

Dropping in on School Administrators: Conversations Regarding "At-Risk" Youth and
Administrative Decision-Making

by

Patti Lynn Anderson
B.A., University of Victoria, 1979

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

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Faculty of Human and Social Development

We accept this thesis as conforming to the required standard

[REDACTED]

Dr. Frances Ricks, Supervisor (Faculty of Human and Social Development)

[REDACTED]

Dr. Brian Wharf, Departmental Member (Faculty of Human and Social Development)

[REDACTED]

Dr. Antoinette Oberg, Outside Member (Faculty of Education)

[REDACTED]

Dr. Elizabeth Banister, External Examiner (School of Nursing)

© Patti Lynn Anderson, 2000

University of Victoria

All rights reserved. This thesis may not be reproduced in whole or in part, by photocopy
or other means, without the permission of the author.

Supervisor: Dr. Frances Ricks

ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study explores the relationship between administrative decision-making and the difficulties associated with maintaining "at-risk" youth in the public school system. The study was based upon four, one hour interviews with six school administrators who dealt regularly with disciplinary matters involving "at-risk" youth. It identifies how school administrators perceive their role and provides a context for the manner in which decisions involving disciplinary action are made.

The study identifies 1) that there are distinct, identifiable forms of administrative practice operating within the public school system, 2) that administrative decisions are governed by the particular beliefs, values and assumptions held by individual administrators and 3) that given these conclusions, administrative decision-making may or may not reflect the values espoused by current legislation, standards of practice or the profession's code of ethics. In light of the level of discretionary authority available to administrators in making disciplinary decisions and thus their capacity to influence so significantly the future of a young person, the author proposes the need for ongoing reflection within administrative practice, in order to increase the likelihood that disciplinary decision-making is consistently exercised in a deliberate and principled manner.

Examiners:



Dr. Frances Ricks, Supervisor (Faculty of Human and Social Development)



Dr. Brian Wharf, Departmental Member (Faculty of Human and Social Development)



Dr. Antoinette Oberg, Outside Member (Faculty of Education)



Dr. Elizabeth Banister, External Examiner (School of Nursing)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS	iv
ABSTRACT.....	ii
LIST OF FIGURES	vi
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vii
TRUTH AND CLARITY	viii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
The Purpose and Significance of the Research	4
Standpoint	4
Epistemological and Ontological Considerations	5
Reflexivity	6
Methodology	8
Theoretical Underpinnings of the Research	10
Critical Theory: Assumptions Overriding Purpose and Guiding Principles.....	11
Merits and Limitations of Critical Theory	13
Critical Pedagogy: A Brief Overview	14
The Integrity of the Research	15
Overview of the Text	17
CHAPTER 2:	
Gathering Participants	18
The Interview Process	20
Field Relations	22
The Transcription Process	25
The Analytic and Interpretive Process	27
Methodological Crossroads	30
CHAPTER 3:	
Roundtable Discussion #1	42
CHAPTER 4:	
Roundtable Discussion #2	62
CHAPTER 5:	
Roundtable Discussion #3	82
CHAPTER 6:	
Roundtable Discussion #4	102

CHAPTER 7:	
Identifying Commonality and Distinction Within Administrative Practice	123
Reflecting Upon the Traveled Path	132
REFERENCES:	154
APPENDICES:	
Appendix A: Journal Entry #1	158
Appendix B: Research Dilemma (1)	159
Appendix C: Journal Entry #2	160
Appendix D: Journal Entry #3	161
Appendix E: Journal Entry #4	162
Appendix F: Journal Entry #5	164
Appendix G: Journal Entry #6	166
Appendix H: Research Dilemma (2)	167
Appendix I: Sample Letter of Introduction	168
Appendix J: Consent Form	170
Appendix K: Case Example #1	171
Appendix L: Case Example #2	172
Appendix M: Research Dilemma (3)	174
Appendix N: Research Dilemma (4)	175

List of Figures

Figure 1 - Visual Representation of the Constructed Relationship Between Research Questions, Interview Questions, Themes and Concepts

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to each one of my participants, without whom this story would remain untold.

I would also like to thank Frances, Brian and Antoinette for their wisdom, their skilful and gentle guidance, and their unfailing encouragement and support. I am indebted to these individuals who, each in their own unique way have enriched my life immeasurably by teaching me that there is value in what I know. Special thanks to Frances for her accessibility, her humour, and her dependability. She was there with whatever I needed whenever I needed her.

Finally, I wish to express my appreciation to my family. To my mother for her thoughtful editing and continuous proof reading, to my two sons for their persistent curiosity about what it was I was trying to achieve and especially to Reed, whose generous and loving spirit nourishes each part of me, making all things within reach.

Truth

Truth is tall and rather unconventional looking. He has golden hair and a short beard. He does not like statistics and is not particularly concerned about facts, but he loves a good story... Truth learned to act in the theater of qualities, and his studies in mime continue. He lingers in the long pauses between the questions and the answers. He has made an altar to his loneliness. Certainty and Uncertainty are both welcome at his table.

J. Ruth Gendler
The Book of Qualities

Clarity

My visits to Clarity are soothing now. He never tells me what to think or feel or do but shows me how to find out what I need to know. It was not always like this. I used to visit other people who visited him. Finally, I summoned the courage to call on him myself. I still remember the first time I went to see him. Was I surprised. He lives on a hill in a little house surrounded by wild roses. I went in the living room and sat down in a comfortable chair by the fireplace. There were topographical maps on the walls, and the room was full of stuff, musical instruments and telescopes and globes, geodes and crystals and old Italian tarot decks, two small cats. When I left, he presented me with a sketchbook and told me to draw the same thing every day until the drawing started to speak to me.

J. Ruth Gendler
The Book of Qualities

Chapter One

Introduction

This learning journey began while I was in my mid-twenties working in the public school system. In 1986 I became employed as a youth and family counsellor at a local junior high school. The focus of my job was to identify as early on as possible, those adolescents deemed to be at-risk of dropping out and to develop and execute strategies designed to maintain these students in school. The mandate seemed simple enough and I happily embarked on a career that promised to heal my own troubled adolescence while advocating for others who were experiencing difficulty.

When I began this job I remember feeling fortunate to be working with an administrator who seemed to value my presence in the school. One of the ways he demonstrated his regard for my work was to allow me the opportunity to visit his office and plead the case of students I had been working closely with who were on the brink of becoming suspended or expelled. The seldom stated but mutually acknowledged purpose of these visits was to present an argument on behalf of the student in question which was intended to convince the administrator that the student was in fact worth keeping in the school. My ongoing success at this ritualized practice of saving souls prompted me to believe that my work was indeed having an impact on both the students I was working with and the system that seemed to hold such power in determining their fate. Several years would pass before I would begin to examine the power relations embedded in that belief.

As it turned out, the contentment I initially enjoyed while working as a school-based youth and family counsellor proved to be relatively short-lived. Within three years my sense of harmony had become increasingly and significantly disrupted by that which I observed occurring around me. During the course of my work I observed a

number of instances in which some (though not all) school administrators seemed to be engaging in practices which served to discourage the youth I was working with from staying in school. The administrators to which I am referring regularly spoke disparagingly of youth that had been labeled “at-risk” and appeared to regard them as an unrelenting burden on a system that was already short of resources. My success in convincing these administrators to maintain these youth in regular school dwindled over time. More and more often, “at-risk” youth were repeatedly being suspended, (paradoxically in many cases for non-attendance) sent home and put on wait lists for enrollment in alternative programs (which could take several weeks therefore making it difficult to re-engage them) or, counselled to pursue their education through correspondence (an option which is known to have a dismal success rate with “at-risk” youth). As a youth advocate and counsellor whose mandate it was to assist the students I worked with to stay in school, I found these observations perplexing and disturbing. How was it that some school administrators seemed to be following an agenda dissimilar to mine with respect to this particular group of adolescents? Was there some relationship between the “at-risk” label that had been assigned to these students and the manner in which they were dealt with? Was it not critically important for everyone working with these youth to be particularly sensitive and responsive to their needs? Surely these educators recognized the importance of education to the futures of these youth. What was the underlying rationale for administering these youth in a manner which appeared to alienate them from successful outcomes? These were some of the initial questions I felt I needed to find answers to.

The concerns I have identified thus far regarding the manner in which “at-risk” youth are administered within the public school system raise some important questions. They draw attention for example to such issues as the function of schools in society, the role of school administrators as gatekeepers and the implications of assigning labels.

Rather than formulating one central question in relation to these issues at the outset, I preferred to allow my questions to continue to evolve as the research process unfolded. This approach is supported by Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) who have observed that “the development of the research problem is rarely completed before the fieldwork begins... (in that) ...the collection of primary data often plays a key role in that process of development” (p.40). Their recommendation during the pre-fieldwork phase of a research project is to take a series of “foreshadowed problems” and formulate them into questions “to which a theoretical answer can be given” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 32). While I preferred to regard the issues and concerns I had raised as questions rather than problems, I was in general agreement with their approach and as such, proposed to adopt it within the context of this research project. My initial research questions were formulated as follows: What are some of the beliefs, values and assumptions that underpin the disciplinary practices of school administrators? How do these beliefs, values and assumptions influence the manner in which “at-risk” youth are dealt with in the public school system? What perceptions, understandings and expectations do administrators have of/in relation to “at-risk” youth and how might they influence the manner in which these students are dealt with? Is this adolescent group dealt with differently than students who have not been assigned this label?

While the above research questions served me well throughout the interviewing and analysis phases of the project, new questions and central themes also began to emerge as the research process continued to unfold. For reasons that will soon be made clear to the reader, in the early stages of interviewing I became concerned with the issue of whether my described experiences as a school-based youth and family counsellor should be regarded as typical or atypical. As I followed this path of inquiry I became interested in the question of whether or not it was important to distinguish between different kinds of administrative practice and if so, whether it would be useful to identify these distinctions

within the context of my research. And while learning about the manner in which the beliefs, values and assumptions of school administrators underpin their disciplinary practice provided an important starting point from which to conduct my inquiry, it soon became apparent to me that I would also need to narrow my focus and seek to understand more about how administrators perceive their role.

The Purpose and Significance of the Research

My primary purpose in conducting this study is to understand and describe the context in which school administrators practice and more specifically, the ways in which their decision-making processes govern the manner in which “at-risk” adolescents are administered within the public school system. While my initial objective was to develop a deeper understanding of this aspect of administrative practice, I am also hopeful that this research project will pique the interest of educators and other human service professionals concerned with “at-risk” youth. Thus a second objective in conducting this inquiry is to create knowledge that provokes reflection and prompts lively discussion in relation to this important topic. The promotion of dialogue (particularly across disciplines) could provide some valuable opportunities to begin forging effective links between theory and practice. Ultimately the knowledge gained from such a process could serve to guide and inform the manner in which educators and other professionals assist “at-risk” youth.

Author’s Note Regarding the Use of Multiple Descriptors

I acknowledge that the following descriptors I use to identify the methodological and theoretical underpinnings of my research may prove somewhat overwhelming to some members of my reading audience and as such the level of detail I have opted to use may be regarded as unnecessary in some circles. In response I wish to state that my intent is not to create unnecessary clutter here, but rather, to provide a very clear and specific context

for those of my reading audience who will be concerned primarily with the ways in which this project was constructed and executed. For those who are less concerned with the methodological and theoretical aspects of this study, or, for those who find the descriptors onerous, I invite you to skim over the remaining sections of this chapter and read chapters two through seven.

Standpoint

The term standpoint is one often used in reference to a researcher's articulated location, way of knowing or lens from which he or she views the world. My standpoint is a reflection of my beliefs, values and lived experience. It is influenced by many factors including gender, age, race, and socio-economic status. These and other factors in combination with my lived experience provide me with a location from which to evaluate that which I observe occurring around me. My standpoint communicates information about my beliefs, values and the manner in which I make sense of the world. It also provides my reading audience with a context for understanding and interpreting the situation of the arguments.

Epistemological and Ontological Considerations

This inquiry is based upon a constructivist theory of knowledge (epistemology) and reality (ontology). That is to say that it wholly rejects the positivist world-view represented by natural science that mind and matter exist as separate and distinct entities, that observation and reality exist independently of one another and that knowledge is a smooth, identifiable entity which can be confirmed by the replication of empirical evidence (Lather, 1991). The constructivist world-view refutes the positivist assumption that reality exists independently of subjective experience. From a constructivist point of view knowledge is regarded as something constructed rather than something discovered. Heinz

von Foerster an early constructivist stated, "Everything that can be said is said by an observer to another observer, who may be him or herself" (quoted in Segal, 1986, p. 8). This statement captures the notion that the observer and the observed are not separate and that knowledge is generated from the observer, rather than the observed. Knowledge is created from experience and thus "reality" is knowable only in relational or contextual terms. In relation to this concept Segal (1986) makes the comment that, "Observers live in language the way fish live in water... Speaking a language means sharing agreements about the perception of 'reality'" (p.8). Experience then is mediated and produced through language.

