authority figures

Those who seek to liberate children (Ayim, 1986, Freeman, 1992, Rosenbaum & Newell, 1991, Verhellen, 1990, 1992) acknowledge that maturation is accompanied by increasing competence but argue that children's lack of competence may often be the result of their being deprived of opportunities to exercise responsibility and socialization into self-determination Others (Goldstein, Freud, & Solnit, 1979) argue that children are properly deprived of such opportunities because of political, economic and psychological grounds

If children are to be given greater status in the courts, then our knowledge about their understanding of the legal process is essential "It may be that 'due process' for children really is different than for adults, at least in some circumstances" (Melton, 1983, p 25) Knowing what children think about their rights is both timely and important because consumer feedback is becoming increasingly valued by service providers, policy developers, and program funders (Raychaba, 1988, Task Force on the Child as Citizen, 1978) Children's thoughts on their rights will address the issue of the relevance of meaningful participation (Canadian Mental Health Association, 1992, Freeman, 1983, 1992, Raychaba, 1988, 1993) The degree of participation of children and youth in juvenile court matters, adoption and in custody proceedings is an important issue facing our society today (Boyden & Hudson, 1985, Freeman, 1986, 1992, Verhellen, 1992)

Melton (1983), on the basis of his studies on the issue of children's rights, hypothesized that children's perception of themselves as having just claim to rights is a function of both developmental factors and social class Piaget's (1965) and Kohlberg's (1976) research on moral development has shown that young children regard rules as sacred and untouchable emanating from parental or divine authority Children holding such views would be unlikely to challenge adult authority and assert rights for themselves (Boyden & Hudson, 1985)

Melton (1983) argues that the term 'rights' implies some universality, which would require a child to have at least partial respect for others He points out that Piaget believed that children developed a sense of social justice from the egalitarian peer relationships of middle childhood As children develop cognitively, they are more likely to differentiate between things they

are privileged to have and things that are theirs by right, or not there, in spite of their right to it The changes in the child's conceptual abilities are likely dependent upon having experienced rights as well as cognitive differentiation Melton (1983) believes that to children with low social economic status, rights may be seen as being dependent upon the whim of a benevolent authority The opportunities for these disadvantaged children to exercise decision making and role taking in social situations may be quite limited, which may impact on moral development

Melton's (1983) study hypothesized that children's concepts of their rights can be expected to develop along a progression of three levels of reasoning based on their age Melton predicted the following sequence of development of concepts of rights

- Level 1 - Children are at an egocentric stage of development and understand rights as bestowed by a benevolent authority Children have difficulty distinguishing "is" from "ought" and believe that it is by right that someone is able to have or do something Children think in concrete terms at this stage
- Level 2 - Children see rights as part of a complex system of rules and laws that are made and changed by people Rights can be confused with privileges at this stage of development and understood in terms of orderly social functioning
- Level 3 - Rights at this developmental stage are conceptualized in a much broader way and are seen as part of the basis for the ethical maintenance of human dignity and personal freedom The sense of natural justice may transcend laws and social mores

Melton's (1983) hypothesis that the development of concepts of rights is correlated to age and also social economic status was confirmed by his research study Melton believes that his study has some possible implications for public policy One implication is that children under third grade do not understand the concept of waiving rights and therefore would need an advocate during civil and criminal proceedings to ensure that a waiver would be in the child's best interests Melton believes that children frequently have the cognitive capacity to exercise rights and to function as "mature minors" at a much earlier age than was originally thought He cautions however, that an ability to define and conceptualize rights does not imply that they can be exercised maturely " indeed, competence might be expected to vary across

types of rights, given varying complexity of decisions and varying socialization concerning the appropriateness of asserting rights in various contexts" (p 41)

The results of Melton's (1983) study do not establish that children would exercise civil liberties even if they have the right to do so Melton advocates introducing curricula about rights belonging to children as early as third grade, based on two arguments

1 that there needs to be proper preparation for the reasoned exercise of rights,

2 that it makes sense to help children to develop toward principled views of rights

Melton makes the point that children's right to be different is a contentious issue within the mental health system, where children are often unwilling participants in therapy when their interests differ from their parents or the law

Lack of information about rights

Current child advocacy has at least two basic tenets - nurturance and self-determination (Melton, 1983) Nurturance rights tend to be based on a paternalistic belief that the state must respond to children's particular needs and interests Child-savers, who are those who advocate nurturance rights, perceive children as vulnerable and in need of special protections and entitlements Self-determination rights are based on the belief that adult civil liberties should be extended to children (Verhellen, 1990) Self-determination advocates, sometimes known as "kiddie-libbers" perceive children as more alike adults than different in terms of basic status as citizens of the community These two adult perspectives on children's rights are rooted in different concepts of the nature of childhood, and the capabilities of children The tensions between the two schools of thought can interfere with a united and concerted effort on the part of adults, to ensure that children understand and are able to exercise their rights Melton makes the point that a combination of nurturance and self-determination may be very good He notes that many children's liberationists advocate for broad social welfare entitlements Melton (1983) states that "where they are likely to depart from the child savers is in the latter group's tendency to support interventions for children's "own good" regardless of whether such "help" is requested" (p 10)

Nurturance by definition involves protection (Raychaba, 1993) Advocacy for nurturance rights for children involves decisions about what children should have and do Melton (1983) states that, "there is clear potential for advocacy of one's own economic and political interests (even if not consciously done for self-interest) in such a way as actually to limit the choices of the children whom one claims to represent" (p 18) Melton cites as an example of this type of advocacy, the turn of the century child savers who took an individualistic approach to rescuing youth from sordid inner city life The problem was perceived to be a deficit in the youth's attitude and morality rather than being the vast social and economic inequities of the day These child savers believed that a change in youth's attitude could overcome these forces Sheleff (1981) strengthens Melton's viewpoint when he says, "many of the child-savers' reforms were aimed at imposing sanctions on conduct unbecoming youth and disqualifying youth from the benefit of adult privileges Their reforms were aimed at defining and regulating the dependent status of youth" (p 216)

Melton (1983) suggests that there is considerable evidence that people tend to perceive the world as just and to rationalize the rewards and punishments as deserved Many social programs have been based on the belief that the poor are responsible for their plight This leads to energy being expended, for example, in serving deprived children rather than challenging the structure and inherent inequities in our institutions and bureaucracies

A number of authors make the point that there is a problem of adults seeing issues from the child's perspective (B C Ombudsman, 1992, Canadian Mental Health Association, 1992, Farr, 1985, Melton, 1983, Raychaba, 1988, 1993, Verhellen, 1990) Melton (1983) states that, "child advocacy is essentially 'cross-cultural' and entails the difficulties inherent in an attempt to express the viewpoint of people whose view of the world may be quite different from one's own" (p 22) Adults tend to work from the perspective of what the child's interest <u>should</u> be, as an adult sees it The process of interaction within the child's own culture has been largely ignored (Farr, 1985) It is therefore very difficult to perceive the child's interests from his/her point of view Melton (1983) states that

> Power rests with adults If child advocacy is to be more than mere paternalism or gratuitous platitudes, adults must become partners with

> children and youth in advocacy for their interests Perhaps at root, my point is that adult advocates for children must show them respect That sort of modeling ultimately may be the most potent source of change in the status of children and youth (p 288)

The Norwegian Ombudsman suggests that if children are believed to lack the competence to assert their rights, that this cannot be a reason for denying them the right to be consulted or to be kept informed of important decisions regarding their lives (Verhellen, 1990) Youth themselves are stating that they need to be informed of their rights (B C Ombudsman, 1993, Canadian Mental Health Association, 1988, Raychaba, 1993, 1988)

Inadequate enforcement of rights

There are many barriers to using the legal system to protect the rights of children Litigation is expensive and time consuming Using judicial action to fulfill basic rights is likely only when other branches of government are inactive and legislators and administrators are unwilling or unable to act The courts have difficulty forcing other branches of government to develop the financial and human resources necessary to implement the orders Melton (1983) notes also that the courts cannot monitor compliance

Historically, children were presumed to be incompetent beings who were unable to determine and safeguard their interests (Aries, 1985, Freeman, 1992) Children were not allowed to sue or be sued by others The Office of the B C Ombudsman, in its Discussion paper on Advocacy dated October 29, 1993, has made the point that the situation in British Columbia today has not significantly changed

Children may lack the means of entry to the legal system Children often lack standing in the adjudication of disputes, for example in custody disputes The Rules of the Supreme Court of B C require that children be represented by an adult of sound mind, known as a guardian ad litum, in any court action The guardian ad litum is frequently unsure about whether to advocate for the child's wishes or to argue for what the guardian/advocate believes to be in the best interests of the child The wishes of the child are not legally binding on the guardian The B C Combudsman (1993) states that

> When the guardian is a parent or relative, the interests of the child which may not be identical to that of the parent or family may not be protected or even acknowledged On the other hand where the guardian is a stranger to the child and there are competing adult interests in a lawsuit it is possible that the guardian is less assertive out of a biased regard for the adult interests and an insufficient regard for the child's interests (p 20)

An additional barrier to the participation of children in asserting and protecting their legal rights is the fact that the guardian ad litum must be prepared to pay the legal costs if they are the plaintiffs, lose the action, and the court has awarded costs against them It is the guardian and not the child that must pay This presents a rather significant disincentive to a guardian in launching a lawsuit on behalf of the child

On a class level, children may not be able to establish themselves as parties to the litigation Melton (1983) cites the example of litigation involving parental rights of the Amish people to keep their children out of school after grade 8 The children involved were not seen by the court as having a key interest in the dispute Ironically, the court saw the competing interests as being between the school board and the parents

Political powerlessness

Farr (1985) makes the point in his article Social Worlds of Childhood, that politics is an adult game played by adults, where children have few, if any, established rights Children are vulnerable to becoming targets for political pressures within a nation Farr (1985) raises the questions

> If children had certain "rights" with respect to the type of education which they received would this be an effective way of ensuring that they were "protected" from being manipulated? Is the answer to allow children a greater say in the affairs of the community, especially those affairs of greatest concern to them as children? (p 32)

Children, by virtue of their lack of force in the political arena, have fallen victim to reduced governmental resources In contrast, other groups have in fact enjoyed increased prominence and governmental priority

Farr (1985) points out that there have been some political concessions to youth in recent years, for example, the lowering of the age of majority (and hence age to vote) Such legislation has helped to establish youth as a legitimate pressure group in the world of adult politics Children however, continue to be without any strength or status politically and as such, have no say in the management of their own affairs Farr (1985) suggest that "if adults better appreciated the important social developments which occur in the course of growing up they might be prepared to allow children to have a greater say in the running of their affairs than they enjoy at present" (p 39) Farr believes that the moral and political education of children in many Western cultures is inadequate He sees these deficiencies resulting from the

failure of adults to reach agreement on what it is that children need to know He also sees the adults' lack of awareness and understanding of the culture of the child as problematic and a contributing factor in the ethnocentric attitudes being transmitted from one generation to the next

The Voice of the Child

The rights of children are not clearly spelled out and enshrined in law (Ayim, 1986, Freeman, 1986, Turner, 1981, 1988, Verhellen, 1990) Opportunities for a child's voice to be heard are contingent upon an understanding of what it means to give children a voice This section of the review illuminates some possibilities in changing the socio-political status of children and the accountability procedures in implementing any changes (Aries, 1985, Boyden & Hudson, 1985, Bronfenbrener, 1985, Canadian Mental Health Association, 1992, Farr, 1985, McDougall, 1985, Melton, 1983, Raychaba, 1988, 1993, Verhellen, 1990) Themes like participation, respect, empowerment and competence are discussed (Canadian Mental Health Association, 1992, Raychaba, 1988, 1993) The mechanisms for providing opportunities for children's voices to be heard and to be given due weight are examined (B C Ombudsman, 1992, Verhellen, 1990)

The benefits and limitations of having children freely express their views in all matters affecting them will be explored Issues of self-esteem, sense of identity and connectedness to their community, learning important life skills like the appropriate challenging of authority are discussed in the context of accepted democratic principles The issues of making mistakes, and of compromising the sovereignty of adult authority are discussed In addition, the economic benefits and liabilities to society are addressed This section of the literature review addresses some of the moral and practical imperatives of empowering children, an important step in achieving consensus on the merits of empowering children and youth

Examining the importance and impact of compliance to Article 12 of the U N Convention is reviewed in terms of accountability of state authorities to children and parents Mechanisms required to strengthen and reinforce the child's right to be heard are highlighted This section of the literature review examines the political and legal implications of empowering children which is essential in establishing the importance of empowering children and youth

Freeman (1986) states that the term moral right takes in a number of usages which have little in common except that they are not legal or

institutional in origin He suggests that when we talk of children's rights we are most often referring to moral rights, usually in the ideal sense of rights, but sometimes also in the sense of conscientious rights He describes conscientious rights as claims against individuals for a certain kind of treatment Freeman suggests that many references to children's rights are really aspirations for the accomplishment of a particular social or moral good The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child uses this type of language and recognises that the language of rights and the concepts inherent in them like dignity, as applied to children, is important (Freeman, 1992) "The case that children have rights has to a large extent been won the burden now shifts to monitoring how well governments honour the pledges in their nations laws and carry out their international obligations" (Freeman, 1992, p 39)

There are a number of problems and challenges inherent in the safeguarding of children's rights (Verhellen, 1992) Some of the literature covering issues relating to children's rights assumes that no conflict of interest exists between children and their adult caregivers and that caregivers are usually acting in the "best interests" of children Goldstein, Freud and Solnit (1979) state that

> Children, on the other hand, are presumed to be incomplete beings who are not fully competent to determine and safeguard their interests They are seen as dependent and in need of direct, intimate, and continuous care by the adults who are personally committed to assume such responsibility (p 3)

Goldstein, Freud and Solnit (1979) also make the point that there are problems inherent in the traditional goal of serving "the best interests of the child"

> In giving meaning to this goal, decision makers in law have recognized the necessity of protecting a child's physical well-being as a guide to placement But they have been slow to understand and to acknowledge the necessity of safeguarding a child's psychological well-being Yet both well-beings are equally important, and any sharp distinction between them is artificial (p 4)

There are still those who would argue that, however important children's rights are, it is not necessary to recognize as such, children's rights (Freeman, 1992) Freeman (1992) suggests that two myths are used for this argument One myth idealizes the adult-child relationship and emphasizes that adults and parents in particular have the best interests of children at heart Those who would argue this way tend to adopt a laissez faire attitude towards the family

Freeman further suggests that the only right for children that writers such as Goldstein, Freud and Solnit would accept is the child's right to autonomous parents He also states that the second myth used in the argument that it is not necessary to recognize children's rights is that childhood is a golden age and the best years of one's life The myth would see childhood as a time of innocence, freedom, joy and play, and a time to be spared the rigors of adult life Freeman refutes this myth and reminds the reader that there are countries which today are systematically exterminating children like vermin Poverty, disease and exploitation of children is seen in every part of the world (Boyden & Hudson, 1985, Freeman, 1992) The lives of children living in the developed world are also fraught with deprivation and child poverty has increased dramatically (Freeman, 1992, Task Force on the Child as Citizen, 1978) Freeman states that the case against children's rights is not worthy of respect He, like Wolfson (1992), suggests that rights are important because possession of them is part of what is necessary to constitute personality Wolfson suggests that moral and legal rights are held by those who have interests which are in some way intimately and inextricably bound up with their personality Wolfson (1992) states that the broad implication of understanding children's rights in this way are that a child could be said to have a primary right that we act in his or her interests

The child's perspective is not often addressed in depth, except in anecdotal or token ways Only in recent years have the notions of children as persons with a right to be heard been addressed, usually by children's rights activists and often in the context of juvenile delinquency "But there was a price once given 'special status', juveniles lost the protection of due process" (de Lone, 1979, p 56)

The U N Convention on the Rights of the Child and recent amendments to children's legislation in Canada and elsewhere suggest that societal attitudes are slowly changing Lopatka (1992) states that the U N Convention sets moderate rather than unduly ambitious standards of promotion and protection of the rights of the child Its provisions are an order for some and a incitement for all, universally, to raise the standards of promotion and protection of the rights of the child in all areas that concern the child in all countries of the world There has been a significant increase in the amount of literature in recent years about children's rights, however, it does not appear to be consumer driven Many would argue that there is no problem, that

support for adult caregivers is adequate and that this support will have a subsequent benefit to children

Verhellen (1992) states that the children's rights movement has devoted itself to the recognition of the rights of participation for children He believes that children should have the right to participate in determining their own living conditions and in shaping society The right to participate in democratic policy-making processes, the right to self-determination and the right to assert these rights independently are the pillars of human rights Verhellen (1992) states that the constantly recurring, fundamental argument for denying children autonomy and rights is their alleged incompetence in making informed decisions Children are labeled physically, emotionally and intellectually immature Verhellen (1992) states that "the most striking feature of this discussion on competence, at an underlying level, should be that the recognition of self-determination for children is essential in order to make them more competent, and not vice versa (p 81) He explains several trends in the discussion on competence

1 Reformist - considers the argument of incompetence to be valid but believes our society heavily underestimates the competence of children to make rational and informed decisions This trend believes that such a competence is acquired at a much younger age and that the process is gradual

2 Radical - children's liberationists challenge the argument of incompetence on ethical grounds Their starting point (the highest moral standard) is the equality of all human beings Any discrimination, including that based on age, is morally wrong The solution is to grant all human and civil rights to children as well as adults

3 Pragmatic - questions the practical reasons for not granting children all civil rights and the right to assert them independently They feel there are no such reasons except where the child's incompetence to assert specific rights can clearly be demonstrated This means children enjoying all the rights except in certain cases The advantage to this position is that the burden of proof is removed from the children's shoulders (Verhellen, 1992)

Verhellen (1992) states that

> At present, the position of children is exactly the opposite, and therefore very weak, since the burden of proving that they are entitled to self-determination lies completely with them This is the principle of children enjoying no rights except in certain cases This explains why so many rights of children are

> translated into obligations, for example, the right to learn and go to school becomes compulsory education (p 82)

Freeman (1992) suggests that if competence is a test, a significant proportion of children must be granted full political status and a large number of adults would have to be disenfranchised The child's lack of experience or understanding which are thought to be learned during the traditional period of childhood implies that if children lack foresight, they will make disastrous decisions if given the opportunity Freeman (1992) questions whether this is not the case with adults He believes that to take children's rights seriously requires us to take seriously nurturance and self-determination, and demands of us that we adopt policies, practices and laws which protect both children and their rights

There are many power dynamics which subordinate the social position of children Verhellen (1990) states that "the socially constructed position of dependence of children manifests itself in various ways in everyday life In this way, children are often considered as objects, as 'goods' and as 'property of' this is clearly reflected in the law (p 3) Children and youth are fragmented as an object of study (for example, as cognitive, moral and physical fragments) in isolation from a context This leads to seeing the child as different from adults, leading to different treatment which serves to emphasize the differences de Lone (1979) makes the point that

> Looking at children in a fragmented way leads to a scenario where "each specialist assumed responsibility for a fragment of the whole child, with planners and administrators at the top of the bureaucratic heap responsible for managing the system in a way that was supposed to put all the pieces back together (p 60)

The objectification of children has led to the denial and oppression of the child's frame of reference and the child's interpretation of self and his or her place in the world "Defining situations from the point of view of one particular interpretation, while ignoring so many others, comes down to assigning positions, to which the process of objectification gives a natural, evident and invariable look" (Verhellen, 1990, p 8)

The Task Force on the Child as Citizen (1978) has argued that children should be viewed as participating members of society and that they should enjoy the fundamental rights of any individual in society, gradually assuming developmentally appropriate responsibilities that adult members of the society must bear The family, community and the state must recognize and defend

children's rights and inform the young of the existence of these rights Attitudes must change to shape our future as a humane society where the dignity of each individual will be recognized and respected (Task Force on the Child as Citizen, 1978) The Task Force on the Child as Citizen (1978) has taken the position that "until the principle of an independent voice for each child is clearly established in law, then we believe it is inevitable that the human rights of children and youth will continue to be systematically ignored and so systematically violated" (p 157)

Youth have recently begun to articulate their own views which often diverge significantly from those of adults Raychaba (1988), a former youth in care, talks of the importance of youth becoming more involved in the design, implementation, operation and evaluation of the services which affect their lives Without it, the child welfare system becomes paternalistic, inefficient and dependency-inducing He states

> Empowerment is a priority for young people in care It must be recognized that the best care is not necessarily that solely endowed upon us from above or that done for us, rather, the best care should be viewed as a process in which both service providers and service receivers share the decision-making and the responsibility involved (p 6)