Epistemological and ontological premises undergird the research effort and guide it in a number of ways. Campbell & Bunting (1991) have pointed out for example that epistemology informs a researcher's methodology in that it begs the question, "...what can be known and who can be a knower" (p.4). The multitude of decisions I must make as a researcher are intrinsically connected to my beliefs about what it means to know. My belief that "reality" is constructed and derived from experience has implications for a whole variety of issues including how I frame the relationship between myself and the participants, the kinds of questions I ask during interviews, the manner in which I interpret meaning and the language I use to communicate with my reading audience. Thus I am accountable to my epistemological and ontological beliefs in that they govern my process of inquiry.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is a concept that relates closely to the constructivist notion that all knowing is partial and that knowledge and reality are socially constructed. In keeping with this epistemology Clifford (1986) asserts that "...all constructed truths are made possible by powerful 'lies' of exclusion and rhetoric." Even the best ethnographic

texts...are systems or economies of truth... Power and history work through them in ways their authors cannot fully control" (p. 7). If one accepts these epistemological premises as valid, then it follows that the researcher's standpoint needs to be explicated and accounted for as much as possible and that the researcher should be regarded as the key fieldwork tool (Rienharz, 1997) throughout the process of inquiry. This accounting process provides the study's participants and other consumers of the research with a context in which to understand a researcher's interpretations; thus allowing for a critical examination of them (Manning, 1997).

If the knowledge I generate is grounded in my experience, then I must find some way to render explicit, the assumptions, values and beliefs that shape my interpretations (Manning, 1997). Reflexivity is a practice that provides me with a vehicle for doing so. Hertz (1997) describes reflexivity as "...something that is accomplished through detachment, internal dialogue, and constant [and intensive] scrutiny of 'what I know' and 'how I know it' ...To be reflexive is to have an ongoing conversation about experience while simultaneously living in the moment." (p. vii-viii). Reflexivity then, involves finding some way(s) of accounting for the social, political and historical situatedness of one's interpretations.

There are pragmatic issues associated with adopting a reflexive stance in relation to one's research. Incorporating my reflexive voice into the text requires some viable method(s) of doing so. One such method involves engaging in a practice Gerlach (1996) refers to as *reading from the absent*. This analytic technique essentially asks, "What's missing here?" and proposes that one adopt a critical stance in relation to a particular (in this case my own) point of view by endeavouring to locate oneself in the margins of that situated understanding. Similarly, Richardson (1994) suggests that researchers consider such questions as "Who is not present in the text?" or "Who has been marginalized?" in their writing. (p. 525).

Another method of incorporating reflexivity into the text is to share with the reader some of the seemingly endless number of ethical issues and research dilemmas that presented themselves to me throughout the research process. Several examples of the issues and dilemmas I struggled with are included in the appendices section of the text. (see Appendices A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, M, N) In some instances they are represented as "Research Dilemmas". In others they appear as journal entries. Articulating my struggles and committing them to paper (and later to a hand held dictating device) throughout the research process assisted me in gaining insights that did not seem available to me before I had begun doing so. Looking back, I now see that this method of reflection was such an integral part of my learning process that an account of the journey would seem incomplete if I didn't include portions of it in this text. Moreover I believe that a reflexive account is one that includes some representation of the researcher's internal struggle with her process of inquiry. While unburdened accounts may appear impressive as well-dressed interpretive endeavours, I view them as somewhat one dimensional when compared with the more richly textured, reflexive accounts I have read, which include tellings of struggles with research issues and ethical dilemmas.

Methodology

As many elements of my inquiry naturally lend themselves to ethnography, the simple course of action would have been to identify it as the methodology of choice, state my rationale for doing so and leave it at that. I struggled however with the prospect of doing so. My clinical background has taught me that while naming something offers a common language which in turn has the capacity to facilitate understanding among those who speak the language, the very practice of naming may also confine the understanding of a particular phenomenon. Harding's (1987) definition of methodology serves to illustrate my point. She defines methodology as "a theory and analysis of how research

should proceed” (p. 2). This definition suggests that the act of naming one’s research involves confining one’s inquiry to a set of rules or parameters which are intended to guide and inform the research process. In keeping with this theme, Muller and Dzurec (1993) state that “from the moment a researcher chooses a word, he or she becomes embroiled in the ‘baggage’ that accompanies the word...” (p, 19). While on the one hand I welcome a research tool that offers to guide my process of inquiry, on the other hand I do not wish to have my creativity, intuition and judgment constrained by someone else’s understanding of what an ethnographic inquiry should look like.

It appears that my concern regarding the issue of naming one’s methodology finds me in good company with a number of ethnographic scholars. When I immerse myself in the ethnographic literature I commonly come across instances where this issue is identified as a point of contention. Atkinson and Hammersley (1994) for example offer that, “(the) definition of the term ethnography has been subject to controversy. For some it refers to a philosophical paradigm to which one makes a total commitment, for others it designates a method that one uses as and when appropriate” (p. 248). Their point of view on this issue is later punctuated with their subsequent comment that, “Across the spectrum of social sciences, the use and justification of ethnography is marked by diversity rather than consensus...one has to recognize different theoretical or epistemological positions, each of which may endorse a version of ethnographic work” (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994, p. 257). Similarly, Boyle (1994) makes the comment that, “Many of us would like to assume that some prototype exists, but the lack of consensus indicates there are many variations of ethnography” (p. 162). I find this lack of prescriptiveness to be an attractive feature of ethnography. Rather than finding myself constrained by the methodology, ethnography’s inherent flexibility offers me the opportunity to allow this inquiry to be guided and informed by my creativity and own ways of knowing.

For those of my reading audience who find it useful to have me identify a particular research methodology, I offer the term close-focus ethnography (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990) or microethnography (Boyle, 1994; Wolcott, 1990; Creswell, 1998). I have located my research within the ethnographic tradition because my inquiry is concerned with cultural themes and the meaning of actions (Spradley, 1979). I am also drawn to ethnography for its reflexive, holistic and contextual qualities (Boyle, 1994). I have borrowed the terms close-focus or microethnography because they distinguish my inquiry from those ethnographies which employ a wide angle lens to study culture.

Theoretical Underpinnings of the Research

Having thus far identified some of the epistemological, ontological and methodological premises on which this inquiry is based, I shall now attend to the ways in which my conceptual framework is informed by a series of theoretical assumptions and principles which also serve to guide this research effort.

The discomfort I felt as a result of some of the experiences I had while working in the public school system prompted me to seek sources of information which would offer me some way to account for the disturbing kinds of administrative practices I had observed. Soon after I began attending graduate school I was introduced to a body of literature which appeared promising in this regard. While learning about grand forms of social theory that undergird practice within the human services profession I became acquainted with critical theory. I was immediately intrigued by this form of social theory as it offered a viable framework for making sense of my discomforting experiences. My continuing investigation of critical theory eventually led to my discovery of a second body of literature that related more specifically to my research interests. This offshoot of the critical literature is known as critical pedagogy. These theoretical perspectives were

useful in providing me with a conceptual lens to understand and interpret that which I observed occurring in the local public school system.

While employing critical theory to explain a set of circumstances occurring in one's work environment may be viewed as inconsequential, the same cannot be said of the application of a theoretical model such as this to one's research. In the same manner that choosing a particular methodology can determine how a project does or should proceed, (Harding, 1987) applying a theoretical perspective to one's research can have significant implications for the project as a whole, including the overall intent. The critical paradigm is founded upon a series of epistemological and ontological premises which affect the kinds of theories, concepts, topics and themes a researcher attends to, as well as the purpose of the research, and the choice of methodology (Campbell & Bunting, 1991; Creswell, 1998).

In his discussion on this topic Creswell (1998) makes an interesting comment that has since prompted me to reflect upon the issue of the extent to which we "control" the epistemological, ontological and theoretical assumptions present in our research: "Central to this issue is *whether* (my emphasis) (researchers) should use a theoretical framework to guide their studies and, if so, to what extent, recognizing that all researchers begin with some hunches, ideas, and frameworks from past experiences and readings" (p. 74). Given that all forms of research are chock full (deliberate or otherwise) of assumptions that guide the process, I do not believe that we choose to apply theoretical models to our research in the same manner as we might choose to employ for example, one research method over another. Thus while I might opt to interview participants rather than engage in participant observation, I do not believe that I have the same kinds of choices available to me in relation to the selection of a particular paradigm. I am of the opinion that my theoretical assumptions are inherent in my thinking and writing, and that while they may be implicit, their significance nonetheless needs to be recognized. Consequently, my task as a

reflexive researcher is not to decide whether to use a particular theoretical framework to guide my study, but rather, to recognize that one already exists, and thus to render explicit the theoretical assumptions and principles that guide and inform my inquiry.

Critical Theory: Assumptions Overriding Purpose and Guiding Principles

This theoretical model is based upon the critical examination of social structures. Proponents of critical theory examine the ways in which the interests of some groups are advanced at the expense of other less powerful groups (Morgaine, 1994; Winston, 1995). Groups enjoying lesser privilege have traditionally been identified by race, gender and socio-economic status. More recently they have also been distinguished by age, ability, educational level, sexual orientation, and personal appearance (Ellsworth, 1992). The theory suggests that this inequality of opportunity is pervasive and occurs largely outside of our conscious awareness. The lack of privilege afforded to groups of lesser privilege is viewed as imposing limitations on human potential. Proponents of critical theory believe that societal transformation is indeed possible and desirable. Promoting social justice is viewed as its overriding purpose and is believed to be achieved through critical reflection, dialogue, praxis and collaborative work with oppressed groups (Morgaine, 1994; Morgan, 1985).

Central to critical theory is the concept of dialogue. It is the proposed vehicle for the objectives of enlightenment and emancipation and is also regarded as the instrument for gathering and communicating information. Proponents of the theory believe that it is through dialogue that groups become aware of the oppressive forces that operate within society. Multiple perspectives are gathered to create a rich mosaic of experience, creating pathways for enlightenment, empowerment, and emancipatory action.

Proponents of critical theory subscribe to a constructivist epistemology. That is to say they assume that knowledge is constructed within a particular social context and that

the social context is relevant to the knowledge that is produced. Thus in the critical theory paradigm, "...knowledge is not discoverable or universal but is created, and its creation and interpretation is grounded in language" (Campbell and Bunting, 1991, p. 5).

An ongoing review of the critical literature will lead the astute reader to recognize that the theoretical underpinnings of the critical paradigm itself are in fact situated in a particular historical and social context. With respect to this issue, Nielsen (1992) offers that, "...a critical theory is itself always a part of the object-domain which it describes; critical theories are always in part about themselves" (p. 267). In practical terms this reflective or self-referential feature of critical theory hold its proponents accountable in identifying the ways in which the value-laden nature of the model serves to shape the understanding of the social structures it critiques.

Research methods associated with the critical paradigm vary, ranging from the critical examination of historical documents or other texts to dialogic interviews with participants (Campbell & Bunting, 1991). In each case however, careful attention is given to language and its meaning (Campbell & Bunting) and to macrovariables (properties of societies or cultures) as opposed to microvariables (properties of individuals) (Winston, 1995). The objectives of critical research can vary from those which are aimed at creating knowledge to further emancipatory political aims, (Campbell & Bunting, 1991) (thus being geared toward social activism) to those which are oriented towards the illumination of social processes (M. E. Purkis, personal communication, February 25, 1998).

Merits and Limitations of Critical Theory

An attractive feature of critical theory is the wide reaching implications it has for research, policy and practice. It has the capacity to increase our understanding of the processes and structures operating in society and offers a useful framework from which to examine the effects of power and privilege. More importantly, critical theory implicitly charges researchers, administrators and practitioners with the responsibility of developing policies and practices which are both sensitive and responsive to, the diverse needs of those to whom human services are provided.

Critical theory also has its limitations. For example, it has been roundly criticized for its moral absolutes and prescriptive tone. Critics of this perspective have also suggested that critical researchers are perhaps too selective in their interpretations; reporting only those findings which are consistent with the value systems and theoretical assumptions inherent in the model (Winston, 1995).

I find these criticisms to be useful in that they remind me of the importance of maintaining a reflexive and critical stance throughout the process of my own inquiry. I believe for example, that my ability to be persuasive with my reading audience will depend to a large extent on my capacity to “stay present” with, account for and remain critical of, the value-laden nature of my interpretations.

Critical Pedagogy: A Brief Overview

All forms of education are political... there is politics in the imposition of standardized tests, in grading and tracking policies, in the physical conditions of classrooms and buildings which send messages to students about their worth and place in society...
...politics also resides in the punitive attitude of the curriculum towards everyday speech and non-standard English spoken by students, in the diminished role of art, dance, and music... in the

'partnership' between local schools and business without partnerships between schools and labor organizations... and in the unelected bureaucracy running most schools... The entire school experience has political qualities and consequences... Schools construct people year by year, developing the way they think about the world and act in it. Traditional education orients students to conform, to accept inequality and their places in the status quo, to follow authority.

(Shor, 1993, p. 27-28)

Critical Pedagogy is a term used to describe the critical analysis of pedagogical practices which result in oppression, injustice, and inequality (Ellsworth, 1992). It examines the political agendas and hegemonic formations hidden within conventional educational literature and practice (Kanpol, 1994). Critical pedagogues envision an education system which promotes equality, fairness, and compassion (Kanpol, 1994). Gore (1993) defines the purpose of critical pedagogy as the "attempt to facilitate more democratic and emancipatory schooling for all" (p.5). Through ongoing public debate and social action, critical pedagogues seek to promote individual freedom, social justice, and social change.

The Integrity of the Research

The evaluation of qualitative research involves asking questions like: What constitutes a good research project? What does this research tell me about the phenomenon I have chosen to investigate? To what degree does my research reflect the essence of a phenomenon as identified by the study's participants (Baker et al., 1992)? How will I know if my findings are solid or worth paying attention to?

There are a variety of perspectives surrounding the question of how qualitative research should be evaluated. Some researchers have taken the position that qualitative research should be subjected to the same criteria one employs in the evaluation of quantitative research. Others argue that qualitative research should be assessed on the

basis of a separate set of criterion; one which acknowledges and reflects the nature and purpose of a form of inquiry that distinguishes itself from quantitative research. Still others refute the notion that qualitative research can be judged according to a set of criterion at all, arguing that this means of assessment is incompatible with the nature of the social world and the way we understand it. Of those that opt for an alternative set of criterion, my review of the literature on this topic suggests that the most commonly identified criteria for evaluating qualitative research are trustworthiness, (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) authenticity, (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Manning, 1997) credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, (Lincoln & Guba, 1985;) auditability, (Sandelowski, 1986) validity and relevance (Hammersley, 1992). Other criterion include reproducibility, (Knafl, 1994) meaning in context and recurrent patterning (Leininger, 1994).

Some researchers argue that because qualitative research is closer in function to art and literature than it is to science, the criteria upon which it is assessed should be aesthetic rather than scientific (Sandelowski et al. 1994; Hammersley, 1992). The notion of using aesthetic criteria to evaluate qualitative research is well documented. Ray (1994) for example, makes the comment that excellence in phenomenology "...is in the scrupulous philosophical scholarship and, in essence, reveals an aesthetic--a beautiful object--where the phenomenon and reflection are united in an illuminating way" (p. 132).

Deciding upon an established set of criterion from which to evaluate my research project became problematic when I considered the multitude of perspectives surrounding the question of how qualitative research should best be evaluated. Choosing to adopt an assessment method based on an established set of criterion seemed complicated and impractical in that it appeared to raise at least as many questions as it purported to answer. In response to my concerns regarding this issue I began to consider alternative methods of evaluation. When I surveyed the work of prominent researchers who had identified a particular set of evaluation criterion, it appeared that: 1) there was some degree of

overlap when I compared one set of criteria to another among the different authors and 2) each criterion was founded upon a particular principle or set of principles. With these observations in mind I began to consider that it might be prudent to establish my own evaluative framework and use it to evaluate the worth of my findings. The set of criterion I developed is simple and straightforward and reflects my own particular values regarding what it means to produce a scholarly piece of work that is worth paying attention to. It can be summed up as follows: 1) Have I conducted the research in an ethical, effective, responsible and reflexive manner? and 2) Have I represented what I have learned in a such a way that my writing captures the attention of my reading audience to the point where it provokes resonance, reflection, discussion, passion, controversy or intellectual excitement? Rather than offer my responses to these questions here, I thought it best to set them aside for now and include them in the final chapter.

Overview of the Text

This document comprises seven chapters. Chapter two provides an overview of various aspects of the research process and covers such topics as gaining permission to conduct research in schools, gathering participants, conducting interviews, developing relationships in the field, transcribing data, as well as developing a method for analysis and interpretation. Also included in this chapter is a discussion of some further considerations regarding methodology and method. Chapters three, four, five and six are structured in the same manner and focus on providing the reader with a detailed account of the participants' responses to my interview questions. Chapter seven explores the concepts of similarity and difference within the context of administrative practice. It also offers a series of concluding remarks concerning the nature and focus of this inquiry.

Chapter Two

Gathering Participants

My search for participants began with a formal request to conduct research in two local school districts. I contacted two of them in the hope that at least one would allow me to proceed. Both districts required that I begin the process of gaining permission by filling out "Request to Conduct Research" form. Within several weeks I had received permission to conduct my research in both districts.

Given the purpose of my study, I was particularly interested in gathering as participants, administrators who assumed the primary responsibility for discipline in their schools. My interest in interviewing those responsible for discipline was based upon my agreement with Hammersley and Atkinson's (1983) assertion that these individuals control "...key resources and avenues of opportunity" within a school, and in doing so "...exercise control at and during key phases of a youth's status passage" (p. 38). Interviewing those primarily responsible for discipline meant that in most instances I would be speaking with vice-principals.

My goal was to find between five and seven administrators who would be willing to have me interview them for approximately one hour on three or four separate occasions. Parameters were set in this manner for several reasons. While it was important to me to have the opportunity to gather rich descriptive "data", I also wanted to have some control over the volume of information I anticipated that I would generate. Further, I wanted to have the number of interviews I conducted to be determined by the *point of saturation*; a term defined by Kvale (1996) as the point at which interviews yield only minimal amounts of new information. Taking pragmatic issues into account, I was hopeful this would occur by the third or fourth interview.

As I felt it was important to base my interviews on the kinds of school settings and circumstances with which I was most familiar, I invited to participate only those administrators who dealt regularly on disciplinary matters with “at-risk” youth between the ages of thirteen and sixteen. Using the lists of names, job titles, addresses and telephone numbers provided to me by the school districts, I mailed out letters of introduction to all of the administrators who appeared to fit this criteria (see Appendix I).

Within a short period of time I received several responses. A couple of female administrators wished me well but declined to participate on the basis that they didn't feel they could free up the time to do so. Five male administrators also contacted me, indicating their interest in my project and their willingness to participate. While I was delighted that the response to my recruiting efforts had been so positive, the prospect of not having the opportunity to include female administrators in my study concerned me. Having made no claims about attempting to create a “representative sample”, the nature of my concern was not oriented in this direction. I worried instead about not having access to a woman's perspective and how this circumstance might negatively affect the study. After consulting with my advisors I decided that I would further my efforts to recruit a female participant. I mailed out a second letter to female administrators in both school districts who, according to the lists I had been using, appeared to be dealing with youth between the ages of thirteen and sixteen. In the letter, I identified that I had not been successful thus far in recruiting female participants. I also shared with them my concern about not having access to a woman's perspective. Within a short period of time a female administrator contacted me, agreeing to participate; thus providing me with a total of six participants who met the selection criteria I had established.

The Interview Process

I met with each of the participants on four separate occasions for approximately one hour. In the interest of gathering information in a comprehensive and precise manner I requested (and received) permission from them to audio-tape each interview (see Appendix J). At the outset of the first interview, I asked that each participant choose a fictitious name that I would then use throughout the research process to protect their anonymity. All files, tapes and transcripts were subsequently coded accordingly. Several of the participants chose to use androgenous names. Others opted to protect their identity by choosing a name normally associated with a particular gender that in this case falsely reflected the one to which they actually belonged.

I structured the interviews in a manner which allowed me to ask a wide variety of questions in a couple of different formats. My goal in formulating questions was to do so in a manner that would elicit rich descriptive information from the participants. In the early stages of interviewing I asked general open ended kinds of questions; ones that I hoped would serve to open up the process of inquiry. As the interview process progressed I gradually narrowed the focus by asking questions that were more specific in nature.

My agreement with Kvale's (1996) comment that advance preparation is a key element of successful interviewing prompted me to spend a considerable amount of time preparing for each of the twenty-four interviews. I did my best for example to make every question "count" by formulating each one on the basis of what it was I was trying to "get at" within the context of my research questions. Having established a relationship between my research and interview questions, I would formulate questions seeking to get at certain themes in a variety of different ways (i.e. by asking direct questions, indirect questions, probing questions, interpreting questions, circular questions: "If I were to ask a colleague of yours the same question, what do you think he/she would say?" and

exception questions: “Can you think of an example where you would make a different decision than the one you just described?”) in order to obtain as full a representation as possible on particular issues or topics. In the interest of extending even further the participants’ responses, I also made regular use of in-depth follow-up questions during successive interviews with each participant.

In the interest of gaining a more complete picture of the context in which school administrators practice, I employed a technique during my interviews that ethnographers and other researchers refer to as *triangulation*. I use the term carefully and somewhat reluctantly given its kinship with the positivist paradigm where it purports to “validate” one’s findings. Hammersley and Atkinson (1997) have suggested for example that a researcher might use triangulation to offset the potential for “...the danger that undetected error in our inferences may render our analysis incorrect” (p. 231). Given that there are a variety of different methods and purposes associated with this technique (Richardson, 1994) and that it is not my intention to use it in the manner identified by Hammersley and Atkinson (1997) I shall, from this point forward confine my discussion on this topic to elements of it that relate directly to the methods I employed in my research. Creswell (1998) describes triangulation as “...the convergence of sources of information... to help support the development of themes” (p. 251). My intention in using triangulation was to add another dimension to the descriptions the participants provided in response to the direct questions I would ask them during our interviews. In order to accomplish this I employed two slightly different triangulation techniques. The first involved introducing into an interview situation, salient issues or themes that had been raised by another participant during an earlier interview. For example, when one participant told me about a disciplinary strategy that involves counselling students to withdraw from school, I used this information to ascertain the prevalence of such a practice by asking several of the other participants whether or not they had heard of or used this particular approach. The

second triangulation technique involved the creation of two fictitious case examples (referred to by the participants and myself as case studies) of situations in which “at-risk” youth find themselves at critical junctures in their school careers as a result of circumstances which, for one reason or another prompt a school administrator to initiate some form of disciplinary action. (see Appendices K and L)

Both case studies were structured similarly in that they each included a case history, an account of the circumstances which led to the incident(s) which later resulted in an administrator becoming involved with the youth in question, and a detailed description of various factors which might influence an administrator’s decision-making. My intention in creating these case studies was to have them provide the participants and myself with an alternate avenue to explore in detail, the process by which school administrators make decisions concerning disciplinary action. By asking the participants a series of broad open-ended questions I sought to understand as fully as possible, their points of view in relation to the case studies and the context in which they make administrative decisions involving “at-risk” youth.

Field Relations

It is worthwhile to examine the manner in which research relationships are constructed in that the nature and quality of those relationships will influence significantly, the kind of information that is gathered and ultimately the knowledge that is produced. Factors which influence field relations include how the researcher constructs her research selves, how participants in the field construct the researcher, (Reinharz, 1997) and the power relations that ensue in response to these constructions (Ellsworth, 1992).

There is a relationship between the various “selves” I bring to and create in the field and the ways in which those selves are perceived by those with whom I conduct the research (Reinharz, 1997). A variety of factors including my age, gender, manner of

dress, communication style and status as a student and professional influence how I am perceived by my participants. These perceptions in turn affect the context of the interview situation and the kind of information that is made available to me. It was of interest to me for example, that several of the participants made polite queries concerning whether I was conducting research in association with a Master's degree or a Ph D. Their questions on this topic reflected for me that in their minds one had more currency than the other and that the "importance" of my research was being assessed to some degree on the basis of my status as a Master's student. Similarly, another one of the participants spoke directly to the issue of whether or not my research would be perceived as credible by school administrators, given my previous status in the school district as a youth and family counsellor.

Implicit in these kinds of questions and comments are notions about power: Who has it; what attributes or conditions influence whether you have it or don't have it; and, how having it or not having it affects the research process. One doesn't need to examine the power relations operating within the public school system in much depth to determine that the system affords administrators a tremendous amount of legitimized authority with which to conduct the affairs of the school. It was this source of power that, to a large extent governed the manner in which the administrators and I related to one another when I worked in the public school system. The legitimization of administrative authority constructed them as having privileged access to expert knowledge; something I was expected to recognize, respect and uphold. These implicit yet mutually acknowledged expectations regarding our respective roles were so well-cast that I was both surprised and fascinated to discover how they changed when my identity shifted from youth and family counsellor to researcher. The subtle yet unmistakable manner in which the participants related to me in this alternate context was such that I was able to recognize that they had

constructed me as the “expert”; the one whose knowledge and skill would direct the process.

This shift in the balance of power between myself and school administrators prompted me to reflect upon the ways in which power relations affect the research process. Constructed as the “expert” who would direct the research effort, I recognized that I now occupied a position of privilege within the context of the research relationship. In her discussion of issues related to trust and dialogue, Ellsworth (1992) makes the point that, “What they/we say, to whom, in what context, ...is the result of conscious and unconscious assessments of the power relations and safety of the situation... and of the risks and costs of (disclosure)” (p. 105). Agreeing to become involved in my research required a leap of faith on a number of fronts on the part of the participants. Along with other trust issues, these individuals were wholly dependent on my capacity to adequately protect their anonymity. As the keeper of their anonymity, I wondered how comfortable the participants felt about speaking freely with me during our interviews. It seemed to me that their assessment of my ability to conduct the research effort both ethically and responsibly would, to a large extent determine the level to which they were willing to engage with me in sharing information.