Raychaba (1988) notes that while youth in care do have some unique needs, they do however have basic developmental needs similar to youth not in care These include self-reliance, self-initiative and a sense of responsibility, all components of empowerment

Raychaba (1988) discusses the powerlessness of children in the child welfare system and quotes Armitage's description of that powerlessness "Indeed, the limited power they exercise is exercised not through any strength of organization that they possess, but rather on the basis of professional understanding of their situation" (p 49) Raychaba (1988) further notes that in a study of the perceptions of young people receiving child welfare services, Gabor and Greene found a yearning for participation and empowerment commonplace among youthful consumers of services The young people surveyed felt left-out of the planning process and disempowered Raychaba (1993) notes in his recent book Pain, Lots of Pain that Canadian youths' self-reported sense of loss of control echoes reports from the United Kingdom and the USA All report that the youth have expressed a pervasive sense of powerlessness while in care, an ingrained sense of being ignored, of not

being taken seriously and of not being listened to (Raychaba, 1993) Raychaba (1993) believes that when young people feel excluded from planning which affects their lives, the development of self-confidence, self-esteem and independent functioning will be greatly compromised This viewpoint has been echoed in B C Ombudsman reports (1994, 1993) and in the Report of the Community Panel Family and Children's Services Legislation Review in British Columbia (1992)

Raychaba (1993, 1988) raises an important issue when he discusses the feelings of powerlessness in youth in care He stresses the importance of adults empowering young people as a way of helping young people develop the skills they will need to live independently The literature on empowerment would seem to support Raychaba's belief that this is important Simmons & Parsons (1983) define empowerment as

> The process of enabling persons to master their environment and achieve self-determination It may occur through individual change, interpersonal or interactional change or change of social structures which have an impact on the individual As an intervention strategy, empowerment does not imply pathology in either the client or the social system, it does assume a potentially mutually beneficial interaction between individuals and the systems which affect them (p 194)

Lord (1989) defines personal empowerment as a "process whereby individuals feel increasingly in control of their own lives, including the resources they need to live in the community with dignity" (p 1) Lord has identified several factors which assist in the transition to empowerment They suggest that the process begins with a motivational trigger such as a crisis, frustration or outrage In many cases, the trigger leads to change because the individuals learn that they have a voice, and that there are people who will listen and understand The willingness to question is seen as an important factor in the transition to empowerment

Lord (1989) suggests that the process to empowerment almost always includes a change in the person's environment or context, often involving a new person or people in the context Frequently, the significant person provides an important bridge for the person to peers, self-help groups, or other community resources As the empowerment process evolves, many people find that their growing awareness of their own capacities and rights helps them develop a sense of personal control and competence Lord (1989) has found that the process of participation is in itself empowering On one

hand, as people gain self-confidence, they seek more avenues for participation On the other hand, involvement in activities enhances self-confidence and personal control because it reduces isolation and provides involvement in a meaningful activity The points raised by Lord (1989) are consistent with what Raychaba (1993, 1988) is saying

The central thesis in the writings of young people is that children are persons in their own right entitled to the same respect and dignity as that afforded to adults Youth are persons, more competent to participate in their own lives than has previously been recognized Youth typically are not seeking to make autonomous decisions, but they are asking to have the decision making process opened up and to be admitted as participants (Canadian Council, undated) The National Youth Committee of the Canadian Mental Health Association (1992) recently asked eight 16 to 19 year olds from the National Youth in Care Network about assessing and developing policies and programs The results of the study showed significantly different priorities between youth and adults in policy and program development

> The young people emphasized the importance of emotional and mental well-being over physical comfort and rigid adherence to standards Indeed, they questioned the tendency to stress the enforcement of standards, such as building codes, safety regulations, fire codes at the expense of an adequate focus on providing for the emotional needs of the clients The youth made it very clear that for them, respect is a prerequisite to any service or youth policy They feel that they have the same right to respect as people of other age groups, and that youth policies based on an attitude of respect are far more likely to be effective in meeting youth's needs than those that are not (p 2)

The young people also talked about the importance of participating meaningfully in the decisions that affect their lives (B C Office of the Ombudsman, 1994, B C Ministry of Education & Ministry Responsible for Multiculturalism & Human Rights, 1992, Canadian Mental Health Association, 1992, Report of the Community Panel Family and Children's Services Legislation Review in B C , 1992, Proceedings of the Follow-Up Consultation on Juvenile (Adolescent) Prostitution, 1990, Raychaba, B , 1993, 1988) They emphasized the importance of being offered genuine choices, ones which involve selecting from real alternatives The youth rejected completely the goal of autonomy They pointed out that we are all interdependent, and that people should not be left out in the cold to fend for themselves What young people were asking for were services that would provide them with the tools they will need for tomorrow - a sense of self-worth, a repertoire of problem-

solving skills and an identification and connectedness with family and community (B C Office of the Ombudsman, 1994, 1993, Canadian Mental Health Association, 1992, Proceedings of the Follow-Up Consultation on Juvenile (Adolescent) Prostitution, 1990, Raychaba, 1993, 1988)

The issues of respect and interdependence with adults that are raised by the youth are addressed in literature on social support There has been growing evidence over a number of years that social support plays an important role in maintaining emotional and physical health and in mitigating against the deleterious effects of environmental and social stress Belle (1989) defines social support as "resources that are provided by other people and that arise in the context of interpersonal relationships" (p 1) Supportive resources include such things as information, material assistance, affection, physical comforting, empathic listening, assistance in probem solving and reassurances of worth The function of support is to give information to an individual that one is loved, cared for, esteemed, valued and belongs to a mutally obliging communication network (Cobb, 1976) There is recent evidence to suggest that perceived support is even more important than received support in buffering an individual against stressful life events (Callahan & Morrissey, 1993) According to those who hold this view, the value of support lies in the perception that it is available

It is generally agreed that children have a great need for instrumental and emotional resources from others, yet there have been very few studies done on the impact of social supports and networks on children Belle (1989) suggests that children's social networks have been viewed implicitly as deriving from their parents' networks and therefore are of limited importance There is however, considerable evidence that stressful life experiences are a major contributor to the mental and physical health problems of children and youth (Belle, 1989, Benard, 1987, Garbarino, 1980) Rutter (1983) researched the variables that appeared to mitigate social stressors on at-risk children and youth He found that the variables included a warm, close, personal relationship with an adult, and the opportunity for children and youth to participate in a meaningful way so that the youth could feel a sense of responsibility and achieve success at a meaningful tasks These variables are consistent with what the youth in Raychaba (1993, 1988) and Canadian Mental Health Association (1992) are saying

There is a tendency on the part of adults to interpret problems experienced by children in terms of the deficiencies of children rather than on the deficiencies of their parents and the deficiencies of society in ensuring equity For example, Ayim (1986) points out that in 1978, an Alberta Juvenile Court dismissed the complaint of an Alberta girl that she and her sisters were being abused by their parents

> The girl who registered the complaint had attempted to commit suicide Although all three children had been beaten many times, the court decided that the physical discipline was carried out 'in a meaningful manner' and cleared the parents The complainant, however, was judged to be a 'child in need of protection because of her self-destructive tendencies,' and she was removed from the home The other two children remained (p 347)

The Task Force on the Child as Citizen (1978) states that although we have developed theories of child development about which there is some agreement, we still embrace the theories from a viewpoint of children being essentially passive and dependent The child's role is to cooperate, obey and to go to school when old enough This attitude sees children as having no role to play in adult-decision making about them Perhaps innocently, but nonetheless effectively, this perception renders the child invisible

Flekkoy (1992) discusses how adult attitudes as individuals and as a group shape and influence children and their development The child's development of self-confidence, self-respect and identity is determined largely by the signals that the child receives about how others - amongst whom loved adults are very important - perceives the child's behaviour, feelings, thoughts and reactions The child wonders whether they are good or bad, valuable or worthless and if their attitudes and values are in harmony with their community and the people that care for them Flekkoy (1992) wonders if adults are communicating to children that they are valuable as they are and suggests that what adults are really signaling is a wish for them to grow up He sees an incongruence between society's professed attitudes and society's actions For example, the principle that education is important is quite incompatible with the reality that children are forced to attend run-down unsafe school using tattered books and outdated information (Flekkoy, 1992, Kozol, 1991) Flekkoy (1992) states that "children and youth as active, participating members of groups, with opinions worth listening to, are not considered important enough, at least not yet" (p 147) He suggests that the next generations of parents must be brought up to respect the integrity and

dignity of all other human beings, including the small ones, as equal although different from themselves Flekkoy (1992) believes that the world needs children and that they are the "hope of the future because they give purpose and meaning to life when ideologies crumble, when despair threatens to overwhelm us, when everything else seems to fail" (p 147)

In keeping with the conviction that the least that people in power can do to build a sense of community is to listen to those who are disenfranchised, the U N Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989, Article 12) requires states parties to ensure that children have the opportunity to express their views about matters concerning them Perhaps the spirit of this provision could go beyond the right to be heard in individual matters to the right to voice opinions on matters affecting children as a class (Melton & Limber, 1992) Melton and Limber (1992) suggest periodic systematic surveys of children themselves about matters pertaining to their rights which might be an essential element of each nation's implementation of the Convention This has been echoed in B C Office of the Ombudsman (1994) and Canadian Mental Health Association (1992)

Melton and Limber (1992) suggest that another rationale for involving children in the definition of their rights is that it may have the beneficial effect of increasing the self-esteem of children, which is so closely associated with increased perceived control They make the point that the recognition of rights provides a way of ensuring that power is used to uplift rather than to oppress When applied to children, a class with little power, "sensitivity to rights is apt in itself to 'humanize' relationships, especially with authority" (p 183) Minow (1990) strengthens their argument when he states

> The use of rights discourse affirms community, but it affirms a particular kind of community a community dedicated to invigorating words with power to restrain, so that even the powerless can appeal to those words It is a community that acknowledges and admits the historical uses of power to exclude, deny, and silence - and commits itself to enabling suppressed points of view to be heard, to making covert conflict overt (p 229)

Melton and Limber (1992) suggest developing institutions like the Norwegian Ombudsman to make ongoing assessment of the impact of policies and practices on children They also suggest an international ombudsman so that aggrieved children can complain and seek redress when their state, though a party to the convention, violates the rights contained in it

Children represent approximately one-quarter of the population of Canada and yet their views and perceptions are not reflected in our national and provincial social policies (Canadian Mental Health Association, 1992, Canadian Task Force on The Child as Citizen, 1978, Raychaba, 1988, 1993) There is a pervasive and entrenched belief that policies serving families and communities will be sufficient and effective in meeting the needs of children (Sponseller & Fink, 1982) One-quarter of our nation's population is largely invisible in terms of their social and political status (Raychaba, 1993, Task Force on the Child as Citizen, 1978) The logic of this disempowerment and silencing of our children and youth must be re-examined and questioned from the standpoint of a just and democratic society valuing every member of that society (Boyden & Hudson, 1985)

Summary

This review has examined literature that establishes that children's rights are important Literature on some of the most obvious barriers to children exercising their right to be heard has been reviewed, such as the historical absence of legal rights to children, inadequate legal remedies for enforcing this right, and the cultural beliefs about the authority of parents and the incompetence of children Literature on some of the factors that strengthen the opportunities that children have to exercise their right to be heard has also been reviewed, such as participation in decision-making, social support and empowerment

This literature review highlights the important point that a change in adult attitudes about children, their rights and their capabilities is a fundamental component in strengthening the mechanisms for ensuring that children can and will exercise their right to be heard

Chapter Three

Methodology

The research question posed in this study was What is the experience of youth in having their views heard by adults while in care? The importance of understanding this experience, from the youths' viewpoint, has led me to a human science perspective and to a phenomenological inquiry I have chosen a phenomenological methodology to explore the experiences of three former youth-in-care in having their views heard by adults during their time in care

The basis of this study is Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), stated in Chapter 1, which will be used as a point of reference for examining the congruence between the youths' right to be heard and the nature of the youths' experiences in being heard by adults

There are several methodological assumptions underlying this approach

1 The phenomenon must be studied in a holistic way, that is, the phenomenon cannot be studied as a decontextualized unit

2 The researcher and participants (or co-researchers) interact throughout the process of the inquiry and influence each other The researcher and participants are both fully engaged in the research process

3 There is no absolute truth The assertions of truth are bound by a persons's culture, history and life story

4 This inquiry is influenced by my choice of the problem, by my framing of the problem and question, the collection of the data and the analysis of the data

As a researcher, I have been influenced by a number of phenomenologists, including Van Manen, Ray and Osborne Van Manen (1990) states that

> Phenomenology is the study of the lifeworld - the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect on it Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences Phenomenology asks, "What is this or that kind of experience like?" (p 9)

Phenomenology does not offer us theories with which we can either explain or control the world, but rather it offers us the possibility of credible insights that strengthen our contact with and understanding of the world (Van Manen 1990) Ray (1985) states that

> Phenomenological research is the study of lived experience Phenomenology's purpose is to seek a fuller understanding through description, reflection, and direct awareness of a phenomenon to reveal the multiplicity of coherent and integral meanings of the phenomenon (p 173)

I believe, as Van Manen (1990) does, that consciousness is the only access that humans have with their world, and that anything that presents itself to consciousness can be of interest to phenomenology, whether the phenomenon is real or imagined, objectively measurable or subjectively felt Humans

cannot reflect on their lived experience while they are living through that experience and thus phenomenological relfection is retrospective Suransky (1980) explains that

> The preconceived world is the primary reality All knowledge is sustained by a ground of postulates derived from the primary experience with the world It is experience that provides the original data Essences (content/theories) are mere formulations which should be utilized to disclose experience The perceived experienced world is the foundation of all our meaning structures

Our lived experiences are accessed by our perceptions of our experiences Our perception involves our beliefs, values, feelings, hopes and the personal ways in which people regard themselves and each other I am aware that the experiences of the participants of this study were mediated by their personal biographies and their situatedness in time and in the particular context

Research Method

I have used a phenomenology design, through the phenomenological method of in-depth interviewing to yield the descriptive data for the study Morse (1989) states that "The phenomenological method is one of direct inquiry in which constant questioning provides further insights into the lived experience" (p 91) Through this study, I have aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature and meaning of the youths' experiences in having their views heard by adults Morse states further that

> Excellent phenomenology touches us, it reaches our own souls, beneath the part of us that superficially declares, 'that's it!' so important to the validation process in grounded theory or ethnoscience The power of phenomenology is in the sharing, not because the experience is shared, but because the glimpses of pain, indecision, and uncertainty revealed by the writer during his or her own exploration are imprinted on our souls (p 91)

The experience of youth, from their own perspective, has not often been studied, and is rarely addressed in either the literature or in our country's social programs designed to serve them Recent Canadian studies involving youth participants are discussed in Chapters 2 and 5 Children and youth are however, often excluded from participating as either producers or subjects of knowledge This "lack of voice" compels this study in the sense that "research must begin to reflect the experience and concerns of people who have traditionally been marginalized by the research process and by what gets counted as knowledge" (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p 22) Kirby and McKenna believe that people on the margins often know something is wrong, but their

concerns are interpreted as a personal problem or failing, rather than as a public issue By using a phenomenology design, this study attempts to elucidate the nature of the youths' experiences in being heard, from the youths' own life experiences Phenomenology offers a means by which the lived experiences of youth regarding the phenomenon of being heard, can be studied and understood This study will strive to give a voice to youth Kirby and McKenna (1989) make the point that

> If you can increase the understanding of an issue or a circumstance, illuminate one experience, portray one person's story in a new light, you will have helped others to understand the social world a little better This is what research is all about (p 96)

In order to pursue human science research, Van Manen (1990) suggests that phenomenological research may be seen as a dynamic interplay among six research activities

1 turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world,
2 investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it,
3 reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon,
4 describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting,
5 maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon,
6 balancing the research context by considering parts and whole (p 30)

In attending to the first activitity, I have made explicit my beliefs, values and assumptions regarding being heard Osborne (1990) believes that bracketing is a necessary step in recognizing the unavoidable presence of the researcher in the formulation of the question, the determination of the data, and their collection and interpretation Rather than attempting to eradicate the influence of the researcher, Osborne believes that the researcher must attempt to articulate his or her presuppositions and biases through a process of rigorous self-relfection Thus the reader of the research will be able to take the researcher's perspective into account Van Manen (1990) believes that the denial of our pre-suppositions might lead to unconscious biases which ultimately will influence our reflections Van Manen states that we must make our own beliefs and biases explicit to use the knowledge against itself and to expose gaps in this knowledge The dialogue between our pre-suppositions and

the data from the participants opens up the possibility for new meanings to be co-created Van Manen (1990) states that

> If we simply try to forget or ignore what we already "know," we may find that the presuppositions persistently creep back into our reflections It is better to make explicit our understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories We try to come to terms with our assumptions, not in order to forget them again, but rather to hold them deliberately at bay and even to turn this knowledge against itself, as it were, thereby exposing its shallow or concealing character (p 47)

I consciously assimilated my knowledge and the meaning of the participants so that we could open up the possibility for new meaning to be co-created I was aware of my beliefs and pre-suppositions about not being heard and began this study with a belief that children are often not heard I did not have many pre-suppositions about the nature of being heard other than a belief that respect for another human being is a component of hearing someone In an effort to better understand what the particiants were telling me about their experiences of being heard, I asked probing questions This in turn generated deeper levels of thought for both researcher and participants We ended with new insight into the participants' experiences of being heard that would not have been anticipated by either participants or researcher

I did a literature review on the theory and research available on children's right to be heard and their experiences in being heard by adults This review helped me to become more fully aware of my pre-suppositions I made explicit my assumptions about children and youth being heard by adults based on my years as a social work practitioner These include

1 The opportunity for children and youth to be heard in a meaningful way by adults, by our politicians, and by our policy makers is very limited,

2 Children and youth are not typically regarded by adults as competent beings and hence the strength of the child or youth's opinion is significantly weakened,

3 Children and youth are vulnerable members of a minority group Many of their rights as outlined in the U N Convention on the Rights of the Child are not legally enforceable

4 Many adults believe that they are in a better position than children or youth to know what is best for them

5 Many of the bureaucracies and structures of our country, for example, schools and child welfare agencies, and the adults working within them, do not

empower children or provide them with many opportunities to develop independence skills I think there is a tendency, even on the part of well-meaning, caring adults, to hold onto their power rather than use it to strengthen and support the empowerment of children and youth

The literature review served to make me more aware of my own meanings, biases and presuppositions As I read through a variety of literature, I found myself nodding my head in agreement with much of what I was reading regarding the difficulties children and youth face in exercising their rights My biases became more explicit and obvious to me because I was reading it in print It gave me an opportunity to think about what exactly my position was regarding children's rights I was thus able to be more careful to avoid imposing these biases onto the participants of this study The question that guided my research allowed me to set aside my biases that children are not often heard by adults, and to explore the participants' experiences of being heard, a phenomenon that I knew very little about

Selection of Participants

The selection of a sample has a dramatic influence on the quality of the research The goal of phenomenology is to understand everyday experiences and it is therefore important to have participants who have experience with the phenomenon being studied The participants must be knowledgeable about the phenomenon and be able to reflect and provide detailed experiential information about the phenomenon being studied As Cohen (1987) stated, "the concern is with individuals and their views Informants, not theories, are consulted and trusted" (p 31) The participants must be willing to share their experiences with the researcher and to critically reflect on their experiences and their response to it The participants and researcher engage in a deep and meaningful conversation with each other and thus the researcher penetrates the deeper layers of the participant's lived experience

I chose three participants for this study who had all experienced being heard by adults while they were in care and who were all capable and willing to reflect on the experience of being heard and to discuss them with me This is not to say that the youth only had experiences of being heard or that, as a result of this, their experiences in care were all positive Quite the contrary, the youth had many experiences of not being heard by adults, and at least one youth had very bad experiences of being in care However, the purpose of my research was to examine their experiences of being heard, which they all had

The three youth are now young adults aged 19 to 20 years and were all formerly in the care of the Superintendent of Family and Children's Services in B C I chose to interview former youth in care because of the problems in accessing youth under 19 years of age who are living in state care There is a lot of bureaucratic 'red-tape' from the Superintendent's Office regarding having access to children in state care The Superintendent is the official guardian of children in state care and is very cautious about allowing anyone to interview these children and youth, for reasons of confidentiality, etc

I located these former youth-in-care by contacting a former youth-in-care known to me who had indicated that she would like to participate in this research project She offered to contact other former youth-in-care through the Youth-in-Care Network, a network where youth-in-care have informal contacts with one another There is no formal organization of youth-in-care at present, where former youth in care can be contacted Emily was unable to participate in this study due to health problems, but contacted a friend of hers named John, about my project John indicated to her that he would be willing to talk to me I telephoned him and we arranged to meet to discuss the study John asked me a number of questions about the study and my interest in doing it John telephoned me later that evening to confirm that he would like to participate in the study We had our first interview at the beginning of February and the second one a week later