There are a number of other factors that influence the research process. Consider for example the distinction Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillmann-Healy (1997) make between the approach they term interactive interviewing and their view of traditional kinds of research interview situations:

...our work focuses on the interview process, the stories and feelings that both respondents and researchers share in the interview, and the understandings that emerge during interaction. ...Interactive interviewing reflects the way relationships develop in real life; as conversations where one person’s disclosures and self-probing invite another’s disclosures and self-probing... This intersubjective process provides a contextual basis for a level of understanding and

interpretation that is not present in traditional hierarchical interview situations where interviewers reveal little about themselves, aloofly ask questions in one or two brief sessions, and little or no relationship with respondents” (p. 121-122).

The distinction the authors draw between these two kinds of approaches reflect for me the importance of relationship to the research process and, that the nature and quality of that relationship has the capacity to profoundly affect the kind of knowledge that is generated as a result of the research effort.

I view the relationships that the participants and I developed with one another as ones that, if placed on a continuum would fall somewhere in between the two approaches identified by Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillmann-Healy, (1997). While the clinician in me strongly favours collaborative relationships over hierarchical ones, I was acutely aware of the power relations that influenced (if not governed) our interactions. And while the participants and I fostered positive working relationships and developed a strong rapport that grew over the course of the interviews, I suspect that the subtle power relationships influencing/governing the interview process had implications for the level to which each of us felt comfortable engaging in what Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillmann-Healy (1997) have termed the intersubjective process of disclosure and self-probing.

The Transcription Process

As is the case with all other aspects of the research process, transcription is an interpretive endeavour (Kvale, 1996; Arvay, 1998). It is simply not possible to fully recreate interviews by producing a series of audio-tapes and transcribing them on to sheets of paper. Visual cues are lost immediately as a result of this process and the spirit of the exchange between the researcher and the participants soon fades as well. Kvale (1996) describes the transcription process in this manner: “Attention is drawn to the formal recorded language and the empathically experienced, lived meanings of the original

conversation fade away; the dried pale flowers in the herbarium replace the fresh colorful flowers of the field” (p.167-168).

My objective with respect to transcribing was not to try to reproduce exactly what occurred during the interviews with the transcripts, but rather, to textually represent the information that had been gathered as fully as possible, recognizing that the document that I would ultimately produce as a result of this process would be a re-presentation and not a re-creation of the tellings. As will become more evident later in this chapter, representation necessarily involves interpretation. When I textually represent a conversation based on an audio-taped interview, I make a series of choices about how to best represent the information, along with decisions regarding what to include and exclude. These kinds of decisions, as with all other aspects of this project, are founded upon a particular set of beliefs, values and assumptions belonging to me, the socially and historically situated researcher.

In keeping with my objective of representing the information provided to me by the participants as fully as possible, I chose to transcribe each of the interviews myself. Although the process could aptly be described as long and arduous, (it took approximately one hundred and fifty hours to transcribe twenty-four interviews) I believe it was of significant benefit in the long run, in that it allowed me to become very familiar with the content of the transcripts; an important first step in the analytic process. Despite the tiring and time consuming nature of the task, each transcript was produced with the same degree of quality as the one before it.

The information on each audio cassette was transcribed with the intention of representing the information gathered during the interviews in a thorough and detailed manner. I have endeavoured to represent each interview verbatim. The transcripts include all of my questions and comments, and clearly indicate who is speaking at all times. Any information that appeared to identify a participant was labeled as such in bold

print at the appropriate interval. Emphases and passion were distinguished, as were comments that had a tentative quality to them; the former identified by underlining or bolding the print depending on the apparent level of intensity in the speaker's voice, the latter indicated by a question mark in parentheses. All "uhs", "ums", "you knows" and other such expressions characteristic of colloquial speech were included, along with coughs, laughs, throat clearings, pauses, repetitions, jokes, meanderings and any other contextual cues (audible and recalled) that promised to more fully represent the information I had gathered.

On the infrequent occasions when audibility was a problem (I used state of the art recording equipment throughout the interviews) I would indicate within the transcript that I was having difficulty in this regard. If my repeated attempts to make out what had been said proved entirely unsuccessful, I would identify the offending word or comment as inaudible. There were times however when, by using the context of the conversation for clues, I was able to hazard an educated guess as to what had been said and subsequently included this information in the text, along with a question mark, in parentheses.

The Analytic and Interpretive Process

The prospect of sorting through, reducing, organizing and finding meaning in fifteen hundred pages of transcript material is daunting. The proposed task becomes even more challenging when, after reviewing the literature, one discovers that no silver bullet exists with respect to method. As a result, the analytic process for me became one of exploring strategies espoused by various authors, determining which ones seemed most useful in terms of my own project and then tailoring those ideas or suggestions so that they fit well with my own particular research needs. I considered this analytic approach to be a both reasonable and logical one, given my agreement with Hycner's (1985)

suggestion that even in instances where a step-by-step method is proposed, arbitrarily imposing it on any given data set would do a great injustice to the integrity of that data.

As is customary with many analytic approaches, Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) suggest that the process begin with a careful review of the data. For me, the task of becoming familiar with my “data” began early on in the interview process, in that my wish to be well prepared for subsequent interviews with each participant necessitated that I familiarize myself with the content of each preceding interview prior to conducting the next. The second round of analysis occurred once the interview process was complete and began with an approach similar to one identified by Hycner (1985) which emphasizes the importance of staying “true to the data” or phenomenon under investigation by engaging in a rigorous process of analyzing the transcripts line by line, endeavoring to retain the literal statements of the participants as much as possible during the early stages of analysis. Although this disciplined analytical approach proved to be lengthy and at times tedious, looking back, I believe it was worthwhile in that it allowed me to become very familiar with the material contained within the transcripts, thus making it relatively easy to identify the patterns, inconsistencies, and contradictions Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) suggest you look for during the initial phase of analysis. Analyzing the transcript material in this manner also encouraged me to remain open and curious in relation to the “data”, and seemed to discourage me from making premature, unsupported interpretive leaps.

My line-by-line approach to analysis involved going through the text contained within the transcripts and looking for passages; sections of text which could be identified as (more or less) having a beginning, a middle and an end. Having become so familiar with the content of the transcripts, I at some point made the delightful discovery that it was possible to identify patterns of speech within conversation, and happily, that these patterns appeared recurrently throughout each and all of the transcripts. When asked a question in an interview for example, I found that participants were likely to respond with

a clear statement that usually suggested an affinity for a particular belief or value. This statement was often followed by one or more supporting statements, most often articulated as examples. Once the examples or supporting statements were provided to the listener, the participants would regularly follow those up with a summary statement which reflected his or her point of view in relation to the initial remark made. The discovery that there is pattern within speech was a significant one in that identifying such patterns gave me the ability to begin reducing the transcript material by drawing parameters around passages, and developing summary statements in relation to them, often using the participants' own words. This analytic approach is similar in several respects to one identified by Kvale (1996) as *meaning condensation* and was one of the primary means by which I chose to reduce and organize the transcript material.

Although the task of condensing and organizing one's transcripts can pose a significant challenge, I believe the process can be made smoother by the application of some practical tools. For example, the margins on a word processor can easily be manipulated in a manner that allows the "data" to be positioned on one side of a page, thus providing a large margin of blank space on the other that can be used for making notes. Also, for those who opt to use traditional analytic methods rather than employ sophisticated software programs such as NUD-IST to analyze their data, the "find" function on a word processor serves as an invaluable tool in instances where a researcher wishes to locate quickly, specific words, phrases or even passages within large pieces of text. My third and final suggestion regarding the application of practical tools involves the purchase of a blank rubber stamp, a good supply of coin envelopes, a large, three sided corrugated display board and a box of pins with plastic tops. Having a special stamp made that in effect creates a "blank box" or rectangle on a page, allowed me to confine the summary statements in a manner such that I could later cut them out of the transcripts and organize them conceptually or thematically by placing them in designated coin envelopes.

Although one could consider using regular sized envelopes, I would expect to find the smaller ones easier to work with, given that they can be moved about and/or attached to a display board without difficulty.

The next step in the analytic process was to formally assign meaning to the textually generated summary statements by relating them to various concepts and themes. In a practical sense this task involved associating each summary statement with a particular (post as opposed to pre determined) conceptual or thematic construct, labeling a coin envelope accordingly and placing the summary statement(s) inside for future reference.

The third step in my analytic and interpretive process was to take the concepts and themes I had generated from the summary statements and begin relating them back to the research questions. Kvale (1996) refers to this task as one of “interrogating the meaning units in terms of the specific purpose of the study” (p. 194). My method for accomplishing this task involved visually representing on a three sided display board, the relationships I had constructed between the themes and concepts, the interview questions, the research questions. (see Figure 1)

Methodological Crossroads

One of the premises associated with studying culture is that the ethnographer focuses her attention on the commonality that binds the culture sharing group. After conducting the initial interviews with the participants I became increasingly aware of a lack of congruence between some of the assumptions I had made about administrators when I began this inquiry and what I was hearing about administrative practice from those who had agreed to participate in my study. My early journal entries for example suggested that I viewed school administrators as individuals with agendas dissimilar to

Figure 1

Visual Representation of the Constructed Relationship Between Research Questions, Interview Questions, Themes and Concepts

Overarching Research Questions

What are some of the beliefs, values and assumptions that underpin the disciplinary practices of school administrators? How do administrators perceive their role? How do these beliefs, values, assumptions and the way(s) administrators perceive their role relate to the manner in which "at-risk" youth are dealt with in the public school system?

What perceptions, understandings and expectations do administrators have of/in relation to "at-risk" youth and how might they influence the manner in which these students are dealt with?

Is this adolescent group dealt with differently than students who have not been assigned this label?

What might account for the discrepancy between my early and subsequent experiences in the school system? Are there different kinds of administrative practice operating there?

Interview Questions

Interview Questions

Interview Questions

Have any of you ever come across a student that in your opinion, simply didn't belong and if so, could you give me a profile of such a student?

When someone uses the term "at-risk" when they're talking about a student, what do you think they mean?

Do "at-risk" youth receive more chances?

Are there different ways of attending to the task of being an administrator?

In your role as a school administrator, how would you describe yourself?

Would you each provide me with a statement that you believe to be true in relation to "at-risk" youth?

Do you deal with "at-risk" youth in the same manner as other students or are there important differences and if so, what are they?

You mentioned something about "old think" school. Could you elaborate on that a little?

What do you think are the most important aspects of your role?

What do you think is the source of difficulty with respect to "at-risk" youth?

How do you think you would have dealt with that situation if the youth in question did not have the "at-risk" label?

Is this similar or different to how you would describe other administrators?

What kinds of considerations enter into the mix when you decide to act one way or another with a particular student?

As I conduct these interviews, I hear a lot of talk about whether a student is being successful...Could you elaborate a little on this?

Would the consequence for that be the same for everyone?

You said last time there were a couple of indicators that would clearly suggest that someone should not be a school administrator...

Question concerning the hat rule

Do you think that the way administrators deal with "at-risk" youth is changing, and if so, how is it changing?

Themes and Concepts

Commonality/Difference Commonality/Difference Commonality/Difference Commonality/Difference Commonality/Difference Commonality/Difference Commonality/Difference Commonality/Difference Commonality/Difference

Latching on whilst knowing when to let go

Tie goes to the runner

Nice neat process of ushering undesirables out

Systemic versus endemic change

Islands of excellence

Old think school

Building & maintaining culture

Sharpening the saw

Relationship between core beliefs and admin style

"At-risk" as extrinsic quality

Social reproduction and cultural reproduction

Going the extra five miles

Value differences
The hat rule

Best practice jewels

mine in working with “at-risk” youth. Yet early on in the interviews with the participants it became apparent that I was engaged with caring and compassionate folk who appeared to be as committed to supporting youth and advocating for them as I had been when I worked in the school system. When my search for commonality within administrative practice turned up distinction, I felt the foundation upon which I had built my inquiry begin to crumble. New questions began to emerge. I asked myself: What might account for the discrepancy between my early and subsequent experiences? Were the experiences I had while working in the school system old, out of date and no longer valid? Could the experiences I had while working in the school be explained away as just an anomaly? And if so, what value could there be in creating a scholarly piece of writing that wouldn’t resonate with those I was attempting to engage?

One possible explanation was that I had fallen victim to an ethnographic pitfall known as *going native* (Kvale, 1996; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1997). That is to say that my exuberance in discovering a group of professionals who shared similar as opposed to dissimilar values concerning work with “at-risk” youth resulted in my developing what Hammersley and Atkinson (1997) refer to as *over-rapport*. One methodological problem associated with developing over-rapport with one’s participants is that in over-identifying with their perspectives, the researcher fails to treat them as problematic. (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1997).

Developing trust and rapport with the participants was certainly important to me. I believed that my ability to obtain rich and meaningful accounts of their experience was to a large extent dependent upon the quality of the relationship we developed. But had that rapport interfered with my ability to maintain a critical perspective within the context of my inquiry? Although I did spend some time reflecting upon the possibility that I had in fact “gone native”, this explanation for the discrepancy between my past and present

experience with administrators didn't resonate with me and thus I began searching for alternative explanations.