During my initial meeting with John to discuss the research, a friend of his happened to walk by the restaurant where we were having coffee, and John called him in Gordon asked about my research and then enthusiastically asked if he could participate I contacted my research committee about Gordon, who was a former youth-in-care in a jurisdiction outside of B C The Committee believed that Gordon should not be considered as a participant of this study because he had been in care in a jurisdiction outside B C However, at the Committee's suggestion, I met with Gordon informally and asked for his ideas on the phenomenon of being heard I did not tape record the meeting because I did not intend to use Gordon's story in my research I was merely attempting to orient myself to the issues that he saw as relevant and important in his experience of being heard by adults while in care I was also very open with him about what my research was about I made a few notes during my meeting with him

In response to my asking John if he knew of anyone else who would be interested in participating in my study, I was contacted by Brenda, a friend of John's Brenda said that she was very interested and would like to meet for coffee to discuss it During our meeting, Brenda said that she would really like to participate, and we set a time for the first interview The first interview took place in early March and the second interview one week later I met with Brenda two more times, in April and in October, to have her validate my research findings

Neither John nor Brenda had any ideas about who else might be willing to participate in my study I consequently contacted a colleague of mine who works with former youth in care This colleague said that she knew of someone who would probably be very interested in participating in my study She contacted this youth and he in turn telephoned me Steve very enthusiastically said he would like to participate He said that he didn't need to meet with me before the interview began as he had "nothing to hide" I had my first interview with Steve in early April and the second interview several days later

In an effort to balance the benefits that both researcher and participants would gain from the research experience, I paid each participant $10 per hour for their time They were informed of this before the research began Each participant received $40 from me, although Brenda received extra because of the third meeting that I had with her I also paid her $10 for transportation costs which the other participants didn't require

The youth who participated in the study have had a diversity of experiences of being youth-in-care All of the youth were formerly permanent wards The participants came into care at different ages and developmental stages (infancy, early childhood, and adolescence)

All research participants were in care for at least a minimum period of 12 months during the ages of 14 and 19 years Brenda and John were in care from early childhood until they reached 19 years of age Steve came into care at age 16 and was discharged at age 19 years I believe that adolescents in this age group have a heightened awareness of and interest in participating in, sharing or directing the decision making process with adults in matters of concern to them For that reason, I believed the youth in the study were more likely to have an interest in reflecting on the phenomena I wanted to study

People must feel comfortable when they are talking about issues that are personal and important to them This study was conducted in a place agreed upon by each participant and the researcher John was interviewed in an office downtown, near his home and worksite Brenda was interviewed at my office, which is near a bus route to her home Steve was interviewed in his own home Gordon and I met to discuss the research at a park near his home

Ethical Considerations

All of the youth in this study have reached the legal age of majority Every youth I contacted was interested in participating in the research study I met individually with each of the three youth to explain the research project, the purpose of the study, and to give them assurances of privacy and confidentiality I explained the methods I was using in gathering the information, the way in which I would be analysing the data, and the way that the information would be verified I did not at that time discuss or explain Article 12 of the U N Convention on the Rights of the Child I talked in general terms about my interest in learning about the nature of their experiences in being heard by adults while they were in care The purpose of this initial meeting with the youth (individually) was to ensure that they were making an informed decision when they consented to participate further in the study I reassured the youth that they could refuse to participate at any time during the process of the study The participants were all informed that there would be two or more interviews Written consent forms were signed before the research began

The youth's identities have been kept confidential and were not used in the study Their names are fictitious The youth were told that I would be gathering data through in-depth interviewing and analyzing the data by coding specific words, themes and concepts that emerge during the analysis phase of the study The youth were all asked at the beginning of the study if they would be willing to critique and modify my analysis They were offered the opportunity to read it and to provide feedback by means of a follow-up interview They were informed that all of their questions about the study would be addressed and the findings made available to them A copy of the letter of consent is found in Appendix A The youth remained anonymous at all times during the study, with the exception of John and Brenda who knew about each other, and my colleague and Steve who knew about each other

At the end of the second interview, I explained the U N Convention on the Rights of the Child in general to each participant, and Article 12 in particular so that the participants all understood my frame of reference in conducting this study The participants were very interested in hearing about the U N Convention None of them were familiar with it, although they knew it existed and they knew they had rights

Data Collection

The data for the study were collected through two in-depth interviews with each of the participants The interviews were conducted by me, a social work practitioner with a particular interest in children and youth In order to understand the experience of youth in having their views heard, I believe that in-depth, in-person interviews were essential The interviews were conversational in nature rather than a question and answer format The questions I asked were open-ended and designed to allow insights for both the researcher and participants to occur I joined my participants in conversation None of the youth knew me and there needed to be a rapport established between participants and researcher in order to maximize the amount of data obtained

I conducted the in-depth interviews over a three month period During the course of the in-depth interviews with the second participant in this study, I began to hear familiar and similar experiences expressed by the previous participant I interviewed one more participant to be sure that no new information was forthcoming and that repetitive and familiar themes continued to emerge The data generated from the interviews was audiotaped by a cassette recorder I made some notes during the interview, on points that I wanted to follow up on with the participant, later in the interview

The data collection took place during the months of February, March and April, 1994 at a time and place that was mutually convenient to the participants and myself as the researcher

The data from the tapes was transcribed and recorded on to floppy discs and on to the hard drive of my computer

Interview Questions

Based on my review of the literature, I developed thirteen prompting questions from concepts and themes that emerged from the literature review Although I made an effort to cover all of the following questions, my focus was on probing the responses of the participants to the questions This meant that

some questions were covered without my having to ask them The order in which the questions were asked was determined by each participant's response to the first question The questions are as follows

I would like to talk to you about "being heard" by adults, while you were in care

1 What does "being heard" mean to you? Is it important to you? Can you tell me why? Conversely, can you tell me why not?

2 Can you tell me about some of your experiences in being heard by adults, while in care?

3 Can you tell me about some times when you felt heard (e g who, when, where, why etc)? In what ways were you heard?

4 Conversely, can you tell me about some times when were you not heard by adults?

5 Was your opinion considered when decisions were being made about you? How do you know?

What were the circumstances?

6 Did you feel free to express your views to adults when matters important to you were being considered? Can you tell me about it?

7 Do you think that your views carried weight when matters important to you were being considered? Can you tell me about it?

8 Conversely, do you think that your views did not carry weight when matters important to you were being considered? Can you tell me about it?

9 Was your age a factor in being heard by adults and your views given weight, when matters of importance to you were discussed?

10 What was it like to be a child/youth in care?

11 What happened when decisions about you were made (like placement)?

12 What happened when you did not like a decision that was made about you?

13 If you were training adults on how to communicate successfully and effectively with children and youth, what would you be teaching them?

Data Analysis

After I had transcribed verbatim the conversations that I had with each participant, I began the process of thematic analysis In order to gain an overall impression of the conversations as a context, I listened to the audiotapes several times and reread all of the verbatim transcripts a minimum

of 8 times Repeatedly listening to the tapes, word for word, was important in helping me capture the conversation between myself as researcher and each of the participants, as accurately as possible It also was helpful in reminding me of of the manner in which the participant was non-verbally expressing opinions, by listening to the voice intonation and to verbal expressions of emotion I noted the participant's body language and facial expressions throughout the transcription where I thought the bodily reaction was significant These observations were enclosed in brackets in the transcripts During the transcription, I left a wide margin on the right hand side of the page for the purpose of noting the units of general meaning

The next step in the analysis of the data involved delineating the units of general meaning (Hycner, 1985) I did not at this time consider how the units of general meaning addressed the research question Rather, I tried to get to the core of the meaning as expressed by the participants I did this by staying close to the literal data I then began the process of reading each word, phrase, sentence and paragraph in order to get to the essence of what the participants were telling me I made note of these units of general meaning, which were mostly the literal words of the participants, in the right hand margin of the transcript The result was a delineation of units of general meaning which Hycner (1985) describes as "those words, phrases, non-verbal or para-linguistic communications which express a unique and coherent meaning" (p 283) I wrote out the units of general meaning on the right hand side of each of the six transcripts and remained true to the literal words of the participants Hycner (1985) suggests that even the redundant general meanings be included, which I did

The next step in the analysis was the delineation of the units of meaning relevant to the research question Once I had noted all the units of general meaning, I reread the units, asking myself the question, "is this an essential constituent of the experience of being heard as experienced by the participant?" This was done in order to determine the units of relevant meaning which are what the participant has said that relates to and illuminates my research question Some of the units of meaning were either ambiguous or I was just unsure about whether it was relevant to the research question In these situations, I included them as units of relevant meaning I highlighted all units of relevant meaning with a felt pen as a way of differentiating them from the units of general meaning A graduate student

colleague of mine read through all the transcripts and the units of general meaning in one transcript, and told me that she was in agreement with my findings This verification was helpful to me in determining that I was "on the right track" Those units of general meaning that have not been selected as units of relevant meaning were assessed by me as being non-essential to the structure of the experience of being heard

I read over the list of units of relevant meaning to eliminate redundancies, which are phrases redundant to the others previously listed I noted those phrases that appeared a number of times since the redundancy might have been significant in understanding the importance of the issue to the participant

Once I had listed the non-redundant units of relevant meaning, I then began clustering units of relevant meaning I first identified words or phrases which appeared to exemplify the experience of being heard for the participants This was a rigorous process of examining each individual unit of relevant meaning The aim was to elicit the essential element of that unit of meaning, given the research question Hycner (1985) states that "such an essence emerges through rigorously examining each individual unit of relevant meaning and trying to elicit what is the essence of that unit of meaning given the context" (p 287)

I then gave the units of relevant meaning a preliminary title and looked over the lists of words and phrases and judged which words or phrases naturaly clustered together I went over each of the clusters of meaning to decide which ones could again be collapsed into a general theme These common themes were examined to see which central themes emerged At this stage of the analysis, the important task was to search for central themes that expressed the essence of these clusters I gave these central themes preliminary titles During the process of clustering the themes into general themes, I was careful to not lose sight of the individual differences within the themes, by constantly referring back to the clusters of meaning and the general themes

The final stage in the data analysis process was the contextualization of the themes by placing the general themes back into the context of the experience of being heard The entire process of data collection and analysis took 9 months I received support and validation at three stages in the analysis process from Dr E Lindsey, a researcher from the University of Victoria

School of Nursing, who is experienced in phenomenological methodology Ray (1990) states that

> Thus phenomenological theory is an integration of the participants' description of their experience, the researcher's description and interpretation of the data, the researcher's intuitive grasp of the whole of the experience (the unity of meaning), the researcher's use of cumulative knowledge (literature of the phenomenon under investigation, and the researcher's creativity in organization and explication of the phenomenon as theory (p 178)

Although it may appear that the data analysis process is linear and sequential, it is in fact not at all this way The steps suggested by Hycner and Van Manen provided me with direction but the actual process of analysis was much more intuitive than the steps make it appear I spent countless hours reading the transcripts and my notes in order to fully immerse myself in each participant's experience Van Manen (1990) states that

> Phenomenological themes may be understood as the structure of experience So when we analyze a phenomenon, we are trying to determine what the themes are, the experiential structures that make up that experience It would be simplistic, however, to think of themes as conceptual formulations or categorical statements After all, it is lived experience that we are attempting to describe, and lived experience cannot be captured in conceptual abstractions (p 79)

I moved into the data, took it apart to extrapolate order and meaning and thus participated in the data and tried to grasp its wholeness Leonard (1989) states that

> Through systematic analysis of the whole, we gain new perspectives and depth of understanding We use this understanding to examine the parts of the whole, and then we reexamine the whole in light of the insight we have gained from the parts The interpretive process follows this part-whole strategy until the researcher is satisfied with the depth of his or her understanding Thus the interpretive process has no clear termination (p 51)

I am satisfied that I have taken this process to the point of an adequate understanding of the phenomena being studied

Rigor

Phenomenological research strives to elucidate the meaning and understanding of human existence from an individual's point of view It focuses on meaning rather than facts (Osborne, 1990) Phenomenology is only one type of research method used in qualitative inquires One of the criticisms of qualitative research is that these various methods fail to make explicit the rules for achieving rigor in the research (Sandelowski, 1986) Guba and Lincoln (1981) discuss four factors relating to the tests of rigor in

conventional scientific research which Sandelowski (1986) believes provides a useful framework for assessing rigor in qualitative research The four factors are (1) truth value, (2) applicability, (3) consistency and (4) neutrality I have used this framework in considering the rigor of this study

1 Truth Value

Truth value is a measurement tool used typically in quantitative research to assess whether what is being studied is as it is defined in the study It looks at the closeness between the test results with other tests measuring the same phenomenon and measures congruence between the test results and theoretical explanations of the phenomenon In qualitative research, truth value is much harder to define Sandelowski (1986) states that

> The truth value of a qualitative investigation generally resides in the discovery of human phenomena or experiences as they are lived and perceived by subjects, rather than in the verification of a priori conceptions of those experiences Significantly, truth is subject-oriented rather than researcher-defined (p 30)

Guba and Lincoln (1981) suggest that credibility be the criterion against which the truth value of qualitative research be evaluated They suggest that a qualitative research study would be credible when it presents an elucidation of a human experience that would be immediately recognizable to other people who have had that experience Secondly, a study is considered credible when other researchers or readers can recognize the experience when confronted with it, even though they have only read about it in the study Finally, for a study to be credible, researchers should describe and interpret their own experiences and behaviours with the research participants In this way, the threat of becoming enmeshed with the participants can be avoided by deliberately focusing on how the the researcher influenced and was influenced by the particiants

I attended to these three criteria for truth value as outlined by Guba and Lincoln (1981) and Sandelowski (1986) by

1 Meeting with two of the participants to present and discuss my preliminary interpretations of the tape recorded, transcribed and analyzed conversations Both participants confirmed my initial interpretation and clarified what was for each of them, the most important aspect of the experience of being heard When I had completed the analysis part of the study six months later, I met with the only available participant to present and

discuss my findings, to ensure that there had been a faithful interpretation of her experience in being heard

2 Recognition of the experience by other readers and researchers was attended to by providing the results of this study to my research committee as well as to several social work colleagues who are presently practitioners in the field All readers confirmed to me that the experiences were clearly understandable and recognizable

3 I attended to the third criterion, that of describing and interpreting my own experiences and behaviours as I worked with my research participants by discussing the experience with other social work practitioners as I collected, analyzed and wrote up the results of the study I spent considerable time reflecting on the process after each interview with the participants For example, two of the participants had particularly terrible experiences of trauma and betrayal by adults significant to them and they both had a need to talk about it While their experiences of not being heard by adults contributed to my understanding of their experiences of being heard, I found that I needed to refocus my thoughts periodically and return to a discussion of the phenomenon I wanted to study My biases around the importance of being heard and my presupposition that children and youth are infrequently heard created a situation where I felt uncomfortable with the redirecting that I felt I needed to do I was in effect, trying to maintain a balance between letting the participants talk freely and trying to remain focused on the phenomenon I wanted to explore I discussed my perceptions of the interview process with my husband, who is a social worker with many years of experience I discussed strategies for dealing appropriately with the different agendas of the participants and myself, with my research committee and my husband I noted the different dynamics between each participant and myself and I thought about how I had influenced the difference

2 Applicability or Fittingness

Although external validity is an issue of rigor in quantitative research, there are fewer threats to external validity in qualitative research because phenomenology is the study of a phenomenon in its natural context with few controlling conditions (Sandelowski, 1986) Sandelowski makes the point that

> generalizability is itself something of an illusion since every research situation is ultimately about a particular researcher in interaction with a particular subject in a particular context From the qualitative perspective, generalizability is based on the reification of a context-

> free structure that does not exist and the assumption that the multiple realities in any given situation can be controlled to illuminate the effects of a few variables (p 31)

The sample size of this study is three participants Sandelowski (1986) states that "sample sizes in qualitative research are typically small because of the large volume of verbal data that must be analyzed in addition, sampling is often theoretical rather than statistical" (p 31) For this reason I chose three youth who indicated they had experiences in being heard, and could illuminate the phenomenon being studied

Sandelowski (1986) suggests that representativeness in qualitative research refers more to the data than to the participants The researcher must establish the typicality or atypicality of observed events, behaviours or responses in the lives of the participants The problem of "holistic fallacy" which makes data look more patterned or congruent is a threat to rigor I believe that this study meets the criterion of fittingness as outlined by Guba and Lincoln (1981) because the findings can fit into contexts outside of the study situation Readers of the findings have told me that it is meaningful and applicable in terms of their own experiences of being heard The findings of this study are, I believe, well-grounded in the life experiences of the participants and reflect both the typical and atypical elements of those experiences

3 Consistency reliability versus auditability

Reliability in qualitative research is not a valid criterion of rigor because qualitative research emphasizes the uniqueness of human situations rather than the replicability of them Sandelowski (1986) suggests that auditability be the criterion of rigor in qualitative research A study and its findings would be auditable when another researcher is able to clearly follow the decision trail used by the researcher in the study Another researcher should be able to arrive at similar or comparable conclusions rather than contradictory conclusions, given the researcher's data, perspective and situation

In order to provide evidence of the test for rigor in achieving auditability in this study, I have followed steps suggested by Sandelowski (1986)

1 I provided information about how I became interested in studying the experience of youth in being heard by adults

2 I have made my presuppositions and biases explicit and I have reviewed existing theory and research in the area of children's rights and experiences in being heard

3 I have provided the purpose of the study

4 I have described the participants and included the criterion for their inclusion in the study

5 The influence that the researcher and participants had on each other has been explored in Chapter 4 of this study

6 I have provided evidence about how the data were collected, the length of time involved in data collection, and a description of the settings where the data were collected

7 I have explained the way in which I analyzed the data

4 Neutrality objectivity versus confirmability

Sandelowski suggests that confirmability in qualitative research is an important test of rigor "Confirmability is achieved when auditability, truth value, and applicability are established" (p 33) There are several strategies for ensuring that truth value and applicability are achieved in a qualitative study These strategies include 1) checking for the representativeness of the data as a whole and the use of coding categories and examples to reduce and present the data, 2) triangulating across data sources and collection procedures to establish congruence, 3) ensuring that the descriptions and explanations of the data contain the typical and atypical aspects of the data, 4) attempting to disprove conclusions drawn about the data, and 5) getting validation from the subjects themselves In order to ensure that the truth value and applicability are achieved in this study, I have 1) reviewed the literature to check for the representativeness of the data as a whole, 2) had a research colleague of mine read my transcripts, make notes on her impressions of the data, read my units of general meaning, and my unit of meaning relevant to the research question I have also discussed my findings with her, all for the purpose of verifying that she can clearly following my decision trail and that her findings would be compatible with my own, 3) met with a youth who did not participate in the study but who met the criteria for my study (except that he had been in care in a jurisdiction outside of B C), to discuss his ideas around being heard, and 4) met with two of the research participants to verify my findings One of the participants had some ideas around drawing themes from the clusters of relevant meaning derived from

the transcripts of my interviews with her, which I noted I have ensured that the descriptions and explanations of the data contain the typical and atypical aspects of the data

Summary

I have used a phenomenological research method to study the question What is the experience of youth in having their views heard by adults while in care? I have addressed the philosophical considerations which provided the rationale for this choice of research method I have outlined the steps for the collection and analysis of the data In addition, I have outlined the ethical considerations and addressed the issue of bracketing The rigor of this study has been carefully attended to

Chapter 4

Presentation of Findings

The purpose of this research was to explore and describe the experiences of former youth-in-care in being heard by adults, while they were in the care of the Superintendent of Family and Child Services in British Columbia The research question that guided my study was What is the experience of youth in having their views heard by adults while in care? This chapter has been divided into 4 sections to present the findings (a) introduction of the participants of the study, (b) description of the experience of being heard divided into 5 essential themes, (c) description of the experiences of the participants in taking part in this research project, and (d) description of my experience as a researcher in conducting this study Wherever possible the participants' voices have been presented in their own words to provide an animated and descriptive account of their experiences so that the phenomenon of being heard speaks for itself

All information about the participants has been provided by the participants themselves The names of the participants are fictitious to ensure confidentiality

All of the participants in the study were permanent wards A permanent ward in British Columbia is someone who is under 19 years of age whose care, custody and guardianship is provided by the Superintendent of Family and Child Services Children are typically made permanent wards when there is no hope of the child being able to return home to live with their

parents The legal right of guardianship and custody of the child is removed from the parents and assumed by the Superintendent of Family and Child Services For all intents and purposes, the parent of children with permanent wardship status is the Superintendent, who delegates her authority to district office social workers