Hammersley and Atkinson (1997) have observed that "...it is frequently well into the process of inquiry that one discovers what the research is *really* about; and not uncommonly it turns out to be different from the initial foreshadowed problems" (p. 206). This was certainly true of my experience. My search for a common set of beliefs, values and assumptions among school administrators had in fact exposed a clear distinction between the practices of some of the individuals I had once worked with and the practices of those who had agreed to participate in my study. Continuing to muse about what might account for the difference between practices, I began to consider the possibility that there were distinct kinds of administrative practice operating within the school districts I was studying. Approaching my research questions from this point of view would represent an important turning point in my search for meaning.

Interestingly enough, it was a series of comments made early on in the process by the participants that first led me to consider that there might be different kinds of administrative practice operating within the local public school system. Having read my letter of introduction (see Appendix I) several of them communicated to me, their interest in participating in a research project that promised to yield information which would help "at-risk" youth while identifying elements of effective administrative practice. (One participant for example, likened my study to Stephen Covey's (1990) book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*) While I remember being pleased that the participants viewed my research as a vehicle for assisting "at-risk" youth, the comments that caught my attention were those that suggested I was conducting a study which sought to identify elements of effective administrative practice. I was intrigued that several of the participants had drawn similar conclusions with respect to the intent of my study insofar as their interpretation of what I was seeking to "get at" was somewhat different from my

own. After reflecting upon this intriguing bit of information for some time, I concluded that: If this very busy group of professionals (I had been turned down by several administrators who identified a lack of time as the reason they were unable to participate) were as enthusiastic as they seemed about giving me four hours of their time to discuss elements of effective administrative practice, they must perceive themselves to have information to share that was important (and perhaps critical) to my understanding of this topic. I viewed my task at this point as one of listening carefully to what my participants had to say while attempting to come to some understanding of what might account for the fact that my earlier experiences seemed incongruent with much of what I was now hearing from the participants about administrative practice.

Still grappling with the issue of whether or not the kinds of practices I observed while working in the school system could be explained as either anomalous or irrelevant (due to the fact that my experiences might now be considered out of date) I began to notice that the participants themselves would routinely make reference (sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly) to different styles of administrative practice operating within the school system. Their observations in this regard served to support my own, thus encouraging me to move forward with the idea of identifying distinctive aspects of administrative practice in the midst of studying culture.

A mentor of mine once taught me that we learn by drawing distinctions (D. Todtman, personal communication, 1993). To illustrate his point he made a dot on a blackboard with a piece of chalk and explained that I knew it was a dot because I could see it wasn't part of the blackboard. Similarly, I know that I am a curious person because I spend a lot of time seeking to understand things that others seem unconcerned with. I knew the participants were talking about a different kind of administrative practice than the one I became familiar with while working in the school system because their words

sounded different from those I had heard from the administrators I interacted with as a youth and family counsellor.

As I discuss issues of commonality and distinction within the context of my inquiry it occurs to me that a couple of points require clarification. First, I wish to state at the outset that I am speaking/writing about these issues in relative as opposed to absolute terms. When I speak/write about distinct kinds of practices operating within the local public school system, I am not suggesting implicitly or explicitly that they should be dichotomized and interpreted as categories of good and bad administrators. To do so in my mind would reduce this inquiry to an overly simplistic and inaccurate account of what I learned. Further, as Hammersley and Atkinson (1997) have pointed out, "judgments about the good and the bad are always dependent on commitment to a particular value perspective, and there is a plurality of values and cultures to which human beings can be committed" (p. 277). My intent in distinguishing between styles of practice is, a) to offer them as a means of explaining the discrepancy between my experiences and, b) to tease out elements of (what I consider to be) effective forms of practice that might ultimately serve to guide the manner in which we assist "at-risk" youth. Second, I do not mean to suggest that there are a wide range of administrative styles operating within the local public school system, or that the distinctions I draw between different kinds of practice comprise unitary categories. When I interviewed those who agreed to participate in my study, I sometimes encountered tellings of what I would consider to be, examples of less effective forms of administrative practice. And, by the same token, looking back on the experiences I had while working in the school system, I can recall that I sometimes observed demonstrations of that which I would consider to be, more effective forms of practice.

Having hopefully cleared up some possible misconceptions about the intent of my inquiry, the question that raises itself for me at this point is: How then does one

effectively report on what is common to this culture sharing group whilst seeking to identify those elements which distinguish one style of administrative practice from another?

Before moving forward with a discussion of this and other issues associated with how best to represent what I learned as a result of conducting this inquiry, it is appropriate at this point to explicate further the assumptions upon which this research is based. It is my belief that, 1) there are social forces operating within educational institutions that influence/govern administrative practice; 2) there are distinct, identifiable sets of beliefs, values and assumptions that guide and inform administrative practice in schools; 3) administrative decisions are made in accordance with the beliefs, values and assumptions of administrators, and, in accordance with the manner in which administrators perceive their role; 4) in the case of this particular inquiry, it is as important to identify the distinctive elements of the culture sharing group as it is to identify its common features.

As Arvay (1998) has suggested, there are a number of ethical issues associated with writing about a culture to which one does not belong; not the least of which are the problems one might associate with an outsider proposing to thoroughly represent the tacit knowledge held by inside members. When researchers set out to textually represent what the participants in a study have said, in many cases they choose to speak for them, using their own words, rather than those of the participants. For example, as the author of this text I occupy a position of privilege which allows me to choose which of the participants' comments to include and which to omit. My capacity to make these kinds of choices affords me the privilege of shaping the participants' responses in a manner which I believe will best support my arguments (Hertz, 1997). Thus what ends up appearing on the pages of this and other documents of this nature is a translation; an account that has been interpreted in perfect accordance with the situated understanding of the researcher. As Stacey (1988) contends,

The research product is ultimately that of the researcher. [However] with very rare exceptions it is the researcher who narrates, who “authors” the ethnography,...a written document structured primarily by a researcher’s purposes, offering a researcher’s interpretations, registered in a researcher’s voice. (quoted in Arvay, 1998, p. 71).

While it is useful to identify some of the power relations embedded in an author’s privilege to choose the manner in which she will represent the information provided to her by the participants, it is also worthwhile identifying the political and ideological agendas (Richardson, 1994) that lurk beneath the surface of the researcher’s account. As Hertz (1997) has observed, researchers “selectively resonate and associate to produce a perspective” (p. xiii). At the risk of stating the obvious it should be explicitly acknowledged that the ideological leanings I bring to my research may not be shared by those who have agreed to participate in my study and, while I cannot *not* interpret what has been said, I believe I have a responsibility to explicate as fully as possible throughout this document, that which might otherwise remain implicit in those interpretations.

My concerns regarding the ethical issues associated with representation prompted a search for a writing method that would allow me to share with the participants, some of the privilege afforded to me as the researcher. I was particularly interested in finding/developing a method of representation that would give each of the participants a voice in the text; one that represented (more authentically than traditional research writing methods seemed to allow) their beliefs, values and assumptions concerning administrative practice and “at-risk” youth.

The inspiration for finding a vehicle that would a) honour the words of the participants by providing opportunities to have them speak for themselves and b) provide me with a means of effectively identifying both the common and distinct elements of

administrative practice originated from a comment made to me by one of the participants. He suggested how useful it would be to have all of the individuals involved in my study gathered together in one room, sharing thoughts and ideas on the topics and issues I had raised during our interviews. While I felt that there were a number of logistical and ethical barriers to coordinating such an effort at that point in the interview process, I was nonetheless intrigued by the suggestion and later gave consideration to how I might textually simulate such a situation by creatively making use of the transcripts I had so painstakingly produced. After spending some time reviewing the transcripts and thinking about the narrative approach Marla Arvay (1998) used in her dissertation on secondary trauma, I concluded that by utilizing a bit of poetic license and, by finding a way to ensure all of the information that could identify the participants was omitted, it was feasible to then manipulate the text contained within the transcripts in a manner that would textually simulate a situation in which the participants and myself had come together to discuss issues pertaining to "at-risk" youth and administrative decision-making. By bringing together actual portions of the transcripts that contained both my interview questions and the responses of each participant on a given subject, I was able to craft fictional conversations between the participants, using my queries and comments as a textual means of facilitating discussion.

While this method of representation offers some exciting possibilities, there are several issues associated with it that need attending to. First, in order to effectively represent the information provided to me by the participants, the sheer volume of information contained within the transcripts would suggest that a significant degree of editing be required. It is important for the reader to keep in mind that as the editor of the transcripts and this document, I retain the privilege of choosing which information will be included in the text and which will be omitted. The representational method I propose here does little if anything to diminish my authority in this regard. As Hertz (1997)

observes, “As they shift between data and theory, scholars make decisions about the voices and placement of respondents within the text” (p. xii). Thus it should be made clear at the outset that both my inclusions and exclusions unquestionably reflect my judgments concerning how best to represent what I have learned. Second, the more information I take from the transcripts and include in the text, the greater the likelihood that I may inadvertently compromise the anonymity of the participants, thus violating the confidential nature of our agreement. I have done my best to prevent this occurrence by giving the participants the final say in determining which of my intended inclusions serve to maintain their anonymity and which do not. Prior to this document becoming published, each participant was given the authority to exclude from the final draft, any information they believed could potentially identify them. Third, in the interests of representing the information provided to me by the participants in an effective and concise manner, I eliminated from the text, the characteristic “uhs”, “ums” and “you knows” of colloquial speech. I have also corrected grammatical errors, and omitted most slang, along with the indications of pauses, sighs and emphases contained within the original transcripts. And while the participants’ responses were, to some extent subjected to a little further “polishing” for the purpose of enhancing clarity, I have endeavoured to leave them largely intact, recognizing that significant alterations to the original transcripts would compromise the authenticity of the responses, the integrity of the text and the intent behind the use of the method.

I have structured these fictional conversations whenever possible, to reflect the form and content of the actual interviews. For example, the conversations have been crafted in a manner which creates the illusion that I have conducted a series of audio taped discussions with a group of six participants, on four separate occasions for a period of approximately one hour. As was the case with the actual interviews, I begin the process of inquiry in the roundtable discussion groups by asking broad, open ended questions, then

gradually narrow my focus and ask questions that become more specific in nature as the process moves forward.

The questions and responses that appear in the roundtable discussions represent, for the most part, a deliberate as opposed to haphazard or random series of inclusions. That is to say that what I have chosen to include in these discussions is representative of that which I found most meaningful within the context of what it was I had set about to learn, and eventually did learn as a result of conducting this inquiry. I have endeavoured to ensure for example, that the questions I “ask” of the participants in the roundtable discussions (the incidental, clarifying and follow up questions would represent important exceptions) bear a direct relationship to both the larger, overarching research questions I posed at a couple of different junctures within this document, as well as to the thematic and conceptual constructs I generated as a result of conducting my analysis. Correspondingly, it is fair to say that each of the included responses bears some relationship to one or more of the research questions and to the various concepts and themes that were generated from the analytic process. The participants’ responses were in fact chosen on the basis of their superior (my value) capacity to shed light upon or offer insight into, the various issues and topic areas that I have opted to examine throughout this text. Given these kinds of considerations, the reader may safely assume that the responses which appear in the roundtable discussions have, as much as other practical considerations would allow, been evaluated more favourably than those which ended up being excluded, in terms of how well they conform to the stated criteria. With one exception, all of the questions in the roundtable discussion groups are representative of ones asked of the participants during my actual interviews with them. The final question in Roundtable Discussion # 4, is not however and was “asked” with a specific purpose in mind. The question “Can you identify for me, one or two examples of what you would consider to be, elements of effective practice?” was formulated for the purpose of

showcasing a number of “best practice jewels” (my value) that appeared incidentally throughout the transcripts which, for the reasons I have just stated, were not likely to otherwise have been included in the roundtable discussions.

As I considered the viability of this method of representation, given the operational and ethical issues associated with it, I was reminded of Hertz’s (1997) comment that researchers interested in creating new conventions in ethnography, will want to concern themselves with ways in which “...the author’s voice and those of her respondents (can be) situated more completely for the reader” (p. vii). I believe my proposed method fits this criteria and, having satisfactorily addressed a number of the concerns I associate with employing this kind of approach, view it as viable in representing ethically, effectively and responsibly, much of what I have learned as a result of conducting this inquiry.

Chapter Three

Roundtable Discussion #1

The participants and I have agreed to conduct the meetings in a school that one of the participants works at that is conveniently located. We have arranged to meet in a room that comfortably accommodates the seven of us. When everyone arrives I introduce the participants to one another, identifying them as Lily, John, Alex, Conor, Robin and Tom. After requesting that the content of our discussions be considered confidential, I then turn on the tape recorder, explaining that the device will beep softly in one hour's time, signaling the end of our meeting.

Patti: First off I'd like to thank you all for being here today. I anticipate that our discussions here are going to be interesting ones. Before we begin, I would like to make some brief statements about my intention in conducting these meetings. As I stated in my letter of introduction, my research is concerned with administrative decision-making as it pertains to matters involving "at-risk" youth. My overall objective in meeting with you is to try to gain a better understanding of the context in which you practice and make decisions, particularly those of a disciplinary nature. Does anyone have any questions or comments?