The Participants

John

John is a 19 year old First Nations youth He was in care as a permanent ward from the age of 2-1/2 years until his 19th birthday several months ago He lived in 7 different foster homes between the ages of 2 and 9 years John moved to his eighth foster home at 9 years of age and left that home at age 17 years John was very unhappy in the latter foster home where he had a particularly negative relationship with his foster mother John's face looked pained and angry whenever he talked about her John has virtually no memory of the seven previous homes He did mention that he lived with two sisters at one time and that at the age of 6 or 7, they all went to speak to a social worker because they wanted to be moved He told me though, that he could not remember earlier foster homes because it was too long ago

John's ninth and final placement in care, where he lived from age 17 to 19 years, was in a foster home where the focus was on helping him to develop and enhance his independence skills John's foster father was a young single adult male John spoke very positively of this experience and believes that he really benefited from it Although he had enormous respect for his foster father, he told me that this person has faded from his life and he no longer has contact with him

John contacted me in April to say that he was leaving town for 6 months and to say good-bye He had decided to return to his birthplace to reconnect with his Band He was planning to spend time with his grandfather, learning the ways of his people and becoming reconnected to his aboriginal ancestry John was both nervous and excited when he spoke to me about this adventure He was moving to a very remote part of the province where there would be no telephones or modern conveniences I haven't seen or heard from John since and can only hope that he is fulfilling his goals John was unavailable to validate my findings, for these reasons

Brenda

Brenda is a 19 year old youth who was in care as a permanent ward from age 7 to 19 years She was discharged from care at 19 years, although she continues to live in her foster home Brenda spent her entire time in care in this one home She speaks very fondly and very positively of her foster parents She has felt very loved and very nurtured in this home although Brenda has talked of recent conflict with her foster parents around independence issues, curfews etc She told me that she does not feel treated as an adult by her foster parents but also expressed fear at moving out on her own as she would feel too vulnerable

Brenda described her childhood from birth to age 7 in considerable detail She has very vivid memories and impressions from a very young age Her birth home life was described to me as extremely negative She talked about living in constant terror of her father, of daily beatings and other forms of abuse Brenda's mother was not able or willing to protect her two daughters and Brenda describes an early childhood characterized by fear of, and betrayal by, her birth parents Brenda remembers being taken into care as an act of rescue She thinks that her teacher at school figured out what was going on at home and was able to get the wheels in motion and the proper authorities involved to help Brenda Brenda was taken into care along with her sister, and both girls have lived together in the same foster home since that time Brenda has talked of many professionals who helped and protected her from her birth parents Brenda remembers spending one year in a psychiatric treatment facility just prior to coming into care She describes her time in the facility as a terrible experience where fear of staff and feelings of abandonment by her parents were paramount Brenda also remembers the details of the court battle between her parents and the Superintendent of Family & Child Services She describes feeling terrified that she would have to testify against her parents but believes adult helpers were successful in their attempt to keep her "off the stand"

Brenda has finished high school and is pursuing a career in modeling She met with me in late April and again in October, to validate the findings

Steve

Steve is a 20 year old youth who was in care as a permanent ward from age 16 to 19 years Steve was brought into care following the death of his mother, who died when he was 15 years old He lived with his father for a year

following the death but his dad was not able to cope with the responsibilities of parenting 3 teenagers and the family fell apart Steve came into care with his younger brother, although they never in fact lived in the same group home

Steve has described the court process as being particularly frightening and incomprehensible to him Both he and his brother felt "cut loose" at this time because they felt abandoned by their parents and terrified of the unknown of being in care

Steve described his childhood as "typical" and "OK" He believes however, that communication between family members was very poor He told me that he thinks he may have ended up in care even if he hadn't lost a parent, because of the poor communication in his home

Steve believes his life, which he described as quite negative after his mother died, was turned around by being in care His experiences were virtually all positive and he believes that the adults he met while in care have had a very beneficial influence on his life Steve lived in a total of two group homes with the same set of group home parents The second group home emphasized independence skill-building Steve's final placement in care was similar to John's He and another youth lived with their group home parent in a roommate type situation

Steve has been out of care for about 1 year now He has spent a lot of time reconnecting with his father He believes his closest and dearest friend is the group home parent whom he lived with for 3 years Steve maintains regular contact with him and spoke of feeling grateful for the opportunity to meet this person

Steve finished high school and subsequently went to college He has recently graduated and planned to move to another city just two days after our meeting to validate the findings

Summary

In spite of the different personalities of the research participants and their very different experiences in being in the care of the child welfare system, the participants' experiences in being heard by adults had much in common I have included many verbatim quotes from each of the participants so that their experiences of being heard can be given a direct voice

Experience of Being Heard The Themes

There were many common elements among the three participants in their experiences of being heard notwithstanding the fact that the 3 youth had very different experiences in care Five themes emerged from the data which seemed to capture their common experiences These themes are

1 Caring commitment
2 Feeling safe, protected and not judged
3 Help in getting what I need
4 Help in dealing with my problems
5 Intuitive knowing

Caring commitment

An integral part of the participants' experience of being heard by adults was the *caring commitment* they felt from the adults This *caring commitment* was not necessarily a result of a long term relationship with the adults In fact, more often than not, the participants' sense of a *caring commitment* by adults was from adults whom they had not known for a long period of time None of the participants experienced the sense of caring commitment from their birth parents This *caring commitment* was, for the participants, exemplified by adults' understanding of their situation, and their interest in the youth and their opinions Empathic listening, that is, listening with attentiveness and being able to identify with the thoughts and feelings of the youth, and respect for what the youth had to say was also an essential part of the *caring commitment* The participants felt that adults who were willing to "go the extra" mile for them, that is, adults who were doggedly determined to help the youth beyond what could normally be expected, was evidence of a *caring commitment* For example, having the sense that adults were helping beyond what could be expected of them by virtue of their role or relationship made the participants feel that the *caring commitment* was there All the participants talked about the fun that they had had with various adults and the encouragement they received from them as being an integral part of the caring commitment to them

For Brenda, the theme *caring commitment* was best exemplified by the caring and the understanding she felt from her foster parents Brenda was 7 years old when she was placed in this foster home, where she remains today,

and she recalls immediately sensing their understanding of her and her situation Her foster parents had both been in care as children and Brenda really sensed that they knew what she was about Brenda's foster parents took the time to help her understand her feelings and listened to her with empathy and understanding Brenda described herself as a very troubled youngster and felt her foster parents really went the extra mile in helping her overcome some of her problems Brenda told me that she doesn't believe any other home could have handled her as well as her foster parents did and that she would probably have been moved from home to home if this family had not taken her in She explained

> Being in foster care especially permanent custody that extended length of time and receiving so much love that I've never had before, and understanding and being able to talk one on one with them it helped me out a lot there was a lot of patience um and a lot of understanding because they've been through quite a bit of stuff themselves when they were younger and they sort of knew what we were going through because they'd been through it themselves and um so they knew like what we were up against and stuff like that and how to, I guess you could say protect us in a way but also to help us understand our own feelings and where exactly they are coming from I was really messed up and I guess you know, just through talking and stuff like that they would point out um, like I have some obsessive habits that I didn't know I had

Brenda received art therapy for several years starting when she was about 6 years of age She was placed in a psychiatric facility because "no one could handle me" when she was 6 and began art therapy while she was institutionalized Brenda felt the therapist's *caring commitment* to her was exemplified by her caring and her willingness to 'go the extra mile" to get her the continued help that she needed Witness her account

> I found like the art therapists took you seriously even though you're young, they did listen You know, it's not the fact that they're getting paid, but they do listen They just got a heart for it She was one of the best, like I mean, after I got out of the (institution), I mean that was our cutoff point, we could no longer communicate with each other because I went back home And um she was persistent, she fought in order to get me back under her wing to help me, to help that healing process She came right to the house, she had like a confrontation with my father and everything else like that and said, "I'm not finished with her yet She needs more of this stuff" And it works out um after I got in care, we got back together and (began) art therapy all over again

In contrast to Brenda and Steve, John found it easier to talk about his experiences with adults whom he felt, had not heard him at all He was in total agreement with Brenda and Steve however, that an integral part of his feeling heard by adults was the sense that they cared about him as a human being and were interested in who he was and what he had to say John felt this sense of *caring commitment* from the foster father in his last home where he lived in a roommate situation with the foster parent John felt the man cared about him and was interested in what John thought about things The foster dad was respectful in the way he related to John and offered him a lot of encouragement John's relationship with this person was less than 2 years long, and John left the home when he was discharged from care at 19 years Yet the short time John spent with this foster dad had an enormously positive effect on John and helped to counteract the bad things that happened in his previous foster home of 8 years This foster dad helped John learn to speak up He stated that

> Being in a roommate situation, we were both equals and um there was no longer that barrier, "I'm the adult" so for me, that great experience helped me a lot Right now he's, I guess, he was kind of a mentor but now he's kind of faded into the background, well in my history books, but at the time, he's somebody that I needed He asked me you know if I, what I felt about living there you know, and if I was happy, if I agreed you know with his girlfriend moving in, how I felt about his dog running around mucking my room, and I kind of had to think well, what I did and didn't like Ah, for me, I was so accustomed to sitting idly by and letting people walk all over me so that was a great experience, like we were just equal Like he was a real optimist and he says you know John, you're a good looking guy and you've got all these talents, like what, what are you sitting around for? And then he asked me, what, is it living here, what is it and you know, he encouraged me to go out and be young

Steve spent 3 years in care, from age 16 to 19 years He, like Brenda and John, experienced a strong sense of *caring commitment* from his foster dad, with whom he had lived the entire time he was in care Like Brenda and John, *caring commitment* for Steve was exemplified by his foster dad's understanding of him and his situation, his interest in him, his obvious caring of him and his foster dad's ability to listen to him with empathy Steve, like Brenda, experienced his foster dad's "going the extra mile", that is, being there for him as an important component of the *caring commitment* Even after Steve had left his foster home at age 19, Steve's foster dad was there for him at a critical time Steve was able to call up his foster dad during a personal crisis,

when the pain and grief from losing his mother through death, and being abandoned by his father caught up with and overwhelmed him Steve's foster dad responded immediately, and came over to see Steve at a moment's notice Witness his account

> Then just one day, I totally broke down and lost it, I was just sitting in my house I was living with my friend and I just was shaking uncontrollably and just lost it, and the thing was is that, like at that time I was crying, I was at a total loss, I didn't know what I was going to do I went to the phone and I called up (foster dad) right away It was the first thing I did and the thing was is that when I called him up, I didn't feel like embarrassed or ashamed of calling and asking for his help It's just that with the amount of times that I had lived with him, and all the conversations that I had had with him, I had known that if I needed him, I could phone and he'd be there And he came right over and we sat and talked for about 6 or 7 hours, just sat there and talked and you know, there was a lot of stuff that I really had to get out of my own personal guilt and whatnot and he just sat there and he listened to me and he didn't, he didn't you know, patronize me or tell me what to do or be overly sympathetic He was empathetic, cause he had lived and he knew what it was about and he had met lots of kids, so he knew what I was talking about, he'd lived through it so it was um, it was really good and from that point on, I guess that was the biggest turning point, and there, there was someone that I'd met in care, they're helping me I didn't feel at that time that I could call my dad My dad was living in town, I could have called him but I know he wouldn't have been able to understand

Steve's relationship with his foster dad continues to be very special to him and he sensed this man's caring commitment from the beginning of their relationship For Steve, like Brenda and John, the *caring commitment* of his foster dad was exemplified by his foster dad's respect for him, his interest in him, and by the fact that he could have fun with him He stated that

> He cared about me a lot and like we had a lot of rituals, like it's hard to describe how I just knew like I have to throw out examples It's that like I was working pat-time and um in the mornings, if it wasn't, like sometimes I worked like dreadfully early, but if it wasn't quite so early that I was going to work, (foster dad) and I would go for coffee and a muffin in the morning and talk about stuff and it's just like, we talked a lot and the thing was is that, he didn't, like, I guess essentially the biggest thing that I knew that I could turn to him was the fact that he didn't just like throw money at me and say like "get out of my face" or like make up dinner and go hide in his room or whatever and not talk to us or, or not get involved with what we were doing Like the thing is that is we'd hang out with (foster dad) and talk with him and like he'd want to do things with us like

> "let's all go out for dinner, like right now", like spur of the moment like "you guys here, let's go for dinner", like that kind of thing like, "let's do stuff", we'd go out shopping and it was hilarious like, like just that kind of thing, is that he wanted to spend time with us legitimately He enjoyed spending time with young people That's what he really liked and like that's where I felt I could turn to him, not as like my old foster dad or something like that, but as my friend, that I knew really cared

For the participants of this study, the *caring commitment* of significant adults was an essential component of feeling heard This *caring commitment* was experienced by the participants in much the same way, even though the relationships with the caring adults were sometimes fleeting, as with Brenda's art therapists and John's foster parent, or long term as with Steve and Brenda's foster parent(s) The participants all sensed the *caring commitment* from these significant adults at the beginning of the relationship, not after a certain length of time Not all of the components of *caring commitment* could be visible in a short time, however, the participants were able to determine very quickly that an adult was interested in them, cared about them, saw them as valuable human beings, and wanted to hear what they had to say

For the participants of this study, *caring commitment* was best exemplified by the empathic listening and caring of adults, by the adults interest in them and their opinions, their understanding of the participants' situation, and by the sense that they were being treated respectfully Steve and Brenda both experienced going the extra mile as a component of caring commitment All three participants experienced encouragement from adults and having fun together as components of a *caring commitment* This theme, *caring commitment*, is a particularly important part of the experience of being heard for the participants of this study

Feeling safe, protected and not judged

All three participants in this study felt that another important component of feeling heard by adults was the sense that they were not being judged by adults and that they all felt safe to express their opinions without fear of being shamed or embarrassed in any way Having a sense that they were safe to speak their mind was essential for all three participants, because they were carrying around with them feelings of not being heard, of hurt, of anger and of abandonment The participants had feelings of mistrust of adults and they all felt tremendously relieved to be able to meet adults whom they felt

were non-judgmental, who would not in any way violate their confidence and trust that the participants placed in them

The participants needed to be able to let out their feelings of anger and hurt with adults, as a way of coming to terms with some terrible life experiences prior to coming into care It was essential however, that the participants be able to discuss their issues at a time when it felt right for them to do so They needed to be given space by adults, so that they didn't feel pressured to talk or participate before they felt ready to do so They also needed to feel that they were not unfairly restricted when deciding on their options The participants expected adults to set limits, but it was important to them that the limit setting was done in a respectful way These essential components of the theme enabled each of the participants to feel that the climate within their relationship with adults was such that they not only would be able to express their thoughts and opinions without fear, but that they could also feel heard by the adults

Brenda talked a lot about the sense of safety and protection that she felt with each of her art therapists Brenda received art therapy for several years, beginning when she was 6 years old and she remembers feeling a deep sense of trust that these therapists were there for her Brenda was not able to verbally articulate her anxiety and unhappiness with some of the events in her early childhood, yet she found that through the medium of artwork, that she was able to let out these hurt, angry feelings without fear of being judged Brenda talked a lot about how her trust in adults had been violated before she came into care, and how important it was for her to feel a sense of trust in adults before she could even begin to express herself verbally The components of *safety, trust and not being judged* where exemplified when Brenda stated

> I find it very relaxing and soothing in a way you know that, that I'm able to not only get rid of some emotional burdens, that I can just sort of be very relaxed and know that I'm safe with this person So there's that feeling of protection also that's necessary, not only trust but protection and safety for that person I guess what I needed was sort of like a sounding board for all the bottled up anger and hurt you know, different things like that, that I had inside and like through the art a lot like I, I draw sort of abstract, I take things that are inside, like I sit down in front of paper and just sort of draw just like anything that just happens to come out on the paper which is sometimes flowers or windows, just very abstract things I wrote a play, about an angel, you know, and a mother and a daughter and we had it all acted out and it was all

> videotaped it was a wonderful experience, like with her, I was able, I not only felt protected with her but I was able to communicate like just through my drawing

In contrast to Steve and John, Brenda experienced a sense of safety and trust with people who were, and remain strangers to her Brenda is very involved with an evangelical church and had a very emotionally uplifting experience during the past year Several members of her Church prayed for her and she has described the experience as being profoundly moving to her Witness her account

> And now I can now, you know, it's just like sort of a new experience, its sort of like a complete awakening like I mean, I had a lot of prayer and stuff like that and these three people who were praying over me, they didn't know me at all, yet while they were praying um, they just pulled so many things out of my past like some of the things they were describing were exactly how it happened you know And they didn't know me and I just, it was like a warm feeling from the inside out and I just started crying and I couldn't stop and it was just, it was like the biggest release I have ever felt, and it was just from them praying over me

Steve, like John and Brenda, carried with him many hurt and angry feelings when he came into care To meet an adult whom he felt would be non-judgmental, would give him space when he needed it, and who would be trustworthy were all essential to Steve in feeling safe to let out his feelings so that he could be heard Steve told me that his foster parent was able to give him this sense of being safe and protected and Steve was finally able to let out his feelings of guilt and anxiety about his mother, and to grow and develop as a person Steve believes that feeling safe and trusting a significant adult were paramount in his learning more effective ways of communicating and in dealing with his problems He states

> Because um essentially to take someone like me that was, when I was that age, who was like, hurting that much and just wanted to throw anger at everybody and didn't want anybody telling me what to do, didn't want anybody in control of my life at all, um I guess I felt that that had taken place before and everything had gone all wrong So I was like, OK, well, nobody's going to do stuff to me like kind of like almost like maybe a little bit of a revenge complex I never really felt spiteful but I think it was there but just to take a whole house of people feeling that way and teach them to live with one another in a way that's helpful, it's ah such a boon It was such a learning experience and like that's, that's essentially being heard, like and the essence of it is that if you want to be left alone, you're left alone, if you want to talk, you can talk, that's like, that's the utmost of being heard, not somebody trying to force help on you, and if you say you didn't

> want it, then it, it wouldn't be coming, cause that's the way it was for me, cause the help was always there

Steve remembers with humor how he used to announce his intentions to do something "wild and crazy" and his foster parent would remind him of the possible consequences of his actions, while at the same time reassuring him that he would get him "out of jail" if he got into real trouble! For Steve, having a foster parent who gave him space to make his own decisions, who was non-judgmental about the decisions he had made, and who gently reminded him of probable outcomes for his actions was a key factor in his feeling more in control of his life By feeling more in control, Steve was able to feel capable of making positive changes in his life He explains

> So you it was ah like just having somebody say, "I'm not going to tell you what to do I'm going to let you make your own decisions", like that was an incredible thing for me cause that had never happened before in a long time There had always been like teachers at school, "you must do", parents "you must do this", then there was someone who was treating you like an adult and saying that if you're going to make adult decisions with alcohol and drugs, then you're going to have to reap the consequences and make decisions to deal with those consequences It was very good, like right then and there, I felt like OK, I'm in control now, the world isn't controlling me, and that, I'm sure that would have never happened if I hadn't met (foster dad)

John found that the respectful limit setting by his foster dad to be a significant part of his *feeling safe protected and not judged* John recounted an experience where his foster dad made it quite clear that John had violated a house rule John told me that while he did not like the rule, he felt really good about the way his foster dad had handled setting the limits, showing him respect, and providing an atmosphere where John felt safe even though he had done something wrong John didn't mind complying with the rule after that incident For John, *feeling safe, protected and not judged* was best exemplified by the respectful, non-judgmental limit setting that his foster father had done with him, allowing John to feel, all the while, safe and trusting with his foster dad Witness John's account

> And anyhow, I had a couple of friends over that night and you know, we had a couple of bottles out, just drinking and hanging out and he (foster dad) sat down and I asked him "do you want a drink?" and he said "sure, why not" But the next day, instead of saying, "John, you shouldn't have, you know, you're not supposed to drink, you know, you idiot", you know what I mean? I don't know like he's never taken life skills courses but you know he

> used all the "I" statements, "John, I was put in the difficult position last night I know you know that there's no drinking in this program, and I would like that if you drink, don't do it in the house, and I don't want to hear about it" There was that real wide margin, ya, you know, it's about like taking ownership for how you feel and there is a lot more clearer respect and it's not an issue of blaming I don't know, it's really different, so after that, you know, like I didn't like the fact that I couldn't drink in the house, but I felt better about the respect that I was given It's discussions like that that really quite help me be heard and you know, he gave me the chance, "well, is there anything you want to discuss?" you know what I mean?

John, like Steve, felt that his foster dad treated him as an "equal" and that together they were able to problem solve issues that arose during the course of living together on a daily basis This sense of safety was critical for John, who felt very shamed and demoralized by the foster parents in the home where he had lived for 8 years previously John told me that trusting his foster dad was instrumental in his learning to state his opinions and to speak up for himself, something he had never been able to do before

For all three participants, an essential component of their experience of being heard by adults was the sense that they were *safe, protected and not judged* by the adults They all needed an opportunity to express feelings of anger and hurt that they carried with them when they came into care (or in John's case, as a result of living in a foster home for 8 years where he felt shamed and humiliated) The participants needed to trust the adults in order to feel free to state their views Having adults give them space to make decisions and not to pressure the youth into talking about their problems was so important to the participants in feeling safe to express their views The participants all felt heard by adults who were able to provide this kind of climate, even in those situations where limits were set and rules enforced

Help in getting what I need

Another component of the experience of being heard for the participants of this study was the theme of *help in getting what I need* All of the participants, at some time, needed help in getting tangible support, whether it was getting a clothing allowance, enrolling in a correspondence course, or getting their teeth fixed The participants believed that an essential part of getting what they needed was having adults who would take action on their behalf when needed, or who would nudge them along to get what they needed on their own It was essential to all the participants that adults were there to let them know about their entitlements The participants made the

point that knowing what supports were available and having adult help in getting these things or in making "the system" work for them is especially important for children in care, who don't typically have parents advocating for them

Brenda found it much easier to talk about what she didn't get and the resentment she felt because of it Brenda, who had her sights set on a modeling career, believed that she needed braces in order to have a perfect smile Brenda's older sister received braces When the time came for Brenda to get her braces, Brenda's social worker informed her that the rules had changed and that Brenda would no longer be eligible for braces Brenda felt not heard by both her social worker and "the system", and still feels quite bitter about this lack of help in getting what she needed She was able to discuss several instances where she did get the help she needed Brenda was involved in the child protection proceedings between her birth parents and the Superintendent of Family and Child Services Her parents' lawyer wanted Brenda to testify and Brenda remembers feeling particularly terrified of having to face her father on the witness stand Brenda's social worker and lawyer were able to take the required action to keep her off the stand Brenda also vividly remembers a time when she felt entitled to an extra clothing allowance Her social worker was able to take the necessary action to get the clothing allowance for her Brenda felt heard by her social worker

John, like Brenda, found it easier to remember all the things he didn't get because no one took action on his behalf, nor let him know about his entitlements He was able to recollect a time however, when he went to see his social worker about changing foster homes He believes his social worker really heard what he had to say because he was moved to a new home

Steve, unlike Brenda and Steve, felt that he was always informed about his entitlements as a child-in-care by his social worker and his foster dad, both of whom would have willingly taken action to help him get what he needed Steve talked about his social worker with great affection and for him, the theme of *help in getting what I need* was exemplified by the social worker's letting him know of his entitlements, and nudging him to take the necessary action to get what he needed He stated

> I had a bike accident when I was a kid I busted a whole bunch of my teeth and (my social worker) was one of the people that was always kind of on my back, "well, why don't you just get them fixed because the system takes care of all your dental, so why

> don't you just go in and get it fixed, it'll save you a lot of money later" and just like little things like that But it wasn't a little thing because like the amount of dental work I had to have done would have cost me a lot of money later on, that I probably wouldn't have had for a long, long time, and then I would have said forget it, I don't need this done anyway but um just in that respect and that helped me out a lot too Just for self-esteem and stuff like that so she was good for getting me in to get stuff like medical check-ups and whatnot done, she was one of the people that would be like "have you gone in for a check-up yet", stuff like that like ah but not in the sense of saying "you should get in", just like "why don't you, it's available and you should make use of what's available"

For all three participants, the theme of *help in getting what I need* was an important part of feeling heard by adults The participants all believed that they needed to have an adult who would take action on their behalf to help them get what they needed, or would nudge them along to do it themselves They all felt that it was essential to have adults' help in getting to know what they were in fact entitled to This last component of the theme *help in getting what I need* was important for the three participants, who often compared themselves with other children and youth in and out of care regarding what tangible support others were receiving

Help in dealing with my problems

For the participants of this study, an essential ingredient in their experience of being heard by adults was the help they received in dealing with their problems They all stated to me that they had a number of problems during the time they were in care, and it was really important to each of them to know adults who would help them with their problems For example, Steve had a problem with alcohol and drugs Brenda had trouble controlling her temper John felt depressed a lot None of the participants looked for an adult to tell them what to do or what not to do What the participants all found particularly helpful was to have adults outline their choices and options for and with them, so that they could make more informed decisions about how to handle their problems All of the youth felt that they needed to have someone point out options that they may not have even thought about before The participants also needed helpful feedback from adults in order to get a sense of how they were doing or where they were going with their problem-solving or their life planning The verbal feedback from adults helped clarify for the participants what the issues were in the problem they were dealing with at the time All of the participants also found that advice was a helpful part of

dealing with their problems They didn't want or need to be told what to do, but sometimes some advice on how the adult would handle the situation was enough to get them started in the right direction

Brenda, who was a peer counsellor in high school, was particularly sensitive to the difficulties in helping people deal effectively with their problems Based on her training and her experience, she found it most helpful to have adults listen attentively to her problems and help her see her options so that she could come up with appropriate solutions Brenda talked a great deal about social workers who had not helped her with her problems, but had interrupted her or didn't take the time to listen She did however, have a number of experiences where she felt really heard by an adult because she was given helpful feedback and help seeing her choices One particularly poignant experience for Brenda was when she was 7 years old and had just moved to her foster home She described herself as very troubled and was unable to deal with her constant anxiety Her foster parents listened to her describe her feelings and then would give her words to label these feelings, as a way of helping her understand herself and what she was feeling a little better Brenda found this experience immensely helpful in feeling less anxious, more "normal", and more in control of herself She stated

> Like I mean, if I don't understand um a certain feeling, I'd sort of describe it to them and they would say, "oh, you're feeling apprehensive, you're feeling nervous" or what have you and I just think it's, it'd be like, "so that's what I'm feeling!", you know and sometimes it's a mixture of things you know and sort of categorize them as to what's what

Steve, like Brenda and John, talked about the helpfulness of having adults given him feedback, and helping him by outlining his choices Steve felt really mixed up when he came into care and he had a lot of difficulty knowing what to do about these feelings He says that he had reacted for many years to what he had perceived as the controlling and patronizing way that his parents and his teachers had dealt with him He had responded to the control by becoming more out of control (drinking and taking drugs excessively) and it wasn't until he met his foster parent that he began to see a different way of dealing with his problems For Steve, the theme *help in dealing with my problems* was best exemplified by the helpful feedback from his foster parent and the way that his foster parent outlined his choices for him Witness his account

> Just the people I met, like I got really heavily into drugs and alcohol It was almost every day, it was a really serious problem I never really looked at it that way during, of course, while it was going on All my friends were doing it But the thing was is that it wasn't working for me and no where in that time did anyone say, "stop" But a lot of times during that time they said you know, "look what you're doing to yourself, like I'm not going to stop you, it's your life, but you know like, take a good hard look at what you're doing" and that came down especially with (foster dad), cause I lived with him for the majority of time I was in care and um, one time I had come back to the house and I'd been over to the hospital I'd really screwed up on LSD and I freaked out and gone to the hospital and when I came back, I was just thinking, "oh no, what am I in for?" like I can't deal with this But as soon as I came in (foster dad) just went, "so you had a little trouble" and I'm like, "ya, I did" "OK, why don't you go downstairs and get some sleep", like that was it and then for the next couple of days, I'd go up and talk to him about it and he'd just say like, you know, he'd just go "don't worry about it, it happens to everyone Like, you're just a teenager, like you're going to make mistakes But you know that you made a pretty big one you know, so what are you going to do to change it You know, it's entirely up to you, it's not up to me If you'd like say, to stay in this house and don't do any drugs or anything, it is entirely up to you

John, unlike Brenda and Steve, is Aboriginal and he believes that the kind of help he will need in dealing with his problems and emotional pain will be very different than the help that he can get in a white culture John has recently been reunited with and returned to his Band and is trying to come to terms with the emotional scars caused by a traumatic childhood through traditional First Nations methods Notwithstanding this difference however, John felt that his last social worker was very helpful to him in sorting out where he should live John had just left the foster home where he had lived for 8 years, and he was feeling angry and bitter at what he believes was significant mistreatment by his foster parents He met with his social worker to plan where he would live for the last 2 years of his wardship His social worker outlined 5 different options for him, and provided safe housing in the interim, while he was deciding what he wanted to do John liked the fact that the social worker discussed the benefits and drawbacks of each choice with him When John did finally make his decision about where he wanted to live, he felt that the decision really had been his, and not surprisingly, this last placement was by far the most successful for him John stated

> After I left that foster home, I wasn't sure my social worker, she helped me present, or she presented like five different options to me Two were out of town, one was the residential program I

> went to, and the other two were foster homes She said, "which one do you want John?" She helped me look at each one, kind of thing, the benefits, the bad sides, and she didn't put any pressure on And she even helped me I guess, find a spot to stay until I found a place that I wanted to be I had a choice of staying at a group home, or an emergency bed There was even one emergency foster home too But uh she laid them (choices) all out for me, you know

The theme *help in dealing with my problems* was an important component of feeling heard by the participants of this study, who all felt they were struggling with a number of problems while they were in care Each participant found their own unique way of coming to terms with their difficulties and in moving to a more satisfying lifestyle Yet each participant saw the same ingredients as being part of receiving help with their problems Having adults outline their choices for them was important in figuring out how they wanted to deal with various issues Receiving helpful feedback from adults was important to the youth in terms of a reality check - having someone give them a reading on how and what they were doing from a different perspective Receiving advice, though not directions, was also important to the participants, particularly when they found themselves in situations where they were not sure about what they needed to do

Intuitive knowing

A key component of the participants' experience of being heard was the theme of *intuitive knowing* All the participants expressed strong feelings about knowing when they were being heard by adults, just by the way the adults responded to them non-verbally When adults were for example, shifting in their chair, looking bored or staring out of a window, the participants believed that they were not being heard The participants all felt that they could sense when an adult was hearing them, and they could sense if the adult was genuinely interested They all had experienced feeling patronized by adults and the participants believed that they could tell immediately if an adult was acting in genuine ways

Brenda believes herself to be very intuitive and can tell visually very quickly if someone is hearing her

> I can usually tell when someone is genuinely interested as to what I have to say there are just different things about the person's eyes if they are not paying attention or if they start being absorbed by their own thoughts, they sort of go glossy or glassy I can sense it you know like they get fidgety or something she was really paying attention, I could tell you

> know she was asking a lot of questions um and she just like, like your posture now, like she was very, you know, into it She had the whole body language saying she was into it

Brenda had an experience recently where she was at a meeting with several social workers She told me that she began to feel very angry during the meeting because she believed the adults were not hearing what she had to say She saw 2 adults sharing a private joke and she said that the body language of the others told her that they were not listening to her When she confronted the group on their inattentiveness, she felt that they were defensive and they denied her allegation Brenda however, maintains that she knows they were not listening to her, until after she had confronted them

Steve, like John and Brenda believes the he can tell if he is being heard just by whether or not someone looks him in the eye For Steve, the theme of Intuitive Knowing was best exemplified by his sense that his social worker was acting in a genuine way He explained

> With the person that's filling in for (my social worker), um he came over here to just like, he didn't say "come to my office, so I can meet you", he just went, "oh, can I come over and talk with your dad and you guys and you know, meet you?" And he comes and we're all hanging out and my friend came over from _____with his guitar and he said, "oh I play guitar" and he comes downstairs and he's jamming out with my dad cause my dad used to play bass and we're just all hanging out and having a good time and it was like you know I don't think that would have really have gone on years ago It would be more like a suit and tie social worker coming in like ah more of a formal thing rather than more like real like, like he just came up and he was hanging out and being himself and that's a lot different like rather than trying to represent the system, he was representing himself

John's experience of intuitively knowing whether he was being heard tends to have come more from negative rather than positive experiences, however, like Brenda and Steve, he believes that he can tell very quickly if someone is hearing what he has to say He states that

> I could just tell if someone is willing to listen by their personal presentation, by their attitude, their mannerisms, the way they look at you, by the amount of talking they do too what they do with their hands, their eyes, whether they're looking at you just, you know, it's all in the non-verbal communication I suppose If they're staring at you, you know, with their hands clenched on their hips or whatever, and they're just yelling, it's rather blatant you know that they're not listening to you

The theme *intuitive knowing* was an essential part of feeling heard for the participants of this study Each of the participants believed that body

language and posture and willingness to have eye contact were indicative of whether or not they were being listened to They all believed that adults who acted in genuine ways, without pretensions or phony affect was a necessary part of their believing that they were being heard The participants felt this attentiveness or lack of it, on an intuitive level

In summary, the experience of the participants of this study in having their views heard by adults while in care, when significant decisions were made that affected them can be described by five interrelated and interconnected themes These themes are *caring commitment, feeling safe, protected and not judged, help in getting what I need, help in dealing with my problems,* and *intuitive knowing* Table 1 provides an overview of each theme with its essential components

Table 1
Experience of Being Heard The Themes

Themes	Components
Caring commitment	empathic listening, caring, understanding of my situation, interest in me and my opinions, going the extra mile, respect, having fun, encouragement
Feeling safe, protected and not judged	sense of safety and protection, giving space, respectful limit setting, non-judgmental, letting out the anger and hurt, trust
Help in getting what I need	taking action, nudging me, letting me know of my entitlements
Help in dealing with my problems	helpful feedback, outlining choices, advice
Intuitive knowing	visual, acting in genuine ways

Conclusion

In presenting the results of this study, I have divided the participants experiences into five themes and discussed each theme separately These divisions are in fact artificial in the sense that the themes are very much interconnected, interrelated, and overlapping The experience of being heard

is a dynamic phenomenon For the participants, it was not a matter of having a checklist of themes that they referred to in order to determine whether they were being heard by adults It was more a sense that the adult to whom they were relating had a fundamental belief in their worthiness as human beings and treated them with the dignity and respect that they deserved The themes represent, in a sense, a composite of the skills and characteristics of adults who listened to and heard what the participants were saying Steve, for example, talked of feeling heard by foster parents who treated him like someone special and unique For the first time in his life, Steve was living with dignity He states

> But they weren't the kind of people that had seen it all and they were just going to say like like a patriarchy or something like that you know "we've done that before" But none of that, like anything that happened they reacted as if it was a new thing because it was a new person, right, so that's how they handled it, as a totally new experience for anything that happened to any of the guys in the house, cause the first (group home) that I was in was just boys, ya, it was pretty interesting to ah to see people like that, and they were very loving and caring so, that was good they gave me something that was um, I looked on it as something very small then, but it's something that's very large now It's that in the house that I lived in with (the group home parents), there was a rule that said um, you have as much freedom as you want, as long as you like they were saying, "we're giving you all the freedom in the world, as long as you respect these small rules that we have for while you're in the house, but what you do outside the house is your responsibility" I'd never had that before, like um somebody just saying, "here's your key, come back when you like If you're going to go out you know, it would be nice if you told us where you were going If you don't, we understand" Like, it was just like they were saying, "here's freedom, do with it what you will and if you um don't respect that we're giving you this freedom, then of course, we'll have to take it away because you know, we're the parental figures here but if you respect the freedom that we've given you, then you know, you'll get the respect back" type thing

Experience of Participants

Each of the participants gave me feedback about their experience as a research participant John was unavailable to meet with me after we had completed our interviews, however made it clear during the course of the two interviews that he had really enjoyed the process He had agreed to be a

participant in the first place because of his interest in the topic of being heard He also told me he liked being able to 'help out'

Brenda spoke very positively of the experience of being a research participant She told me that she really liked it when I called her, and she felt very happy to help me by participating in the study Brenda said that she enjoyed talking about the issues that she discussed in our interviews I met with Brenda in October 1994 to discuss her impressions of the (re-done) results Brenda said the results were "incredible" She said the results were "amazing" because they helped her see things more clearly She told me that "seeing it on paper is really powerful" She said she liked the results "a lot" She felt very positive about Steve (whom she has never met) after reading the results and told me that his story made her want to cry She really liked what John said about Intuitive Knowing She said John's quote sounded "strong - not wishy-washy like mine" Brenda was surprised at the similarities she saw between her experience of being heard and the others' experiences Brenda also told me that she thought I was a "really good listener"

Steve also told me that he felt good about being able to help me out He found the experience of value to him because he said it gave him the opportunity to process some of the issues that he had not given any thought to for a long time Steve telephoned his group home dad after our first interview Steve told me that he had spent so much time talking about this person that he had a need to check in with him and verify that his perceptions of what went on while he was in care were accurate

Experience of Researcher

My experience as a researcher in this study began in September 1993 and continues to the present date (October 1994) I think the best description of the experience would be to say that it has been a journey - a long, arduous journey with as many highs as it has had lows

I entered the Faculty of Human and Social Development in September 1992 knowing that I wanted to study the area of children's rights in an in-depth way My interest in children and their rights has spanned my 20 year career as a social worker Through a process of discussing my interests with my Committee and various other resource people in the faculty, I was able to develop a research question I found the review of the literature really exciting I was drawing on literature from a variety of sources - educators,

researchers, practitioners at all levels of the practice arena, and current legislation in British Columbia The work I read was fascinating and served to reaffirm my interest in the field of children's rights Developing a framework from which to conduct the study was a challenge because I see my strengths as a practitioner, not as a researcher It was a learning experience however, and the more I read about phenomenology, the more I realized it was a logical choice in methodology for me to make I have had an interest in philosophy for some time and studied it for several years at College many years ago Philosophy is an underpinning of phenomenology and it worked well with my desire to understand an issue from the perspective of children and youth

The data collection phase was exhilarating for me I have worked with young people for many years and have missed the direct contact with youth during the course of my work of the last few years Having the opportunity to meet with the participants and listen to their stories was a very powerful experience for me - I realized that I must return to that direct contact with young people in my professional career I had forgotten how much I enjoyed working with young people and the data collection process was a compelling reminder Each of the participants presented me with a different kind of challenge One participant became particularly fond of me during our meetings and turned to me for guidance and support in dealing with her problems I found the participant's need for help very difficult to handle I knew that it would not be appropriate for me to engage in any kind of counselling or therapeutic relationship, yet I felt that I could not deal exclusively with my agenda and move quickly on I handled the dilemma by taking the time to listen to the participant after our meetings had ended This seemed to be enough of a support and satisfied the participant

Another participant was hostile and mistrustful of me during our meeting to discuss my research project I felt quite comfortable dealing with the anger because I have done it so often in the course of my social work career I answered the participant's questions honestly and made no attempt to convince the participant that he should agree to participate in the study I left our meeting believing that this person may not participate in the study I was not altogether surprised, however, when he telephoned later that night to ask if he could still be considered a participant

One of the participants astonished me by his level of skill and social maturity I think that I have a fairly good idea of the challenges facing

adolescents who cannot live at home (having been one myself) This participant had had a fair share of troubles arising from his home life before coming into care, yet seemed to have a level of maturity far beyond his years and an understanding of life that I found really impressive

The data analysis phase has been a grueling experience for me I was unsure about how I was to tackle it and I dealt with that unsureness by sublimating my intuition and common sense I analyzed the data based upon what I thought I was supposed to do I am an intuitive person and the process was a painful one for me It didn't feel right, but at the same time, I didn't feel I had anyone to help me So I soldiered on and produced an analysis that made me feel anxious merely by reading what I had written When I eventually found a phenomenologist willing to help me, I was feeling discouraged and anguished To compound the problem, my 'Protestant work ethic' was forcing me to continue a process that I felt was all wrong for me The process was exacting a huge toll on my personal life It was as if a personal goal had turned sour and things had gone terribly wrong

Speaking to this phenomenologist was like a revelation to me I felt that this person understood the purpose of my research and could see and feel the things that I was seeing in my data She listened to me, asked me some probing questions about the data, and then gave me some guidance about how I could do the analysis This process took less than an hour, yet I left her office knowing what to do and how to do it And, it felt right It felt like me I felt almost euphoric, and considering the extent of the work that lay before me, that was significant! When I returned to the analysis, I brought myself into it this time, with all my intuitiveness and capabilities to feel things rather than merely use my intellect The process felt right and I had a growing sense that I was empowered, in control, and using my skills