Conor: I have a couple of comments that I'd like to make. I was thinking that administrators come to administration via some very different routes. Also, I'm wondering, not in terms of this group per se, but with respect to administrators in general, how many understand what their responsibilities are in terms of what they need to do for kids? My experience has been that some may not.

Patti: Well those are important points you have raised, and I hope they will be addressed further as we discuss issues that are related to those topics. Perhaps we can begin to address them in part by having each of you talk a little about how you see your role. In fact, let's begin with that. In your role as a school administrator, how would you describe yourself?

Robin: Well I'm very much the buck stops here person. There's quite a bit of the rescuer to me. I am however, the person who ultimately deals with discipline, but I try very much to be out there and gather it up rather than have kids sent to me. For example, this little lad who was in here at lunch time was just about to slam his hand down on somebody's lunch so I just said "go to the office" rather than make a big deal of the fight or have a teacher refer the student. I would say my style is more improvisational than formal. I don't come in and sort out my mail first and then do this, that and the other. I like to do what comes by in a day. I'm very, very conscious of what the students need. I seem to have octopus arms and I can almost pick the ones that I know will need me more, so I go find them. I try to be supportive of staff but my world is primarily for the students.

Patti: Tom?

Tom: How do I describe myself? Good looking, debonair. (we all laugh) I guess my role here is to provide a service to the school. Despite what many people feel, the school doesn't run by itself. It needs some sort of structure. I see myself as a person who provides oil to the mechanism. I make things work whether I'm talking about kids or I'm talking about teachers. If a student turns up here and says "I've got a problem," my job is not to say "Go away, don't bother me," my job is to say, "What is the problem?" "How can I solve it for you?" By the same token I might have a teacher who comes in here and says "You know, I need a new desk or my computer's gone missing." I have to try to

solve a multitude of problems. There are lots of things that happen in school that don't appear to have a whole lot to do with education that I'm responsible for, such as making sure that fire drills go smoothly and making sure the grounds are cleaned up.

Patti: So your role is multi-faceted.

Tom: Very much so.

Patti: Alex, what are your thoughts on this?

Alex: How would I describe myself... I place immense importance on relationships. I try as much as I can to help students. I understand that I'm not here to be their friend but I'm here to help them. I'm here if they need someone to talk to, or if they need someone to provide resources. Or I'm here if they need some guidance and if they ask, I'll do everything I can to be there. So I see my role as one of trying to establish relationships with students, where they can feel comfortable making requests of me.

Patti: Lily, in your role as a school administrator, how would you describe yourself?

Lily: Well, I see myself as a leader. I'm part of the management team and as such I am expected to be a role model. Therefore in my role modeling and especially if we're talking about dealing with "at-risk" students," I need to deal with them in a way that's respectful and caring, so that we have some chance of giving them a better opportunity than they've had in the past. Another aspect of my style is that I operate from the premise that I can never know enough about dealing with "at-risk" youth. I need to always be working on self improvement; sharpening the saw so to speak. And by doing that, I can also bring ideas back and share them with my colleagues in the classroom. Another aspect of my role is to work with the parent community. Not just in terms of "at-risk" youth but with

any issue that comes up. I dealt with a parent on the telephone today because a student whacked her kid at the bus stop. I had to try and help that parent understand what's behind the behavior that resulted in that action. So I do a lot of work with parents. I see myself as a resource.

Patti: John?

John: I think it's about creating a balance between pushing the envelope in terms of challenging the systems that we use to support students, and keeping the student at the center in all decisions. We need to be asking "What is the best thing for this student?" not "What's the best thing for you teacher or the best thing for you parent." So it's all about being the advocate for the student. But it's also about setting standards and expectations for the student and the whole system. My role as a leader also involves making sure my staff are on board in terms of what it is we're trying to achieve. That means coming to some collective agreement about what we're going to do. I have to have staff that are able to implement the vision because you can't do it by yourself. So that's my job as a leader. To get everyone on Board in terms of the vision for what's going to be done and to challenge the status quo. You need to be able to successfully challenge systems that are not effective. That's probably the biggest thing and not many administrators do that. Also, as I think Lily mentioned, it's important to keep current with research, keep current in terms of what is working.

Patti: Conor?

Conor: I have a motto that I follow and it goes something like this: The tie goes to the runner and the runner is always the student. It's a baseball thing. If there is a close play where the umpire has to make a decision on whether or not the person is out, the tie

always goes to the runner. It's what I think of whenever I'm in a tough situation involving a student. I think it reflects how I see my role and how I interpret our code of ethics. I think it also speaks to what John was saying about remembering that your responsibility is to the child first. Not the parent, not the teacher, not the institution and not society. It's to the student.

Patti: Thank you for that. My next question was going to be, "What do you think are the most important aspects of your role?" It would seem that some of you have already spoken to this in part, in your responses to my first question. I would be interested in hearing however, whether any of you have further comments to make in this regard.

Conor: Well I think that one of the most important facets of our role is to be a gentle pit bull. (Patti and several others laugh) Latch on and don't let go. "At-risk" students need someone there, someone they can approach, someone that might have the wherewithal to lead them out of the dark place into some place that's better. I think what often happens with administrators is that we get frustrated with "at-risk" students and we give up. I try really hard not to give up. There are students that come into my office that I don't like. I love them because they're people and because they need help and all the rest of it but what it is that they're doing may very well be designed to work like an engine's cry;...to elicit an adrenaline response from me. That kind of stuff isn't fun. It's easy in those kinds of circumstances to turn off. It's easy to shut the door and it's easy to blow up and say "Get lost." To expel. You know, to get rid of. So, the idea is to try not to let go. The other end of that is knowing when to let go. That's absolutely crucial. As an administrator you're sometimes faced with situations where you have to be willing to say the hard words to a parent or to a child, or to a social agency, "In my opinion I don't think this is working and might I suggest this?" That's probably the most difficult thing that we do, is to get to the point of recognition that a public institution, in this case a school, cannot serve.

Robin: The thing John talked about, the business of setting a vision and enabling people to get there, working to build a team is, I think, so important. As an administrator I want to make sure that myself, all the staff, including the support staff, and the students are working together. We should all be helping one another. So I guess that's one of the most important aspects of my role, to set the standard. If you want an outstanding school, a quality school, then I guess quality starts at the top and you have to walk the road you preach. I have to be on the side of the student and on the side of the parent and on the side of the teacher enabling everybody to work together, for the good of the student. In terms of on the side of, I mean beside, I don't mean aligning with.

Patti: What happens when the need to be beside a student and a teacher conflict, when they rub together the wrong way?

Robin: Well it's an art, but you set the problem up so it's not owned by the student or by the teacher. You approach the problem from the perspective of how it developed and you identify the responsibilities of the student and the ways the teacher can help with the problem. Very occasionally, perhaps two, three times a year, we may have to move a student out of a particular class but in most cases I think it is possible to bring the behavior, or the problem, or the issue, away from the people, look at it, dissect it and find something that each of those people can contribute to it. The student and teacher and parent sometimes, and me. Generally speaking, if we're all working on the problem then we're all a team, right?

Patti: Yes, I would think so.

Tom: I think another important aspect of the role is to be seen by the students certainly, and hopefully by the staff as well as being fair. You mustn't be seen as arbitrary. You

mustn't be seen as impulsive. You must be perceived as honest. Students don't like being manipulated. The students I work with cannot be easily conned into something. If you attempt to do that and it's discovered, then you lose a lot of your credibility. So I think you build your respect through your behavior. Everybody says you can't demand respect and you can't but on the other hand you can in the sense that if you have the title of principal, everybody recognizes that you are the boss because everybody went to school and everybody knew the principal was the boss. But apart from that particular role I think you have to be seen as a person who can deal with the person who turns up at the office door red faced, violent, and wanting to punch out everything and anybody in front of them. Your job is to have that person calm down and walk out of the office feeling they've been fairly dealt with. So I guess the most important thing is to be seen as being fair.

Alex: What's most important from my perspective is being there for the students. Being visible to them so they know who you are, so they can contact you when they need to. I would say that would be virtually number one. If you are focused on this aspect of your role then I would say you are absolutely grounded in your understanding both philosophically and pragmatically of what education is all about. Being grounded in what you're doing is so important because as an administrator you have to be able to argue articulately and be able to get your point across in order to help people see your point from many different angles. And as John and Lily pointed out, you have to continually try and keep up to date. You do this so that you can support your arguments. By arguments I don't mean imposing anything on anybody. I mean, you just have to know what you're talking about. You need to keep current because the world is changing.

Patti: Lily, what do you think are the most important aspects of your role?

Lily: One important aspect of the role is that I need to be seen as a safe person to deal with. I wouldn't want to be perceived as someone who is going to throw out blame before the conversation starts. Especially when we're talking about dealing with "at-risk" students. People need to see an administrator as somebody that's got some common sense, some wisdom. They need to feel confident that if they come to see us about something, the issue will be dealt with in a calm, sensible way. They need to see that we're organized. That's a big part of our role. We're primarily in the people business, and that involves knowing how to get along with people. It also means having social skills and being able to work as a team.

Patti: John, any final thoughts before we move on?

John: I think the most important aspects of the role have to do with the constant evaluation of where you are and not accepting the mediocrity of the day. As Alex said, things are always changing. You always want to be thinking of new things. And being able to stay energetic and passionate is important too. Also, you want to avoid becoming negative or cynical. The other thing is to be able to relax. To avoid seeing any one thing as a huge issue, even if it seems like a catastrophe. If you make the catastrophe an absolute stake in the heart kind of thing, you've blown it. Instead you just learn to carry on. When you have a down period you mustn't get down on yourself. You must be able to stay the course.

Patti: It seems as though we could spend a lot more time talking about the important aspects of your role. And although I'd like to move on to other topics at this point, I am hopeful that we will revisit this one in subsequent meetings. So if you're willing, I would like to share with you, an experience I had while working in the school system. (everyone nods) It is one that has puzzled me for some time and I would be interested in hearing

your comments about it. The experience I'm about to relate to you involved a student I had been working closely with for approximately three years. He was a person who was difficult to maintain in school as he was often in trouble with the administration and had been suspended on several occasions in the time I had known him. Despite my repeated attempts to engage him, this student would attend school sporadically and on the occasions he did arrive, he was often late. After a particularly lengthy absence, this student appeared at the office one day to check in. I happened to be in the office at the time and remember being pleased to see that he had finally arrived at school. Rather than smiling at the student or offering some sort of welcoming gesture, the clerical person the student was dealing with spoke to him in an accusatory fashion about being late. And while he was being signed in, the student in question inadvertently caught the attention of an administrator who reiterated the remarks about his lateness and demanded that he take off his hat immediately. Given that the student had disregarded the no hat rule, he was subsequently instructed to wait outside the vice principal's office, where it was evident that the incident would then be dealt with as a disciplinary matter. I remember feeling dismayed by the whole interchange and was puzzled by the fact that no one but me seemed to think it was important to attend to the fact that the student had chosen to come to school on this particular day. Both the clerical and administrative staff seemed intent on focusing their attention on the student's lateness and the fact that he had violated the rule about wearing a hat in the building. Instead of saying something like, "I'm really pleased to see that you're here. Let's see what we can do about helping you get caught up," the whole situation became this huge disciplinary issue regarding his lateness and the hat he was wearing. I was unable to make sense of it. It was as if the school staff and I were operating from two completely different ends of the spectrum. I would appreciate it if you could help me come to a better understanding of the intent behind the hat rule.

Alex: You're asking us to rationalize the irrational. (several of us laugh) That's what you're asking us to do.

Tom: Do you want to know why the hat rule exists?

Patti: Sure. That's probably a good place to start.

Tom: In my mind it's very simple and straight forward. It's not appropriate to wear a hat in a dwelling. Certainly men take their hats off when they come into the house and when they come into a building. That's the way it's always been. Traditions and cultures change but it is a sign to me of bad taste and bad manners if a man wears a hat in a house. And with the equality of the sexes, I guess you've got to say the same for the women. Now, there are a whole lot of other reasons too. If a guy is wearing a hat with a peak on it, of course you can't see what his eyes are doing or what he's doing in the classroom. It obscures him. You can't tell whether he's paying attention. Sometimes you can't even see who it is. It also might obscure the vision of the person sitting behind him somewhat. The rule about hats is also very helpful in a school because it quickly identifies intruders. Anybody walking down the hall who doesn't belong probably doesn't realize that there's a hat rule, and subsequently wears a hat. You can often tell the students who don't belong by virtue of the fact that they're wearing a hat. They're so readily identifiable. School is a place of business. It's like going into the bank, or the office. You don't see your lawyer or your banker or the person in the flower shop wearing a hat. We don't work outside here. We work inside. It's inappropriate to wear a hat.

Patti: So in my example, if you and I were working together, trying to get a student to come to school and I finally got him here, and he happened to have a hat on, and he refused to take it off for whatever reason; perhaps he was wearing it because he was

ambivalent about coming. Would you be inclined to enforce the hat rule or would you be inclined to overlook it? I imagine you'd have a lot of things to consider...

Tom: No I wouldn't have anything to consider. He would take it off.

Patti: Would anyone else like to share their perspective on this topic?

Conor: The hat rule has always been foreign to me. I come from a farming background where the only reason you would take your hat off is if it had something on it.

Alex: At the risk of sounding a bit confrontational in relation to what Tom said a minute ago, I believe that this kind of situation occurs in instances where someone believes that dealing with students is about power. Some people have a need to exercise power. I shouldn't say power. It's more like their perception of power. They not only think they have a right, they almost feel as though they have an obligation to act in this manner on the basis of their authority. It happens. If I had been that administrator's colleague, we would have had a discussion where I would have said something like, "Even if you were choked with the hat, you've got to pick your spots. Put your energy somewhere where it actually means something." Tell me, what sort of educational change does that make in the school?

Robin: I can speak specifically to the hat rule, but I'd like to first start with your observation about what happened between the student and the clerical staff person. Unfortunately our clerical staff are not hired on the basis of their empathy for students. I won't say too much about this except that we have our difficulties in this regard. So that is something we need to work very hard at in schools. We need to work with our clerical staff so that the demeanor they use with students is consistent with the demeanor we'd like all people to use with students. That comes over time. It comes with training and it

comes with articulating when I'm dissatisfied with a particular response. Now, I'll move on to the hat rule. This style of discipline represents the "my way or the highway" approach and I think we've all seen it. In the past it was seen to be the only way to control behavior. I think we're moving away from that now, to approaches where the student is at the center of the learning and in control of his or her experiences at school. We're interested in having students become intrinsically motivated, because we believe it's so satisfying for them to be involved in their own learning. So that's the direction I think we're headed in now. We've still got letter grades and those kinds of things that are extrinsic, but lots and lots more teachers and staffs are working from the model I've described. So in terms of the student who walked in with a cap, we wouldn't look to the outside by using discipline to deal with the student. We would look at the lad and say, "Hi. Good to see you again." Then we'd work on getting him into class and getting him involved.

Patti: I know that not everyone has had a chance to respond to my question but I'm getting a little concerned about how much time we have left and so I'm wondering, would you mind if we moved on to the case study I faxed to you yesterday? Have you each had a chance to look it over? (everyone nods) (see Appendix K) Before we get started with it, I would like to clarify that there is no right or wrong answer in terms of your responses to the case study information I have provided. What I've tried to do is simply provide a focus for our discussion so that I can begin to get an understanding of the kinds of information you attend to, how you prioritize issues and the manner in which you make decisions involving "at-risk" youth.

Tom: Well I guess what concerns me is that we have a young lady who is really messing up and when you are acquainted with the background here it's hardly surprising. She

doesn't have a whole lot of things going for her. For example, she's only been here three of the last twenty school days. She's in the process of dropping out.

Robin: The thing that struck me was the lack of supports available for this student. In here it says "enrollment in a mainstream academic program" but it doesn't really talk about who is the key adult in this student's school life.

Lily: I am really concerned about this child's immediate well-being; her physical and emotional well-being. The learning, going to school and passing Math nine is important but what's more important is personal safety. If she's not personally safe and reasonably healthy, nothing else is going to happen anyway.

Alex: What strikes me about this situation is that this is probably a pretty unique kid. It's surprising to me that she is surviving in school, given the academic and home pressures she must be experiencing. I was curious why she appears to be doing well in two courses and failing in three. What's the difference between those courses? How could that be? Is that a teaching difference? But anyway, my biggest concern would be holding on to her. I agree with Tom in that in my mind she's about to disappear. If we turn up the heat in any manner it's going to cause her to go.

John: From my point of view this is a classic case. I've got one I'm dealing with right now that is almost identical to this one. But I think it's important to point out that as an administrator I wouldn't be responding to the situation in the way that's been described here. I wouldn't be sending out letters. That way of dealing with the situation is old think school where the school works in isolation from other agencies. I'd be focusing my energy toward gathering together everyone who's involved, mobilizing all of our available resources to assist this student. youth and family counsellors, social workers, probation

officers, police liaison and outreach workers. We now have partnership programs to assist students like Carmen.

Patti: Conor, we haven't heard from you yet.

Conor: I agree with what John said about this being a classic case. There are probably ten kids I've run into in the last couple of years that would fit this exact profile. In terms of what interests or concerns me about this situation first of all, is the fact that I can't get the parent in to have a talk. I can't do anything unless I have the parent's permission to move forward with any kind of plan.

Patti: Okay. Thanks. John, you mentioned something a minute ago about "old think" school. Could you elaborate on that a little?

John: Old think school is based on an agrarian model where school is something we do ten months of the year from nine to three. You come to us, we don't come to you. It isn't looking at the big holistic picture of caring for a child, treating a child or nurturing them twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. That's the big difference between old think school and the kinds of partnership approaches we take now.

Patti: Thanks for explaining that. So, in terms of the circumstance prompting administrative involvement, what factors would seem most relevant to each of you in terms of your decision-making?

Alex: I would never have written a letter. It's so formal. I would've phoned there, gone there, found her mother. The letter is just asking for mom not to show up. I'd expect Carmen to rifle through the mail and throw the letter away. If I leave a message on the answering machine she'll erase it. This student has lots of skills.

John: Well first of all, I think we would try to get Carmen connected with school. We'd try to get her hooked up with someone she could connect with. That's the biggest thing. We would say to Carmen, "This is going to be a good place for you. We want you to be part of this place. Here are the expectations we have for you. What are the expectations you have for us?"

Robin: I agree. I think a significant adult in this young lady's life would be essential. I don't see any significant adult who is linked up with this person, like a counsellor or some other staff member. We have those kinds of supports in the school that can make contact with that student. We have people who go to kids' houses when they don't show up at school. And if there's no phone that kind of follow up is essential. One of us needs to go and find out why is it that Carmen isn't here.

Conor: Yeah, I would drive to the residence and see if I could raise somebody that way. I'd leave a note in the door, I'd send a double registered letter. That is a practice that we follow. If I get no response from those efforts I have no choice but to assume that mom is abdicating her responsibility to participate in planning for her child's education. I need to have somebody do that. So I would phone the Ministry for Children and Families and say, "Look, I need to have some involvement here. If I can't get the parent to do it, will you investigate and negotiate on behalf of this child?" So that would be stage one for me.

Patti: Tom, what is your take on this?

Tom: Well from my perspective I merely want to do one of two things: Either get Carmen back in school and coping satisfactorily with the regime here or get her out of the school so she doesn't contaminate a lot of other people. All things being equal I'd like the first one to happen but if it doesn't then the second one will.

Patti: Lily?

Lily: As I said earlier, my primary concern with respect to this case is that this student has so many things affecting her life right now that her chances of succeeding at school are low in my opinion. In addition to being concerned about her physical well-being, I'm concerned about Carmen's self esteem and about her becoming depressed. Given her poor school record, I think it would be important to consider placement in an alternative school. There's a rule of thumb I use in dealing with these kinds of situations and that is, if something is working, keep doing it. If it's not, then you'd better change it in a hurry.

Patti: So it sounds like there are some differences of opinion about the problem solving steps an administrator might take in relation to this case. I'm wondering, given the multitude of tasks you are responsible for on any given day, do you really have the time to chase after students like Carmen that can be elusive and difficult to engage?

Alex: I'd find a way in the daily chaos to invest time in this student and if that meant at some point driving her to find her mother to speak to her I would. I believe that if we don't take steps, personal steps, not a letter in the mail, that student is going to disappear. I guess that's why I wouldn't have sent the letter. A letter like that can be used as a formality to get rid of a student. It's a very nice, neat process. I send the letter, you don't reply, you didn't show up at the meeting, you're suspended for five days. You were required to show up at Principal's/Suspension Review, you didn't attend, therefore you are suspended indefinitely. Goodbye. And there you go. You have one less kid in school that is a major problem.

Tom: We had some students last year who just didn't come to school. You can tell them to come, their parents can tell them to come. But if they don't come I'm not going to go

out there and run around behind them with a willow switch trying to make sure they do. As you can see, I've got a lot of other things to do with my day.

Conor: We can't be primary advocates. But our code of ethics clearly states that our number one decision-making responsibility is to attend to the safety of the student, the individual. Now, the tricky part is that the safety of the individual is constantly put at odds with the safety and the efficiency of the big system.

Robin: It's looks to me as if the system has failed her actually. It's gotten to the point now with Carmen that we don't ever want it to get to. We want her to hook into school. We want her to get connected with an adult in school. We want her to hook into things at school. Getting hooked into school will help Carmen make a place for herself in the world.

John: Yeah, I agree but you've also got to factor in the fact that Carmen has already made some significant albeit negative attachments. She's living with a boyfriend, probably in an abusive relationship. Let's not forget that a good pimp can make an attachment with a female in four hours. In this short period of time he can get her to the point where she will lie for him, sell her body for him, and allow herself to be abused by him. It's a sad statement that we as educators seem to have difficulty creating attachments with kids in the thirteen years we have them in school, when pimps seem to be able to do it without much difficulty. They must have some real skills. We need skills that will allow us to effectively engage students like Carmen. We need to in a sense, sell our abilities to meet their needs in a positive way, a way that will discourage her from running to her boyfriend to have her needs met. But in terms of strategy, I would never attack her attachment to her boyfriend right off the bat.

Patti: In terms of developing strategies for dealing with this case, are there other things you might be inclined to put into place?

Lily: I would be inclined to make a call to the Ministry for Children and Families. There's enough neglect going on here that they need to be involved. I would also initiate a team meeting around this case. I would bring together the school team, which consists of administrators, counsellors, Special Ed people and sometimes probation. We'd get all the information we could and make some decision based on that information.

Tom: Well I think you would want to consider that she was in a behavioral class before she arrived at our school. The fact that she wasn't put in ours when she arrived is curious to me. There seems to have been some sort of an administrative glitch there. The behavioral class would seem to be the logical and obvious place to put her. Assuming she can be found, and assuming she can be brought back. Another thing to consider would be to suggest to Carmen that it might be to her advantage to stay out of school until the beginning of the next semester. Actually, you couldn't use this strategy with Carmen as she is too young. The law doesn't allow us to use this option with students under sixteen. But it is a strategy that can be used with older students.

Conor: If I could make contact with mom I would probably request a meeting with her. I would try to tease out information from mom about the extraordinary events that happened in their family's life that might explain some of Carmen's behaviors and symptoms. I would also want to look at the PR card going right back to the primary teacher's comments. I would want to do a complete file search to give myself the best frame of reference possible to assist Carmen. Given the fact that she is failing in three subjects and getting A's in two others, I would ask the learning assistance teacher to do a screen. Depending on the results, I might also recommend going for a formal assessment

by the school district psychologist. I would facilitate teachers getting together to start planning for what we're going to do in the interim, because there would have to be some bridging interventions. In terms of the provocative style of dress I would probably involve a youth and family counsellor. As John and Robin have suggested, I would ask the counsellor to try and establish a relationship with Carmen. Carmen would obviously have to buy into that plan. So it's pretty comprehensive. In my view she basically requires just about every kind of service that we have.

Alex: I would do everything I could to latch her on personally to someone at school that she could speak to. That person wouldn't be me, just because of the nature of my day. I'm not always there in the way that I would like to be for students like Carmen. So it would have to be someone like a junior support worker or a counsellor or a peer mentor. Someone that she can at least touch bases with. I think it would be crucial to just take absolute baby steps with this person. I'd start with just one or two blocks a day. I'd sit down with her and try to build a timetable that she would agree with. One that she would like. My approach right or wrong, would be to literally bend over backwards to do everything we could to accommodate her needs. What are *her* needs? I don't see her needs anywhere here. It's all the school's needs. Be on time, pass, fit our timetable. That doesn't work for a student who may be prostituting at night.

Robin: In terms of strategies in working with students like Carmen, I find I learn a lot from reading about and thinking about what other successful people do. I read about a school in California some years ago, where a group of educators sat down and said, "Okay we have sixty people on staff here and we have about sixty students that are "at-risk". Let's put one adult with each one of those sixty kids." Well it made a tremendous difference. With Carmen, we didn't connect her with school somehow. Now, she hasn't been here very long. It says she just transferred the year before. The teacher who saw her

standing on the street corner needs to do something about that. She needs to utilize some of the supports we have. Talk to the social worker. Talk to the Youth and Family Worker. Talk to Carmen's homeroom teacher. Get together a group of people and make a plan that asks, "What are we going to do about Carmen?" We need to do something for Carmen. We cannot let her be on the street and hooked in with this drug addict. We've got to do something for Carmen. Get a plan. Usually there's something you can do, but you have to make a plan. A lot of people have to buy into helping. And then one significant person has to take Carmen in and make a difference with her. It needs to be somebody she's going to trust, someone she'll respond to.

John: The one thing I would add to that is the question of what is Carmen going to do for herself, with us, in changing any of this kind of behavior. If in fact she wants to. Now it might be forced upon her in terms of the fact that she might be on probation. She might be on to other things, but we'd still get her in and say, "Listen, here are the expectations."