I had read through the transcripts many times during my first attempt at analysis During the process of breaking down what the youth had said into component parts, I had become locked into a mechanical way of analyzing what they were saying I sensed that the re-construction of the component parts that I had done as part of the analysis was somehow stifling the youth's voices Yet when I spoke to the phenomenologist, I was able to tell her what the participants had to say I could visualize my discussions with each of the participants and I felt that I understood what they were telling me

When I re-analyzed the data, I re-read the transcripts many times and looked at the totality of what they were saying to me I no longer felt anxious about doing the right thing The emergence of the themes seemed natural and so evident to me the second time around I was not letting my own fear of failure interfere with my ability to analyze the data When I submitted the analysis to the phenomenologist for feedback, I was completely confident in what I had done It was a really good feeling

Getting rid of the barriers that prevented me from being able to effectively analyze what the youth had to say allowed me to see some rather surprising results I had started this research project believing that young people in care were probably heard by adults less often than they were not heard I believe that I am an adult who can and does hear young people, but I never really stopped to think about why I see myself as someone who hears what children and youth tell me I just know that I like young people, have really liked working with them during the last 20 years, and I sense that most have liked working with me as well Listening to what the participants told me about their experiences in being heard by adults gave me insight into some of the things I did or did not do during my career as a social worker It is not that the participants were telling me things that were surprising, it is more that I had never thought of things in that light before For example, the participants talked of feeling heard by adults who enjoyed them and had fun with them That makes sense Yet I had not thought of it in those terms before I think that I may have minimized the importance of some of the activities I did with young people, like clothes shopping or going for coffee, in favour of over-emphasizing the importance of my counselling skills in particular and my caring and interest in children and youth in general

My frame of reference at the beginning of this study was from a rights point of view This has been reinforced through this study but in ways that I had not predicted The powerful negative experiences of all three youth in relationships with natural parents and many professional "caregivers" reinforces the need for greater safeguards to ensure the <u>right</u> of all children to be treated with dignity and respect and to be heard However, this study focuses on those elements that contributed to the participants' feelings of <u>being heard</u> Further research is needed into the all too common experience of children and youth <u>not</u> being heard

This research turned out to be about the qualities of people who related to children and youth as if they had rights The participants of this study talked of feeling heard by adults who treated them in ways that respected the participants' right to be heard This research project does not address how frequently participants met adults like this It was evident in the participants' stories though, that the adults whom the participants felt heard by have a fundamental belief in the value and capabilities of children This is important because the participants have articulated human qualities that we as service providers need to think about and hopefully incorporate into our interactions with each other, with children and youth, and with all human beings What the participants have said makes so much sense and yet it is not something that we as adults have paid enough attention to

Chapter 5
Discussion of Findings

> Indeed, even if there were no instrumental benefit of asking children about their views on their rights, such a step would be an important signal of respect for their personhood including children as participants alters their stance in the community, from things or outsiders to members (Melton & Limber, 1992, p 170)

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of three youth in having their views heard by adults during their time in the care of the Superintendant of Family and Child Services Article 12 of the U N Convention on the Rights of the Child was used as a point of reference for examining the congruence between the youths' right to be heard and the youths' perceptions of their experience in being heard by adults during their time in care

A phenomenological methodology was chosen for this study to examine the participants' lived experience of feeling heard by adults, while in care The aim of this research project was to explicate the phenomenon of 'being heard' and to describe the essential components of being heard as the participants experienced it This study seeks to provide the reader with a deeper understanding of the nature and meaning of the youth's experiences in having their views heard This study has given a voice to three young people who, by virtue of their age, have traditionally been excluded from participating as either producers or subjects of knowledge

The research findings were divided into two sections The first section described the participants in the study The second section described the participants' experience of being heard and the five themes which emerged to explain and describe their experience of being heard These themes were *caring commitment, feeling safe, protected and not judged, help in getting what I need, help in dealing with my problems,* and *intuitive knowing* *Caring commitment* was characterized by empathic listening, caring, understanding of their situation, adult interest in the youth and their opinions, feeling respect and encouragement from adults, having fun with adults, and having adults go the extra mile for the youth

An integral part of the participants' feeling heard by adults was the sense that they were *safe, protected and not judged* by the adults to whom they were relating The participants needed to feel a sense of safety and trust so that they could let out their anger and hurt They needed to feel that they were not being judged, and that any limits set by the adults were done respectfully The participants needed to feel that they were being given space and were not being pressured into discussing matters they didn't want to talk about

It was important to the participants to have adults *give them help in getting what they needed* That meant that adults were letting them know of their entitlements so that they could make more informed decisions It also meant that adults would be there to take action on their behalf when needed, but would also nudge them along to get what they needed themselves

A component of feeling heard for the participants was having adults give them *help in dealing with their problems* This help ranged from providing helpful feedback and outlining choices, to giving advice to the participants The participants' *Intuitive Knowing* provided a means for them to determine whether they felt that the adults were being genuine in their relationship with the participants The participants could sense this genuineness on a visual as well as a feeling level

This chapter is divided into 6 sections

1 The Themes - a Literature Comparison
2 Comparison of Findings with U N Convention
3 Implications for Policy and Practice
4 Implications for Research
5 Limitations of Study
6 Conclusion

The first section discusses the findings of this study and places them in the context of similar extant theory and research The contextualizing of the themes involves placing "these themes back within the overall contexts or horizons from which these themes emerged" (Hycner, 1985, p 293) Van Manen (1990) suggests that human science researchers must study how other scholars who belong to the tradition of one's subject of study have addressed their understandings of a phenomenon because

> sooner or later one must test one's insights against those who belong to the tradition of one's subject of study And it is then that a researcher becomes aware of as yet unformulated or unsuspected specifications and dimensions of meaning In this way the work of others turns into a conversational partnership that reveals the limits and possibilities of one own interpretive achievements (p 76)

This first section introduces and discusses additional relevant literature as it pertains to the findings of this study

The Themes A Literature Comparison

In this section I compare and contrast the themes that emerged from the data with literature on social support and empowerment The participants talked of their experiences in being heard in terms of how respected, valued and supported they felt by adults in their relationships with them The literature on social suport and empowerment provides a context for understanding more fully what the youth were saying I have also compared the themes as they emerged from the data, with other studies involving child and youth participants, who discussed their experiences as children and youth in an adult society Many of the studies focused on what children and youth felt they needed from adults in order to feel like valuable, participating members of society Contrasting the themes with these studies provides the reader with the opportunity to see how the priorities of the participants of my study compare to the priorities of other children and youth in Canada, some of whom are not in care

Caring commitment

The theme *caring commitment* is a particularly important part of the experience of being heard for the participants of this study Caring Commitment was best exemplified by the empathic listening and caring of adults, by the adults' interest in them and their opinions, their understanding

of the participants' situation, and by the sense that they were being treated respectfully Receiving encouragement from adults is part of the theme of caring commitment The caring commitment was also evident to the participants when they sensed that adults enjoyed them and they had fun together Caring commitment was evidenced by the adults' insistence on 'going the extra mile' to help the participants - a sort of dogged determination to make sure the youth got the help they needed

When the participants talked about feeling heard by adults who showed a caring commitment to them, they were talking about having a meaningful relationship with adults whom they knew cared about them, respected them and valued them as people These adults were communicating a sense of dignity and worthiness to the participants The adults were there for the participants on a level much deeper than merely a physical presence or an obligatory care-giving role They cared about the youth as fellow human beings When the adults listened to them, they were empathic This empathy, for the participants, meant that the adults could in some way identify with what the youth were saying or feeling Brenda felt this empathy from her foster parents, whom she believed had experienced a similar early childhood to her own She felt her foster parents knew and identified with what she was going through Steve felt empathy from his foster dad as well and believed it was because his foster dad had known so many other youth in care that he was able to vicariously experience Steve's thoughts and feelings John felt a sense of empathy from his foster dad who was a young, single male who valued the importance of going out and having fun

Respect was a key component of the theme *caring commitment* for the participants of this study The participants felt a caring commitment from adults who treated them as if they were "good enough" just as they were The participants felt esteemed and valued by the adults The respect they felt was on a deeper level than an adult merely being cordial and listening to what they youth had to say The adults cared about them and valued them and related to them on an equal, although different level As John pointed out, the respect was there when John's foster dad related to him as an equal, rather than as a lesser human being where he felt the barrier of "I'm the adult" The barriers were not there when John and his foster dad related

The components of the theme *caring commitment* are evident in all the support literature as well as in the empowerment literature It is also very

consistent with what other youth, both in and out of care, had to say about the aspects of their relationships with adults that were positive and important to the youth Berndt (1989) talks about esteem /emotional support as referring to the statements of actions that convince people of their worth and value The purpose of the support is to make people feel better about themselves and their life situation Cobb (1976) suggests that the function of support is to give information to an individual that one is loved, cared for, esteemed and valued, and belongs to a mutually obliging communication network Belle (1989) defines social support as "resources that are provided by other people and that arise in the context of interpersonal relationships" (p 1) She sees supportive resources including such things as affection, physical comforting, empathic listening and reassurances of worth This is similar to what the participants were saying about feeling caring, empathic listening and respect from adults

This sense of mutuality is important for the participants of my study, although the participants did not emphasize it as much as was evidenced in the literature on support, empowerment and children's rights John and Steve talked about it in terms of respecting adults who respected them and Brenda talked of it in terms of helping others who helped her The participants were, in a sense, talking about being interdependent with adults and having a relationship with adults that was based on mutual respect This is similar to what the youth in the Canadian Mental Health Association (1992) had to say regarding bridging the gap between adult defined and youth driven policies

> Along with respect goes caring, and young people expressed a strong desire to <u>share</u> in caring relationships with adults They see caring as an essential ingredient of life in a difficult world, one that involves trust, cooperation and mutual support in bad times as well as good (p 3)

It is consistent with what Cochran (1991) suggests is the first rule governing network relations, the reciprocity principle This principle involves the notion that other factors being equal, there is a reasonable balance between how much is given and how much is received in a given network relationship The participants of my study sensed that there was not equality in their relationships with adults and they were sometimes asking for support from adults even in the absence of reciprocal behaviour This is consistent with Cochran's (1991) second rule of providing support based on special weight being given to kinship or common background or, in the case of my participants, special circumstances including age and stage and level of social

skill The participants were not entering into relationships with adults as confident partners Based on a number of bad experiences with adults, the participants often felt a sense of mistrust when they related to adults Cochran's (1991) third rule governing network relations focuses on the mutual respect between each member of the network which serves to maintain a collective consciousness, even though all members of a person's network never come together as a group The participants of my study often felt marginalized by adults and they wanted to feel a sense of connectedness and acceptance by adults Feeling respected by even one adult was important in developing a sense that some adults cared about and valued them, and contributed to the participants sense of connectedness to the adult world

Cochran (1991) discussed the deficit mode of support which is built not on reciprocity but rather on the dependence of powerless people on those with the power to grant or withhold basic subsistence resources He believes that a total lack of respect and a belief in the inadequacy of another is fundamental to the deficit mode The participants of my study talked of their frustration with adults, whom they saw as being in a much more powerful position, who practiced this type of support The participants didn't feel heard by adults who were condescending and who believed that children and youth are fundamentally inferior or less competent beings

In contrast, the empowerment approach to support (Cochran & Woolver, 1983, Rappoport, Swift, 1984), defined by The Cornell Empowerment Group (1989) as "the intentional, on-going process centred in the local community involving mutual respect, caring, group participation through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources" (p 53), is much more consistent with the participants' experience of a Caring Commitment from adults The empowerment process is built on an understanding of another's environment, which the participants in my study talked of in terms of adult understanding of their situation It involves the concept of mutual respect and the belief that all people have strengths, that diversity (of race, gender, age and family form) is positively valued, that people without power have as much capacity as the powerful to assess their own needs, and that people disadvantaged by the way that society is currently structured must play a primary role in developing strategies by which they gain increased control over valued resources

This empowerment approach to support reinforces what the participants were saying about their experiences of a caring commitment from adults They didn't feel a caring commitment from adults who benevolently bestowed certain support upon them They felt heard by adults whom they believed had a belief in their worth and capabilities as human beings The process of mutual respect must generate increased investment in caring and mutual support among the participants in the process, and in the community as a whole (Cochran, 1991) The participants wanted relationships with the adults in their lives and they wanted to feel a sense of connectedness and belonging An essential part of the empowerment process, according to Cochran, is the positive validation by other group members, of feelings, ideas and beliefs negatively experienced by an isolated individual The participants of my study felt a caring commitment from adults who had an understanding of their situation and who could listen with empathy, with interest, with attentiveness and with caring to what they had to say This is consistent with Cochran's empowerment approach to support

Belle (1989) and Cochran (1991) make the point that support is given within the context of interpersonal relationships Belle (1989) discusses social support networks in terms of being an aspect of the social environment that appears critical to the well-being of humans She states

> The social network construct orients us to the cast of characters in an individual's social world, to the interrelationships among these people, and to the connections between differently structured social networks and the large social systems (p 1)

The relationships that the participants had with adults were sometimes fleeting, but the youth felt a sense of caring commitment when the adults connected with them on a level deeper than cordial interacting The youth felt a sense that the adults understood their situation and could relate to what they were saying One might conclude that caring, committed adults were in a sense forging a social connection with the youth and demonstrating their interest in doing so by their attentiveness and interest in the participants

The importance of recognizing and acknowledging this interdependence between children and adults is reinforced by Flekkoy (1992) when he states

> The child's development of self-confidence, respect, identity is determined largely by the signals the child receives about how others - amongst whom loved adults are very important -

> perceives the child's behaviour, feelings, thoughts, reactions Am I good or bad, valuable or worthless, are my attitudes and values in tune with my society? (p 146)

Raychaba (1988) talks about the interconnectedness between children and adults in terms of empowerment for young people in care when he states that "it must be recognized that the best care is not necessarily that solely endowed upon us from above or that one for us, the best care should be viewed as a process in which both service providers and service receivers share the decision-making and the responsibility involved" (p 6) The Canadian Mental Health Association (1992) echoed his thoughts on the interdependence component of caring relationships between children and adults when it states, "the youth rejected out of hand the goal of autonomy They pointed out that we are all interdependent, and that people should not be left out in the cold to fend for themselves" (p 3)

The participants of this study talked about the importance of adult understanding of their situation as a component of the caring commitment they needed to feel heard The participants had experienced significant hardships in their life They were all, to varying degrees, emotionally traumatized by the abuse or abandonment from their biological parents, and in John's case, by his foster parents as well It was important to the participants that adults have an understanding of their situation with respect to their life experiences causing or leading to some of their present-day problems This point is echoed by the youth in Rachaba's (1993, 1988) studies The youth in his studies talked of needing understanding from caregivers about their situation and their reasons for coming into care

The participants of my study had suffered major life stresses as a result of coming into care and being either abandoned or abused by their primary caregivers, their biological parents Their sense of attachment to a significant caregiver was seriously compromised by abuse and/or abandonment by their biological parents Their sense of connectedness to a social support network dissolved because of their removal from their family home and their placement in state care Rutter (1983) researched the variables that appeared to mitigate social stressors on at-risk children and youth He found that the variables included a warm, close, personal relationship with an adult, and the opportunity for children and youth to participate in a meaningful way so that the youth could feel a sense of responsibility and achieve success at a meaningful task This is consistent with what the participants of my study

reported They felt a caring commitment from adults who were interested in them and welcomed their opinions Rutter (1983) makes the point that the research evidence to date suggests that the protective effect of mitigating factors depend more on the quality, strength and security of the relationships rather than on the particular person with whom the relationship happens to be formed This is consistent with the experience of the participants of my study because the participants experienced these supportive relationships with adults who were not their parents Not having a quality relationship with their parents did not preclude them from having quality relationships with other adults

The participants of my study talked about adults going the extra mile for them as evidence of a caring commitment It was a sense that the adults were doggedly determined to make sure that the youth got what they needed For Brenda, it was the determination of her art therapist to ensure she had an opportunity to continue her therapy that signaled this extra effort For John, it was the extraordinarily measures his social worker took to ensure that not only did he have several options from which to choose when deciding on a placement, but that she arranged for him to stay in a safe, neutral place until he had made his decision, thereby eliminating any pressure to choose Steve identified this extra effort when his social worker reminded him frequently, without criticism or injunctions, that he had the option of getting his teeth fixed while he was in care, thereby saving himself enormous expense at some future date The B C Ombudsman (1994) discussed this issue in her paper when she talked of young people wanting adults to "go to bat" for them The youth interviewed, like the participants of my study, did not have the benefit of their parents advocating on their behalf They needed adults who understood them and were willing to go to extra lengths to help them get what they needed The B C Ombudsman (1994) states

> The painful experience of some young people is that their parents, for many complex reasons, may not have the confidence, ability, willingness or resources to go to bat for them (p 8)

She quotes a young person who stated "the Ministry of Social Services drops you as soon as you get into the corrections system" (p 13) as an example of the frustration young people feel when adults don't go to bat for them Another youth in the B C Ombudsman (1994) discussion paper made a plea, "don't give up on us so easily" (p 14) This is consistent with what the participants of my

study were saying about the importance of having adults "go the extra mile" as a means of demonstrating a caring commitment Raychaba (1993) also addressed this issue and the importance of this extra effort in helping young people with problems He states

> The chances of counselling and therapy for abused youngsters being effective are greatly enhanced when they are helped to develop strong, reciprocal, long-lasting attachment relationships with "irrational advocates", caring adults who the youth feel "will go to unreasonable lengths for them", grown-ups who, in Bronfenbrenner's (1977) words are "really crazy" about the children and youth they care for (p 99)

Raychaba (1993) quotes a young person who sums up the issue nicely

> Like she's very conservative but out of all the workers at the agency she's the rebel She always went out on a limb for me You know, she always went out of her way to help whatever way she could We still keep in contact now which is really great because I was afraid that after I really wouldn't have much contact with her any more (p 62)

Raychaba (1988) discusses the issue from the perspective of young people leaving state care and feeling isolated, lonely and abandoned by caregivers who are no longer mandated to provide support and thus just drop out of the youths' lives There was no commitment from the welfare system to go the extra mile for the youth to provide post care services The B C Ministry of Social Services recognized this issue several years ago and in an effort to 'be there' for the young people leaving state care, developed a post-majority service designed to provide that extra commitment and support so necessary to the young people's development of self-worth and skills for independent living

The youth in my study talked about encouragement from adults as being an integral component of the theme caring commitment Steve felt encouraged by his foster father who often reminded him that he had the capabilities to do whatever he wanted to do in life John felt encouraged by his foster dad as well, when he was reminded that he was smart and good-looking and should be out enjoying life as a teenager Brenda felt encouraged by her art therapists who often complemented her on her artwork and poetry and encouraged her to use the medium of art to express herself This need for encouragement is reflected in many studies involving the perspective of youth (B C Ministry of Education, 1992, Canadian Mental Health, 1992, Report

of the Community Panel Family and Children's Services Legislation, 1992, Raychaba , 1993, 1988) The Canadian Mental Health (1992) talked of the importance of encouragement in terms of appreciating youth for their accomplishments They state

> It is very important to be recognized for one's accomplishments, whether as an individual or as part of a group Young people need more than just a pat on the back They need to know and hear that they are really appreciated by adults for the contributions they make (p 8)

The B C Ministry of Education (1992) report reinforced what the participants of my study had to say about needing encouragement from adults as a component of the adult's caring commitment to them The students felt most comfortable participating in classes where they were encouraged by the teacher to share their opinions, and where the teacher acknowledged them and valued their responses The B C Ministry of Education report indicated a strong correlation between the student environment and the student satisfaction with the extent to which their school helped the student learn A positive school environment was one where students felt encouraged by the teachers and where their participation in class was valued

The participants in my study talked about having fun with adults as a component of the caring commitment of adults Brenda talked of the thrill of having fun with her foster parents when she first came into care, in contrast to what she had experienced with her biological parents Steve talked of all the fun things he did with his foster dad, like going out for meals spontaneously, wandering around shopping malls etc as evidence of his foster dad's caring commitment John talked of having fun with his foster father in terms of sitting around talking and listening to music together, as an enjoyable experience Raychaba (1993) also talked about the importance for young people of having fun with adults as a necessary component of a positive relationship between youth and adults He quotes one young person who stated, "my last social worker was just fabulous Like she wasn't my social worker She was more like one of my best friends we would go out for a coffee or whatever " (p 62) For young people, having fun can be as simple as talking with adults Raychaba (1993) quotes one young person who knew what he needed from adults, "you need someone who'll be there, who you can be friends with, who you can talk to, shoot the shit You know" (p 63)

The elements of the theme *caring commitment* as components of the experience of being heard for the participants of my study is consistently reflected in literature on social, empowerment and children's rights The participants of my study have identified actions and qualities in adults that have been stated by other youth The components of the participants' experience of caring commitment is reflected clearly and consistently in this literature

Feeling safe, protected and not judged

The theme *feeling safe, protected and not judged* as experienced by the participants of my study is characterized by the participants' trust in adults that they were safe to express themselves without fear of rejection or abandonment or being shamed The participants needed an opportunity to express feelings of anger and hurt that they had when they came into care They could only do this with adults who were non-judgmental and able to communicate to them that it was safe to state their opinions and to be themselves The participants needed space sometimes so that they could communicate with adults and make decisions based on their own timelines, not those of the adults They didn't like feeling pressured to talk or to participate, before they felt ready to do so The participants felt safe with adults who were able to provide this kind of climate, even though they recognized that adults need to set limits The wanted limits to be set in a respectful way however

For the participants of this study, *feeling safe, protected and not judged* by adults was critical in their experience of feeling heard The participants had experienced a betrayal of trust by their biological parents To varying degrees, they needed to develop or re-establish a sense of trust with adults significant to them before they could learn to speak up for themselves Brenda in particular, felt very mistrustful of adults based on the battering she had suffered from her father and the abandonment from her mother for the first seven years of her life Brenda was terrified of saying anything when she came into care, and was very fearful of all adults Brenda's art therapist was able to communicate a sense of safety and protection to her, and Brenda began to feel trusting of her Through the medium of art, Brenda was able to communicate her thoughts and feelings Brenda was eventually able to learn to express herself verbally because of the trust she had built with her therapist and the sense of safety she felt when communicating through her artwork

Brenda, unlike John and Steve, talked about feeling a sense of safety and protection through the prayers of complete strangers Brenda did not know the people in her church who prayed for her, but she had a very strong and positive reaction to their prayers She told me that the strangers said things about her that she felt were true and yet she does not know how they could have known She told me that their prayers made her feel very good Berndt (1989) would refer to this as esteem support He uses the term esteem support to refer to statements or actions that convince people of their own worth or value "This type of support has also been called emotional support, because its aim is to make people feel better about themselves or their life situation" (p 310) Brenda's experience is not consistent with the experience of the other participants, who felt good about themselves as a result of their relationships with people that they knew Brenda felt good about herself based on her sense that there was some positive spiritual power at work She was quite specific that it was the prayers that made her feel good, not the sense that people cared enough about her to pray for her She stated "It was just from them praying over me it was mainly just the prayer" Spirituality, or the role it plays in the lives of children and youth is not addressed in the children's rights literature Articles 14 and 30 of the U N Convention on the Rights of the Child state that the child has a right to freedom of religion The Convention does not however, specifically address children's spirituality Brenda's experience has highlighted the issue of spirituality in children and youth and the apparent lack of recognition of this in the literature

Feeling safe, protected and not judged was essential for John as well in learning to trust adults and to feel safe to speak up John had many negative experiences with adults and felt shamed and humiliated by his foster parents in the home where he lived for eight years John says that he felt worthless and incapable of speaking up in that home Yet, John felt safe and not judged in his last foster home and was not afraid of negative repercussions when he violated house rules John believes that it was in this home that he learned to speak his mind and to trust that his foster father would not judge him harshly John's need for space was respected and not interpreted as wrong or bad, as it had been in his earlier home

Steve needed to feel safe, protected and not judged so that he could begin to feel more in control of his life Steve, unlike John and Brenda, did not have difficulty speaking up when he came into care, but he felt mistrustful of adults

whom he felt controlled him It was through the relationship with his foster father, where he felt safe, not judged and a sense of trust, that Steve was able to develop a sense of control over his own life Steve's need for space was respected by his foster father Steve was able to eventually let out his angry, hurt feelings about his parents in the safety of his relationship with his foster father

The participants came into care feeling powerless, based on their age and lack of a close nurturing relationship with their parents By learning to trust adults, the participants were able to become more confident and to become more aware of their power as human beings There were becoming empowered Lord (1989) defines personal empowerment as "the process whereby individuals feel increasingly in control of their own lives, including the resources they need to live in the community with dignity (p 1) Lord notes that no one factor creates a sense of powerlessness, rather it is a build up of experiences and factors that create situations where people feel they have very little control One result of being powerless and dependent is people's disconnectedness from their community of family, peers or neighbours The participants in my study were disconnected from all of these communities Lord (1989) believes that service support is helpful and important for some people in their process of personal change This is consistent with what the participants talked about regarding the kind of relationships they needed from adults He states that

> For many research participants, one-to-one support was critical Sometimes this support came from a friend or a peer who may have acted as a mentor Other times, it was a service worker who provided the support When people mentioned services that contributed to their empowerment, they identified services that were personalized, interactive, and that gave them a sense of control They never mentioned congregate, bureaucratic, or institutionalized services as being helpful The health or social service worker who provided significant one-to-one support was characterized as "a good listener", "an equal", "a guide" and as a person "who really cares" (p 1)

This is consistent with what the participants of my study were saying

Lord (1989) suggests that the process to empowerment almost always includes a change in the person's environment or context, often involving a new person or people in the context As the empowerment process evolves, many people find that their growing awareness of their own capacities and rights helps them develop a sense of personal control and competence

Lord (1989) finds that the process of personal empowerment has several important components a trigger, a change in context, awareness of options, and participation At each state there are critical supports or resources that may be needed for advancement Pinderhughes (1983) suggests that powerlessness comes from the failure of the larger social system to provide needed support and resources For the participants of my study, the process of empowerment began through the trusting relationship with an adult where the participants felt safe, protected, cared for and not judged Their sense of worth grew and they began to see themselves as people with some power This empowerment process was an integral component of the experience of having a voice and feeling heard for the participants

For the participants of my study, feeling safe, protected, not judged and developing a sense of trust in adults who were able to give them space and to set limits respectfully was echoed by the youth participants in a number of studies For example, the youth in the B C Ministry of Education (1992) survey addressed the safety and non-judgmental issue when the youth talked of feeling uncomfortable in sharing their opinions in classes where they were ridiculed for incorrect responses The students did not feel well-served by the school when they felt afraid to state their opinion

The participants of my study felt mistrust towards adults because of the bad experiences they had had with their biological parents Similarly, trust was an important issue for the youth participants in the Report of the Community Panel Family and Children's Services (1992) The youth talked of the mistrust they felt towards a system supposedly there to serve them Many youth talked of disclosing abuse information to a worker and then feeling betrayed when the worker immediately told other people The youth talked of feeling anxious and mistrustful about someone having a secret file of them And they talked of their fears in speaking up about situations that were troubling them, for fear of not being believed or fear of reprisal The youth talked of the importance of being given space by adults, being offered a safe place by adults where they could "chill out" during a crisis with their family

Similarly, the youth participants in Raychaba's (1993) study talked about trust being a key issue for them Many youth were unhappy with what they perceived to be a betrayal of trust by adults - disclosing abuse to one teacher for example, often meant that all the teachers knew about it The youth talked of being pushed and coerced into treatment and of being left out

of the planning They talked of feeling pressured by therapists into disclosing abuse and of not being given any space to proceed at a pace more comfortable to them The youth didn't like being pushed into treatment programs where they found the limit setting to be rigid, unfair and disrespectful The youth talked of the transience of placements and relationships to adults interfering with the establishment of a trusting relationship with adults

Consistent with what the participants of my study were saying, the youth participants in the Canadian Mental Health Association (1992) study talked of the importance of feeling secure in their relationships with adults, free from pain and danger They stated that

> All young people need to feel safe from harm whether it be the danger of unsafe neighborhoods, family violence, assault, rape, neglect or abuse young people need to know that they will not be abandoned, neglected or abused And they need to know that there is help available when problems become too difficult to handle alone (p 9/10)

Trust was important to the youth in Canadian Mental Health Association (1992) study One youth stated

> I never thought anybody cared about me, I just didn't take them seriously Until I learned to trust people, I never realized how important that was Now it feels good to know I can trust someone and they can trust me for the first time in my life I really do feel cared for (p 6)

As with the participants of my study, these youth needed to feel safe and secure with an adult to begin to trust them

Bowlby (1971) suggests that secure attachments formed in childhood are the basis of an adults' ability to form socially supportive relationships The participants of my study did not have secure attachments with their biological parents and they had all had some bad experiences in other relationships with adults Their need to feel safe and not judged, and to trust and be trusted is understandable Warm, caring relationships with adults allowed the participants to trust enough to let out their hurt and anger, without fear of rejection or abandonment Interestingly, Steve found it easier than John and Brenda to begin to trust adults and to form good relationships with them Steve came into care at 16 years of age John found it extremely difficult to trust adults, and still does to this day John came into care at age 2 and lived in many different homes until he was 17, when he finally lived in a home that he liked One could speculate that, based on Bowlby's position, Steve is the more likely of

the two to form satisfying relationships with adults just based on the fact that there was some secure attachment in his early childhood This could have implications for practice in the child welfare field because although many governments have recognized the need for a stable home for a child and the need for long-range planning, it appears that it has not been prioritized when one looks at the frequency of moves of many young people, from the time they enter care (Raychaba, 1988, 1993)

The participants of my study saw respectful limit setting as part of *feeling safe, protected and not judged* They had experiences where they had violated house rules and had been held accountable, yet they felt fairly treated John talks of feeling disappointed at not being able to drink in the house, yet he was happy with the way his foster father handled the rule violation Steve talked about how foolish he felt for overdosing on LSD, and yet how supportive, non-judgmental and reassuring his foster father had been Brenda talked of feeling good about the way her foster parents helped her understand why they wouldn't allow her to do certain things

The respectful limit-setting that the participants of my study experienced as part of feeling safe is echoed by the youth in the Canadian Mental Health Association (1992) study when they discussed their need for interdependence with adults The youth made it clear that they understood that interdependence implies limits on decision-making and individual rights They welcomed the limit setting as a component of feeling interdependent with adults They made the point also that they see participation with others in decision-making as essential Interestingly, the participants of my study did not talk in terms of participating in the decision making They were seeing the issue of limit setting from the standpoint of adults treating them fairly and respectfully, rather than from a standpoint of their right to participate One has to wonder how much their viewpoint was influenced by their significant sense of powerlessness due primarily to their negative experiences at a very young age with their primary caregivers Participation in decision making is, none the less, implicit in respectful limit setting simply by virtue of the necessity of an adult having awareness of what a young person would consider fair

Consistent with the views of the participants of my study, Raychaba (1993) addressed limit setting when he talked of youth who felt the limit setting in treatment programs were rigid, unfair and disrespectful Garbarino

(1980) also talked about limit setting as a beneficial and necessary component of an effective program for young people He states that

> The history of services for youths has been dominated by a debate over the relative importance of control versus support in those programs This is a false and misleading dichotomy Successful programs have recognized that young people need a healthy mixture of order and nurturance The two go hand in hand in a well-run program, a healthy family, and a society that knows how to care for its youths (p 125)

Garbarino's opinion is consistent with what the participants of my study were saying, although he did not elaborate on the reasons he believes that limit setting is important One can only assume also, that the limit-setting he refers to is done in a respectful way

The theme *feeling safe, protected and not judged* is evident in literature on support and empowerment in terms of the necessity of children and youth having close, nurturing, trusting relationships with significant adults in their lives, leading to an increase in their sense of personal worth and power Hutchison and McGill (1990) state that "people who are valued and nurtured by family, friends and society have a better chance of becoming empowered The self-help movement often plays a critical starting point for individuals who are alienated from society" (p 8) Freire (1985), quoted in Lord (1989), strengthens this point when he states "the nature of relationships between people is a reflection of the valuing that is present Our language and non-verbal communication contribute to the empowerment process through an emotional union between persons" (p 8)

Help in getting what I need

The theme *help in getting what I need* is about the tangible support the participants in my study needed from adults The participants didn't always know what resources were available to them or in fact what resources even should be available to them They needed help from adults in learning about their entitlements, and how to access them, whether it was entitlement to an extra clothing allowance, or to some dental services The participants sometimes had difficulty getting what they needed and required adults to take action on their behalf to achieve this They appreciated adults who nudged them along to get what they needed themselves

The participants of my study were talking about getting support from adults in helping them get what they needed, whether that meant the adult

encouraged them to do it themselves, or whether the adult did it for them The theme is reflected in literature on support and empowerment and includes the notion of advocacy

Berndt (1989) defines instrumental or tangible support as "the provision of resources or services that are necessary for solving practical problems" (p 311) He makes the point that the perception of available support may help individuals to handle stress more effectively because it can increase a person's confidence that they have or can obtain resources that they need to handle a problem Belle (1989) defines social support as "resources that are provided by other people and that arise in the context of interpersonal relationships" (p 1) The benefit of support has been stated in the discussion of the theme *caring commitment* The kind of help the participants of my study were looking for from adults, is one type of support Brenda needed help in getting her braces Steve needed help in getting his teeth fixed and John needed help with his schoolwork The participants did not always get the help they needed and this lack of help contributed to their sense that they were not being heard by adults

Pinderhughes (1983) defines power "as the capacity to influence the forces which affect one's life space for one's own benefit" (p 332) She states further that "powerlessness is the incapacity to exert such influence lack of power is painful to victims No one wants to feel powerless" (p 332) The participants of my study felt powerless Frequently they didn't know how to go about getting the services or resources they needed They often did not know what services or resources were available to them They needed information from adults on what was available and how to get it This is consistent with literature on support and empowerment

Lord (1989), in his discussion on empowerment, noted that there are several characteristics or conditions which exist when people are in the process of becoming empowered He states

> The idea of being able to get other to do what you want them to do or carry out your own desires, despite resistance, is defined as power closely related to the idea of power is feeling a sense of control over one's life Having choices and making decisions about one's own life are important for people to be involved in the process of empowerment (p 8)

The participants of my study were in effect asking for help from adults in the process of personal empowerment They instinctively knew that having

information about services and resources available to them was in effect having power It meant that they could make informed decisions about what they wanted or needed

The help the participants needed from adults in getting the services and resources necessary is discussed in B C Ombudsman (1994) who states that "advocacy is seen as necessary to advance young people's rights, interests and viewpoints" (p 6) The B C Ombudsman recognizes that "children and youth are vulnerable, powerless" and notes that 'children and youth comprise a permanent, and vulnerable minority group within our society In law children constitute a dependent and legally incompetent group" (p 13) The B C Ombudsman (1994) states that "children do not have the personal power, skills or resources of other minority or interest groups" (p 13) In an effort to mitigate the power imbalances, so that children are well served, the Ombudsman suggests strengthening the natural and self-advocacy for young people She makes the point that self-advocacy, that is, learning to get what one needs oneself and to stick up for one's rights, is an important life skill that needs to be taught to children and youth This point is reflected in what the participants of my study were saying They wanted help from adults (advocacy) in getting what they needed and they wanted adults to nudge them along to get what they needed themselves (self-advocacy) The importance of what the participants were saying cannot be overstated and is reflected at length in the children's rights literature These youth were coming from a position of powerlessness by virtue of their age and the incapacity of their parents to act as natural advocates for them They needed adults who would advocate on their behalf and they needed adults who would teach them to advocate for themselves

Similarly, this viewpoint is shared by youth in many studies involving youth participants The Canadian Mental Health Association (1992) talked of needing adult help to outline their choices for them so that they could learn to make appropriate decisions that would give them a sense of control over their lives Raychaba (1993) quotes McFadden (1989) in a discussion on empowerment, which is consistent with what the participants of my study said about being nudged along by adults

> If we are to think seriously and productively about empowering young people in care, we must examine the ways in which they may be assisted to influence the forces which control their lives

> This does not mean advocating for the child, unless he is to young to speak for himself Rather, it means bracing ourselves for a radical shift in our manner of 'helping' Rather than doing for them, we must instead give them the skills, then quietly step aside so that they can gain power for themselves Perhaps we are standing behind, supporting them Perhaps we offer technical assistance or consultation when asked But to truly empower, we must stop making the decisions and plans for youth Instead, we can help strengthen them to demand and acquire what is their right - equal resources, opportunity equal to that of other children not in care, just laws and choice to determine their lives (p 45)

The youth in Raychaba (1988) saw empowerment as a priority for themselves The youth wanted to share in the decision-making process and they wanted responsibility They believed that participating in decisions would help them develop responsibility for their behavior and to develop self-confidence, self-esteem and the capabilities to function independently This is not inconsistent with what the participants of my study were saying

The theme of *help in getting what I need,* which involves the components of adults taking action, nudging the youth, and letting them know of their entitlements is clearly reflected in literature on support and empowerment Many current studies involving youth participants addressed these components as well (Raychaba, 1993, 1988, Canadian Mental Health Association, 1992, Gouvernement du Quebec, 1984, Report on the Community Panel, 1992)

Help in dealing with my problems

The theme *help in dealing with my problems* as a component of the experience of being heard for the participants of my study is about the help the participants needed in dealing with their problems, both emotional and those that arise in the natural course of human beings relating to one another, for example, fighting with friends The participants recognized that they lacked effective problem-solving skills and they needed adults who were there to help them deal with their problems The participants had ways of problem-solving that they did not find useful or helpful For example, Steve used to get angry and want to fight when he had a problem, John used to get depressed and withdraw and Brenda just got very agitated and upset when faced with a problem They participants wanted adults to give them helpful feedback about what they were doing and how it was impacting on their lives They needed help in understanding and seeing the various options they had so

that they could make informed decisions about what to do Sometimes they just needed advice

This theme is also reflected in literature on support and empowerment Berndt (1989) talks about this kind of help as informational support, which he defines as "advice or guidance that is helpful in coping with problems" (p 311) He suggests that one way of assessing informational support is knowing that "when I need suggestions for how to deal with a personal problem, I know there is someone I can turn to" (p 311) or to ask the question "if you had a problem at home or at school, would you tell _____about it?" (p 311) The benefits of feeling support from someone have already been discussed in this chapter The participants wanted support from adults who would be able to help them sort through their problems and find a solution They were also asking to have adults outline their choices so that solutions could become more obvious to them They wanted feedback from adults because they knew that the perspective of someone whom you respect and trust can be helpful in shedding new light on possible solutions to a problem Sometimes the participants felt at a loss in how to approach a problem and then they wanted advice from adults What is very clear is that the participants instinctively wanted to learn effective problem solving skills They were asking for help from adults in developing these skills The participants were asking for help in their process of empowerment Savo (1983) strengthens the viewpoint of the participants of my study when he says

> Empowerment requires respect for what people already know and can do, strengthening the person's sense of integrity in health care, and teaching problem-posing as well as problem-solving skills (p 19)

The theme *help in dealing with my problems* is reflected in many of the studies involving youth participants The youth in Raychaba (1993) talked of needing information about options available to them The youth in the Canadian Mental Health Association (1992) talked of needing adults to help them outline their choices for them so that they could learn to make appropriate decisions that would give them a sense of control over their lives They wanted guidance from adults in learning how to solve their problems Similarly, the youth in Raychaba (1988) talked of needing counselling and support from adults to deal with their emotional needs in preparation for separation and independence from the child welfare system The youth in

Gouv du Quebec (1984) talked of needing adult help in building and enhancing their self-esteem They also wanted help from adults in reestablishing good communication with their parents

This theme is clearly reflected in literature on support and empowerment and in many studies involving youth participants

Intuitive knowing

The theme *intuitive knowing* is an essential part of feeling heard for the participants of my study The participants expressed strong feelings about knowing on a visual and intuitive level when they were being heard by adults They believe that body language and posture and a willingness to have eye contact are indicative of whether or not they were being listened to They all believed that adults who acted in genuine ways, without pretensions or phony affect, were listening to them They felt this attentiveness, or lack of it, on both a visual and intuitive level They talked, for example, of sensing that avoiding eye contact and fidgeting meant that they were not being listened to Robin and Foster (1989) point out in their discussion of problem behaviors in communication, that people who fail to make eye contact, are fidgeting, moving relentlessly, or gesturing while being spoken to are demonstrating inappropriate communicating behaviors They described these behaviors as "interferences with effective verbal problem-solving behaviour" (p 134) This is consistent with what the participants of my study were saying

Comparison of Findings to U N Convention

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states

> States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child
>
> For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law

Wilson (1994) states that the U N Convention is "a step forward in comparison with other instruments for the protection of children and manifests the increasing respect for human rights of their group of human beings in the international field" (p 1 5) He states further that

> The Convention on the Rights of the Child is said to be the first international instrument that explicitly provides for children to have a right to be heard in processes affecting their lives Article 12 requires that member states look beyond the traditional notions of childhood (p 1 6)

How do the findings of this study compare to Article 12 of the U N Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)? Not surprisingly, each youth recalled experiences of being heard by adults and each youth recalled experiences of being ignored or silenced by adults in matters important to them The significance of the findings is that the youths' ability to exercise their right to be heard appears to be contingent upon adults allowing them to exercise this right This is consistent with the literature on children's rights and is applicable to all children and youth, not just those in state care The B C Ombudsman (1993) stated recently in her discussion paper on advocacy that

> Young people have the right to be treated with respect, honour and affection because they (rights) are inextricably linked to their humanness Like all inalienable rights, they belong to the person, and are not conditional on others declaring their entitlement to them, and belong to them despite their behaviour (p 32)

Some adults in these youths' lives were very empowering and respectful and some adults were very disempowering and disrespectful The powerlessness of children is one reason for the apparently uneven extent to which children are heard by adults in authority Vittachi, the Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF (in Boyden & Hudson (1985) stated

> Why have children's rights never been implemented? Why has a world full of parents been unable to keep any of its promises to children? Because children have no votes They have no political power They lack even the other kind of power which comes from the barrel of a gun (p 10)

The U N Convention has laid out the rights of children in principle yet the mechanisms for children and youth to consistently exercise these rights is rather elusive Enforcement mechanisms to ensure that these rights are being exercized are inadequate (B C Ombudsman, 1993, 1990) The willingness

of our governments to try to remedy the inadequate enforcement mechanisms is not strong, as pointed out in the recently published Human Rights Directorate (1994) which states

> In the view of the Government of Canada there may be a distinction between administrative or judicial decisions that directly affect the child and those which do so only indirectly Furthermore, the implementation of article 12 in areas other than family law, such as immigration, is expected to be a gradual one in Canada In the area of family law, increased participation of children in custody proceedings, and in particular the matter of independent legal representation of chilcden in court, raise a number of concerns, including cosiderations of cost, concerns about a child's ability to instruct counsel and possible damaging effects of asking a child to choose between parents (p 13)

Canada has ratified the Convention and British Columbia is apparently in substantial compliance with the Charter It is apparent however, that the will to develop these necessary enforcement mechanisms is not strong Further, it is clear that efforts must be made in training professionals to have the kind of attitude and communication skills that will enable youth to be heard The findings of this study indicate that the ability of children to exercise their rights continues to be based largely on the benevolence of adults in authority

Implications for Policy and Practice

The most significant finding of this study in terms of policy and practice, reinforced in the support and empowerment literature, is the plea from young people to have relationships with adults that are characterized by the adults' commitment to them, their caring and respect for them, and their willingness to help and encourage the youth to develop the skills necessary to survive in an adult world The participants were asking to be included They wanted to be valued and respected as persons in their own right worthy of being listened to, and they wanted to have their opinions taken seriously They were not asking to make all the decisions in matters important to them, but the youth were asking to be included in the decision-making process Coleman in Benard (1987) states that

> The most fundamental task for educators and parents is linking children into our social fabric Our task is "to look at the whole fabric of our society and say, "Where and how can children be lodged in this society? Where can we find a stable psychological home for children where people will pay attention to them?" (p 6)

The participants of this study talked about feeling heard by adults who listened to them, respected them, encouraged them and helped them The participants were clear in what they wanted and needed from adults in order to feel like worthwhile human beings with a position in society The importance and benefit of including a historically marginalized segment of our society into the mainstream has been amply documented during the past decade by, for example, feminists (Gilligan, 1982, Schaef, 1981, Laidlaw, Malmo & Associates, 1990) and First Nations people (Maracle, 1993) Children and youth need to feel like mainstream members of the society in which they live, but do not possess the tools of adult marginalized groups

How can change be accomplished? As in most situations where a group of people feel left out or silenced, I think that the remedy to facilitate inclusion is a fundamental shift in the attitude of main-stream society Collectively, we as adults need to value our children and youth We must believe that children and youth have the capacity and need to participate more fully and to assess their own needs We need to mitigate the power imbalances that currently exist between adults and children and youth and to alter our service structures so that the imbalances are reduced, and children and youth can begin to feel more powerful We must create opportunities so that children and youth can participate in meaningful and constructive ways so that they can gain a sense of control over their own lives and develop and enhance the skills they need to cope in an adult world The legal imperative is already laid out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child There must also be a social/psychological imperative for adults to bring children and youth into our society as important members Wallerstein and Bernstein (1988) state

> Empowerment is a long-term process with many steps along the way, such as building self-esteem or participation in community organizing efforts steps that appear important for empowering changes in the population it serves are establishing trust and building on natural empathy for friends to consolidate a support network, communicating experiences and feelings in a safe environment, promoting ability to present their ideas to peers and adults, participating in cooperative actions so individuals don't feel the burden of the problem alone, and fostering critical thinking about the consequences of risk-taking actions and about youth's role in society (p 388)

In B C there is growing interest in involving children and youth in the development of policies and programs that are designed to serve them This

needs to be strengthened through network building and enhancement The Youth-in-Care Network is one example of a network that brings children and youth together to discuss issues of common interest and concern The City of Victoria Mayor's Task Force on Advocacy is another example of bringing youth together to share their ideas, as equals, with adults who have the power to make some changes in the service delivery structure The studies involving child and youth participants cited in the literature review in this chapter are examples of positive directions in including a constituent group in a meaningful way

The principles of natural justice must be included in the service delivery system to all consumers in order to make this a fair and just society These principles are

1 The right to be heard and to be consulted,

2 The right to know reasons for a decision,

3 The right to appeal a decision before an impartial review panel (Yardley, 1981)

The critical point that I drew from my analysis of the participants' experiences of being heard, is that the principles of natural justice did not appear to be a consistent experience of youth within the child welfare system Children and youth need to know about the principles of natural justice and to understand how it can work for them Caregivers and service providers also need to know and be guided by the principles of natural justice (B C Ombudsman, 1994, 1993)

Pinderhughes (1983) discusses some of the issues that will arise if we as a powerful group look at meaningful inclusion of a powerless group in our day to day lives and in the social fabric of our nation

> Empowerment of clients and changing their victim status means giving up our position as benefactors we need also to understand that we, as benefactors, pay a high price to maintain our power Fearful of the loss involved in giving up this power, and guilty about its unearned nature, we can also become unrealistically entitled, arrogant, and rigid Our rigidity means we have poor tolerance for differences in people and that we are blocked in being able to grow and expand our human potential (p 337)

I support Pinderhughes' position that we will all benefit from giving up this unearned power No one wants to feel powerless The cost of keeping groups of people in a state of powerlessness is too high We cannot afford the time and cost of continuing to isolate and marginalize members of our society

As service providers, our job is too daunting to try to service disempowered people and maintain these structures that continue to disempower them By facilitating the growth and strengthening of support networks, by valuing all human beings, and by listening to what disempowered people tell us about their needs, our jobs will become much more manageable

Freire (1987) offers some encouragement about the positive impact of incremental steps towards empowerment of disenfranchised people

> While individual empowerment or the empowerment of some students, the feeling of being changed, is not enough concerning the transformation of the whole society, it is absolutely necessary for the process of social transformation (p 109)

The study participants, in their own words, made a number of suggestions for needed improvements in policy and practice

1 Mutual respect

> Basically don't be afraid to share with one another you won't be afraid to share something with someone if you respect each other and its got to go both ways, it's not just a one way thing you can't communicate effectively and share things with one another without respecting one another

Respect for children in care

> Kids want to be respected If I had my way, I would have a Family and Children's Services ministry in and of itself it would be a status in itself that being a youth in care is nothing to be ashamed of you know Just because you don't live with your real parents doesn't mean you are bad or evil or something

2 Listen

> If I feel I'm being humored, or if someone's not really listening to me, I feel really insulted, and it really angers me I feel that if people aren't listening to what you have to say, you're wasting your breath, and they should just be open and honest and say, 'I'm not listening to what you're saying, like I don't care what you are saying' and then you can go, 'well fine, I won't talk to you'

> Sometimes little kids' babble can have a lot of things sort of hidden under the surface, and I think everything needs to be listened to

3 Be empathetic

> Be willing to listen, be humble, be in touch with that youth that is inside you, you know, and don't be 'the adult'

4 Be open and flexible

> The 10 rules that they came up with might have been good for the 20 or 30 kids that they had talked to, but there's you know, millions of kids on this planet they're all different - no rule book can apply to every situation - like if there's going to be a rule put down and the way our society is run there pretty much has to but they should be extremely general, really wide open and flexible

5 Treat youth fairly, regardless of age or gender

> I feel that no matter what the age of the youth is, the adult should still talk to them one on one, on an equal basis, no matter whether they're male or female

6 Communicate effectively

> I would teach them (adults) the "I" statements

7 Don't give up

> and even if the youth does lack a lot of communication skills, even if he is swearing, you can still dig through that to see what is going on

8 Give youth information about rights and entitlements

> When we gave them (children in care) the basic rights sheet, some of them didn't even realize that they were entitled to have full medical coverage

> I would make it mandatory that youth in foster homes have their own room, that they have a right to see everything in their file, they have a right to see policy manuals They have a right not to be scared about asking about stuff like this

The youth talked about the importance of having information in writing about their rights and other matters important to them, like the court process They all believed that they would be better able to make informed decisions and to become more meaningfully involved if they had written information that could be explained to them if they did not understand it The written information would need to be readily available and accessible to children and youth

One youth talked about the importance of having a 'watch dog' type person available to children in care The youth saw it as an important function of parenting which children in state care don't necessarily have access to The youth suggested that this watch-dog be accessible and available to children and youth to provide an advocacy type function For example, he suggested that this watch-dog contact each child or youth-in-care on a regular

basis to find out from them how things are for them and where they need help The Legislative Assembly of B C (1994) recently introduced Bill 45 establishing an Advocate for children, youth and their families receiving services under the proposed Child, Family and Community Service Act This legislation will hopefully address some of the concerns raised by the participants in this study

The concepts of giving voice to children and youth, of keeping them informed of their rights, and of encouraging their participation in matters important to them have both practice and policy implications The study participants have articulated some helpful suggestions to improve the services provided to children and youth Looking beyond what the study participants had to say about practice issues, government policies could be reformed in order to facilitate practice changes If, as a matter of public policy, children and youth were seen to be important and necessary participants in the decision-making process, then for example, when reforming laws or drafting new legislation impacting on children and youth, information could be circulated to schools inviting comments from young people

Children could be informed of their rights and taught ways of ensuring that their rights are respected if school curriculums included this information The media would be another opportunity to let young people know about their rights Information booklets informing children of their rights could be distributed throughout schools, community centres etc

Children are consumers of many government services and having feedback from consumers is an important aspect of service provider accountability and responsibility Having studies such as this one done on a regular and routine basis could become an important part of program evaluation and accountability to funders and consumers alike Governments need to be accountable to the people they are serving as well as to the taxpayer Melton and Limber (1992) suggest that

> In keeping with the conviction that the least that people in power can do to build a sense of community is to listen to those who are disenfranchised, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989, Article 12) requires states-parties to ensure that children have the opportunity to express their views about all matters concerning them Surely the spirit of this provision goes beyond the right to be heard in individual matters to the right to voice opinions on matters affecting children as a class In that regard, periodic systematic surveys of children themselves about

> matters pertaining to their rights might be an essential element of each nation's implementation of the Convention (p 170)

Seeing children and youth as individuals with the right to have opinions and preferences and to actively participate in matters affecting them will require a change in attitude on the part of adults Minow (1990) states that

> Including children as participants alters their stance in the community, from things or outsiders to members The assertion of members accomplishes something important but does not itself disturb or challenge unequal arrangements of political or economic power What, then, is the equality signaled by rights discourse? The equality embodied by rights claims is an equality of attention The rights tradition sustains the call that makes those in power at least listen Rights - as words and as forms - structure attention even for the claimant who is much less powerful than the authorities, and even for individuals and groups treated throughout the community as unequal Unstated here are assumptions about the presumed standard for comparison equal to whom? An adult, white, competent male citizen is the likely reference But by including any who can speak the language of rights and by signaling deserved attention, rights enable a challenge to unstated norms, to exclusion, and the exclusive perspectives Rights discourse implicates its users in a form of life, a pattern of social and political commitment (pp 297-298)

The youth in the study talked about the importance of adult attitudes in their feeling heard They all made it clear that they felt more skilled and competent than what adults often recognized in them The Task Force on the Child as Citizen (1978) highlighted this issue over a decade ago

> We have looked at our present attitudes towards the young and we have found that they derive from a distant past unrelated and unresponsive to today's realities It is time that we threw off the outdated attitudes that shackle us to that past It is time to move on to create the changes that will shape our future as a sane and humane society where the dignity of each individual - of whatever age, ability, sex, race or religion - will be recognized and respected (p 16)

Perhaps the crux of what is needed to reform both policy and practice, is what one study participant called a change in 'mindset' Adult service providers, policy developers and politicians need to change their attitude to children in a way that values and respects children as people, different but equal

Limitations of the Study

This study is about the experiences of three former youth in care in having their views heard by adults, while they were in the care in B C The

study was conducted in Victoria in 1994 The findings are not generalizable to all children in care, nor are they generalizable to all children not living in state care The study is bound by the time and space in which it took place

The study findings have been compared to current research and theories in the literature on support, empowerment and children's rights This comparison ensures that the findings fit into a context beyond the confines of this study Brown and Gilligan (1992) found in their study that

> Our claim, therefore, in presenting this work is not that the girls we spoke with are representative of all girls or some ideal sample of girls, but rather that we learned from this group of girls and young women, and what we discovered seemed worthy of others' attention (p 23)

Like Brown and Gilligan's study, the youth in this study are not representative of all youth nor do they represent some ideal sample This study is about the stories of these three youth and provides a deeper understanding of their experiences in being heard by adults in authority Illuminating the experience of even one person, so that the social world can be understood a little better, is an important achievement (Kirby & McKenna, 1989) This study gave voice to young people who are rarely heard

Implications for Further Research

There are not enough studies that seek to increase our knowledge and understanding of the child's perspective Children and youth are consumers of many state funded and operated services and their views and opinions as consumers of these services are only just beginning to be recognized as important Raychaba (1988, 1993) has done several studies on the experiences of youth in care, using qualitative research methods There needs to be significantly more research done in a systematic and ongoing basis, of the views and opinions of children and youth regarding their experiences in receiving states services (for example, education, health, child welfare) The research needs to be done using qualitative methods so that the voices of the children and youth are not silenced by the methodology The research is essential for two reasons Firstly, service providers must be held accountable to funders and to consumers for appropriate and effective programs Having young people evaluate the services they receive makes good sense Secondly, children and youth are disempowered and marginalized members of society If the goal of society is to value all citizens and encourage their participation in

matters affecting them, then it also makes good sense to facilitate and value the involvement of children and youth in program planning and evaluation, and policy development and reform

The study participants raised the issue of spirituality in children and this needs to be researched further

The study participants consisted of 2 males and 1 female It is not known to what extent, if any, gender played a part in the findings This needs to be researched further

One study participant was a First Nations person and two participants were not Any cultural issues influencing the participants' experiences of being heard were not explicit in the findings This issue needs to be researched further

There needs to be more research done on the complexities of the social support phenomenon so that we as practitioners can know more clearly how support networks work, and how they can benefit a variety of people, regardless of age, race or socio-economic status We need to learn how to facilitate the growth of support networks and to enhance their availability and accessibility to the people with whom we are working

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of three youth in having their views heard by adults during their time in the care of the Superintendent of Family and Child Services in B C Article 12 of the U N Convention on the Rights of the Child was used as a point of reference for examining the congruence between the youths' right to be heard and the youths' perceptions of their experience in being heard by adults during their time in care

The aim of this research project was to explicate the phenomenon of 'being heard' and to describe the essential components of being heard as the participants exprienced it

This study has made a useful contribution to the field of children's rights The phenomenological methodology of the study enabled the voices of the youth to be heard and provided a deeper understanding of the nature and meaning of the participants' experiences in being heard, from the youths own life experiences and in their own words Children and youth are often excluded from participating as either producers or subjects of knowledge and this contribution is significant in terms of respecting youth as teachers, as

consumers with a vital perspective about what is in their interests and as evaluators of services supposedly designed to respond to their needs and interests This study points to the importance of valuing youths' perspectives enough to seek it out and listen to it The study has provided insight into a number of the youths' experiences and has raised questions for further research I shall conclude with Steve's thoughts on the matter

> Like that's the ultimate thing that it comes down to, was that, we were respected almost as equals I guess people we weren't talked to as kids, we were talked to as people you know and that's the biggest difference when dealing with adults when you're a teenager It's just like that's what made me feel like the respect was there - I wasn't being talked down to, nobody likes that, ever and sometimes you have to deal with it at a job or whatnot but the thing is, is in your own home you shouldn't have to deal with being talked down to once any kid is shown respect, then they'll be more open and if they feel that they know exactly what is going on, then they'll be a little more responsible with how they deal with the situations that come up That just makes sense

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Appendix A

Youth's Informed Consent to Participate in Research

You are being invited to participate in a research study The purpose of this study is to find out about the experiences of youth during their time in care (in B C) in having their opinions and views heard by adults (for example, caregivers, social workers, lawyers, teachers) I am a student at the University of Victoria, School of Social Work This research has been approved as the basis for my master's thesis

If you decide to participate, you will be asked a set of interview questions about your experiences in being heard by adults, in matters that were important to you, while you were in care For example, you may be asked to describe what 'being heard' means to you, the circumstances under which you believed your views were heard, and the circumstances under which you felt free to express your opinions You may refuse to answer any of the questions at any time There are no right or wrong answers because what I am interested in is the individual experience of each youth in having their views heard

There will be several interviews during a 2 month period, and they will be tape recorded to ensure all the information is fully and accurately captured Once I have gathered the data for the study through the interviews, I will be analyzing the data by coding words, themes and concepts as part of the analysis You will be asked to critique and modify my analysis of the data by having an opportunity to read it and to provide feedback through a follow-up interview or informal debriefing session Your critique of my analysis will also be part of the research

The information obtained in connection with the interviews will remain confidential The tapes will be coded with a number immediately following the interview A transcriber will be reviewing the tapes She/he will be screened for confidentiality All the tapes will be erased after the information is transcribed Fictional names will be attached to each transcript for the report writing

Your participation is entirely voluntary If you have any questions about the research, or your rights as a participant, please call Debby Jones at 385-2118

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you have had time to ask questions about it, consult with anyone you wish, and that you willingly agree to participate You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation at any

time You will receive a copy of this form

I acknowledge that I have received and reviewed the "Information Sheet"

Name_____

Signature_____

Witness_____

Date_____

Appendix B

Information Sheet for Youth about Proposed Research

On Having Their Views Heard While in the

Care of the Superintendent of Family and Child Services

The purpose of this study is to find out about some youth's experiences during their time in care in B C in having their views heard in matters affecting them Through this study, I am aiming at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature and meaning of the youth's experiences in having their views heard - what having their views heard means to them, what action or inaction resulted in having their views heard, and the circumstances around how, when and why they were able to express their views (or not) This research will be used as the basis of my master's thesis in partial fulfillment of the University of Victoria requirements

The goals of my research are

1) To learn how youth have experienced having their views and opinions heard by adults in matters important to the youth

2) To ensure that youth in the study have the opportunity to have their voice heard and their comments recorded

3) To raise awareness of the importance of the youth's perspective, as consumers of services

I subscribe to the ethical conduct of research and to the protection at all times of the interests, physical comfort and safety of research participants

Participating in the research process will provide the youth with an opportunity to "tell their stories" and know that their experiences are valuable and important to a number of adults Some of these adults may be in a position to strengthen the efforts of various authorities to ensure that children have and maintain the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, with their views being given due weight based on their age and maturity

Several individual interviews will be held over a two month period, in a location agreed upon by all parties The input of the youth will not be criticized or challenged In the individual interviews, each youth will be interviewed by myself and the interview will be tape recorded The interviews will focus on the topic of being heard and will be conducted in a conversational/discussion format rather than a question/answer format I will be asking the youth to share their experiences and opinions with me to help me understand the phenomena of being heard from their perspective The tape recording is done to ensure all information is accurate and complete

Participation in this research is completely voluntary The youth may refuse to take part in any of the discussions, and may withdraw at any time Youth's

involvement in this research and all the information they provide will be confidential, and any identifying features will be deleted from their responses

All tapes will be destroyed after the research project is completed A master list of names will be seen only by myself and locked away to ensure confidentiality, and will be destroyed upon completion of my thesis

If you have any questions or concerns about this research or your participation, please feel free to contact Debby Jones at 385-2118

VITA

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Title of Thesis The Voice of the Child

Author [redacted]

DEBORAH SHEEHAN JONES

January 17, 1995