The tape recorder beeps, indicating that the meeting will soon come to an end. I thank the participants again for coming and we schedule another meeting.

Chapter Four

Roundtable Discussion #2

Patti: Thank you all for being here. For this meeting I would like to begin with the second and final case study (see Appendix L) and then move on to other topics. Has everyone had a chance to look it over? (everyone nods) Okay let's get started then. As with our last discussion, the tape recorder will beep at the end of the hour. With respect to the case studies, I think you'll find that the questions will be similar to the ones I asked last time. My objective is to have them be open-ended, allowing for as full a discussion as possible. So my first question is, What are your thoughts regarding this student and the circumstances prompting administrative involvement?

Robin: Well it's a very sad picture. He's only fourteen. That's quite a picture of a fourteen year old. I want to go to the last paragraph because it seems as though I'm supposed to make a decision about what to do. I will spend time initially listening to mother. She's obviously upset. When our children are hurt, we're upset. So I'm going to be listening to mom, but I would direct her back to what's the best thing for Lyle and ask her if I can deal with the problem in a different way than what she has suggested. Obviously I'm going to be dealing with the students who were arguing in the hallway with Lyle. I'm also going to be dealing with Lyle directly. He's been to seventeen schools or something. He needs some stability. He needs a way of continuing on in this school, and if it's not his choice to leave and be in home schooling, then that's not a good idea for mom to make that choice for him. There are some medical concerns that appear here but I'm not too worried about them. If indeed he has HIV or whatever, he could attend the school without everybody needing to know that. The administration would know of course and we would have to organize his life so that no one else was in jeopardy. If

other parents found out about it and made a big deal about it, then it might have to come to the School Board's attention. From the information presented here, it looks as though it's an assumption somebody's making around facts they don't have. If I was given them as facts I would deal with them as facts. I would suspect that a lot of adults are already involved in this student's life. I might be inclined to draw a picture by contacting some of the schools that he has attended. I would obviously like to get the opinion of the father, who it says here is an administrator in a school. Given the information provided, I don't have enough of a picture yet of what's happening to determine exactly the path I would go, but I would concentrate initially on getting as much information as I could and making the best decision for Lyle, which may be stability in our school.

Conor: Did you invent Lyle?

Patti: Well, as with Carmen, Lyle represents a composite of a number of youth I have worked with over the course of my career. Why do you ask?

Conor: Well, I particularly like this one. The subtitles here are extraordinary. I spent a lot of time on it and made lots of notes. There are so many potential heavy dangers associated with this case that would cause me concern. There's potential negligence, there's potential mutilation as a result of past abuse experienced. There's also potential regarding the exploration of a sexuality issue. And there's certainly a potential for victimization here. Given the fact that there's a victim pattern that's alluded to by the parent, Lyle could be passive aggressive. There's also a negligence issue to be concerned with on several levels, under the guise of living in an "artsie," non-conformist family. It appears to me that Lyle is being abused through constant movement from one location to another. I understand the nomadic impulse but in seventeen schools? I've never seen more than eleven on a PR card. I'll talk for a minute now about the HIV potential. The

rumour about HIV and the fact that the needle came out of somebody's coat indicates potential around the use of heroin. And heroin has been a particular problem in this city in the last six months amongst our youth. We currently have three students who are abusing heroin that I know of. Now, let's talk for a minute about censorship in terms of how Lyle chooses to decorate himself and express himself through his art work. When you step in as an administrator and respond, therein lies a very muddy, murky line of discretion. In terms of the slash marks down Lyle's arms, I would say I would have an instant responsibility to find out what they were and why they're there. And my response would depend in part on how fresh they were. If they were healing, that's something I would get at immediately and likely with Lyle. If they were healed I would probably try to get at it by another route. Potentially with mom or dad, keeping in mind that if there was abuse in the past, dad could have potentially been the abuser. This is phenomenally complex. You would have to have a conversation with the parent, especially given the fact that he was at seventeen schools before he got to you. With mother saying she's about to go for number eighteen, I think that it would be my responsibility to point out that maybe that's not in Lyle's best interest at this point. I would want to say to her something like, "Come on, give us a chance. We have a program in place. Let's give it a rip. I think we can make things work for Lyle." You'd also have to deal with the fight between the students. That's the bottom line. You would have to deal with the needle. So there's lots and lots of stuff going on in here but there are four things I need to check out. The drugs and the needle, the vertical lines, the fight between the students and the mother's stated intent to pull her child out of the school.

Patti: It sounds to me as though the things you have identified are all issues that pertain to safety, and particularly safety with respect to Lyle. Physical as well as emotional safety.

Conor: Oh definitely.

Patti: I'd like to hear from some others. What interests or concerns you about this situation?

John: I guess what hit me right off the bat was the culture, the ethos of the place. That was a concern to me. I evaluated what was happening in terms of how everything got escalated out of proportion so quickly. Although I deal with students like Lyle all the time, I don't often have situations where kids are slapping, hitting each other or pushing people into lockers. I don't have that kind of thing happening because the staff and I have built a culture in the school where things don't happen like that. So that was my first response when I read it. The other thing that occurred to me was, no one seems to have a plan with respect to how this situation and others like it will be dealt with. You have to have a plan for these sorts of situations because they're going to happen. It seems to me that people are operating as though everything is fine. Then, when things happen that are not fine, everybody has to go into react mode. I like to assume from the start that everything is not fine. Then when things happen I am prepared. I am prepared to own the problem. My staff are prepared to own the problem. We'd take the position with Lyle that he is also going to own the problem. We're not going to buck pass.

Patti: So if you had all those people gathered in a room case conferencing for example, because there had been these critical incidents happening, how would you be inclined to manage that meeting?

John: First of all, with a student demonstrating all this sort of stuff you're talking about here, he would be designated in order to be eligible for some form of funding. The teachers and I would sit down with Lyle and his mother and set some goals. Everyone would know what to expect, including the student in terms of what everyone was going to be working toward in the next several weeks. So you see, when you have a plan in place

from the start, incidents like the ones you describe here would have been nipped in the bud long before now. The bomb wouldn't have gone off. You would have seen fuses going out. You would have dealt with two or three of these concerns already. We deal with the early warning signs however trivial they may seem, right away. With a little luck the crisis you describe here would have been avoided although regrettably this goal isn't always attainable.

Patti: Alex?

Alex: My first thought was, and maybe I'm wrong but I don't think he would be at my school. The situation seems too severe. Lyle's life is such that I don't think he would be making a choice to be in school at all. Even if he's fourteen, I think he would be on the street or elsewhere. A student like that would probably be subject to tons of ridicule and peer pressure. But if he were at the school, I would wonder, like John, why there hasn't been any intervention to date. There are a lot of support mechanisms that we would probably have put into place one, two or three years ago for this student, as opposed to having this incident just happen. A student like this would have a long case history of some form of intervention. People should have been talking about this student long before now. Previous intervention should have included things like having him linked up with a peer mentor or a peer counsellor, and having him assigned to an adult in the school, someone who has had time to be in regular contact with him.

Patti: One of the problems with this student however is that intervention is difficult because he moves around a lot.

Alex: Well if he's moving around that much, there would be significant gaps in his learning. Any student who moves around that much has missed a lot of school. And transition from one school to another is very difficult. I think moving, in terms of the

stressors in life is right up there. So, given that this student would have missed a lot of school, we can assume that unless he's incredibly brilliant he would be significantly behind academically. I would ensure he had a case manager that could coordinate support for him. Given his multiple needs, I think he should be placed in a behavior program where he could have access to specific kinds of support.

Patti: So if he was placed in a behavior program at your school and you were presented with the circumstances I outlined, how do you think you would respond?

Alex: The first question I would have is, is this the best environment for him? It's not intended to be a negative in terms of me not wanting this student in my school. It has more to do with my concerns regarding the pressures he will be subjected to. This student as with the last one, needs to be handled with kid gloves. In this case I would probably go directly to district screening with this student and ask at the district level, what types of programs we could put together to help him.

Patti: Lily?

Lily: Although the descriptors are perhaps a bit more bizarre with this case it's fairly typical in terms of the kinds of situations we deal with. For example, it's a regular occurrence today to have students dress or mark themselves like you have described here. So in terms of dealing with somebody who dresses this way, if the dress didn't fit within the dress code, you'd have to make the call on it. And the terminology I would use around that is that it's either appropriate or inappropriate for the school setting. If it's inappropriate, it's probably because it makes somebody feel uncomfortable. So it's not a personal value statement on my part or on the part of the clerical person. It's bigger than that. You'd probably find a level of consensus around what's considered appropriate or inappropriate. So for example, if the secretaries are feeling uncomfortable, most of the

rest of the school staff will be as well. We have a code of conduct as I imagine most schools do, that provides guidelines for these kinds of issues. Ours was developed in consultation and collaboration with the various stakeholders; including the parent's association, students and staff.

Patti: Tom?

Tom: Well this student does not seem to have an awful lot going for him. It says here that in nine years he's been enrolled in seventeen different schools. So he's moved around like a jack in the box. However, it also says that he's been in my school for the last one and a half years. So all things considered, he's actually been here a lot longer than he's been anywhere else. So I gather that this is a fairly rootless character but if he has the capacity to put down any roots at all, it's here more than anywhere else. In terms of some of these other things that have been said about him I'm not sure how to respond. I am not well equipped for example to analyze or interpret weird art, other than to say it's weird. In any event I think Lyle needs some help and I don't think he's going to get it from home. I am most concerned with the mother's statement regarding wanting to haul him out of school. It's not made clear here what role his rather more conventional father seems to have in the situation. His father is a principal. He obviously hasn't been moving around all over the place but what part he plays, and what the relationship is between the father and the mother, is unknown at this point.

Patti: Given the multitude of issues associated with this case, wouldn't you be tempted to just turn your head the other way and let the mother withdraw him?

Tom: I've certainly had situations with students where that approach would be tempting. There are cases where one tries a lot of things and nothing seems to work.

Patti: Thanks for your honesty.

Tom: My pleasure ma'am.

Patti: I would like to move on now and ask some questions that pertain to the topic we discussed last time, that is, I am interested in the whole notion of how you perceive your role and how this relates to the manner in which you deal with "at-risk" youth. I was particularly interested in something Conor mentioned last time about knowing when to "latch on" to students and knowing when to let go. Do you think you could say a little more about this aspect of your work?

Conor: Sure. In some ways you could liken my role to that of a police officer on a call. If I've got a youth who's done something I can have him face down, I mean, not physically but figuratively, face down in the grass with handcuffs on, with my knee in the small of his back, talking hard. Or alternatively I can figuratively be hugging and supporting him. It all depends on what I perceive the situation to warrant, and I need to do all the research I possibly can before I act. I had exactly those kinds of choices to make today. I had a young lad who laid his hands on his mother in a domestic argument and as a result was booted out of the house. Once the police became involved, I was not required to deal with the legal or punitive aspects of the assault. My role in this case instead became one of telling the student how to go about fixing things up with his mom and giving him ten bucks to take her out for coffee. What that student needed was someone to help. On the other hand, fifteen minutes after almost getting teary in the situation I just described, I had another student who'd been farting around in an art class over an extended period. In that case I went to the max. I phoned the parents and asked for a parent meeting. With a strong youth, one who I know is well parented, who just happens to be kind of missing the tone that they need to strike, I go hard. And there's no

mercy. I say to them, "This is absolutely unacceptable. Your parents are coming in. You were fairly warned."

Patti: So what accounts for the difference in the choices you make? You say it's about perception.

Conor: I would say most of it comes from experience. Seeing lots of situations. It also has to do with confidence. Maybe it's about how I was parented as well.

Patti: It seems as though administrators have a lot of discretion available to them in deciding what kind of call you will make with respect to a particular student. I am particularly interested in the process by which you make those kinds of decisions. For example, what kinds of considerations enter into the mix when you decide to act one way or another with a particular student?

Conor: This is going to sound bizarre but mostly it's an intuitive thing. I think you just know what is appropriate with one student and what is not appropriate with another.

Patti: I would like to hear what perception others have in relation to these two topics.

John: In my view, legally there isn't a lot of discretion available to us but yes, you're absolutely right. People do take it.

Patti: Well I know that you have various policies that you are expected to follow but wouldn't you agree that you have a lot of discretion available to you in interpreting those policies?

John: Yes. I have a lot of power in deciding whether or not I suspend a student for a given offense. I think it's important to point out however that teachers also have a lot of

discretionary power with respect to discipline. When a teacher sends a student to my office, they know I have to do something. I can't just send the student back to class. If I don't support my teachers I can expect to get burned big time. I think it's a power thing all the way along, against the student. Even the lunch room coordinators who are hired to supervise the students at lunch time have a lot of power over students. I had seven students sent down to my office yesterday by an over zealous lunch room coordinator who appears to love to walk around outside and bust kids. Yesterday she sent these seven students to me for suspicion of drug use. Board policy states that if a student is suspected of drug use they are to be suspended for a minimum of three days. No questions asked. No discretion involved here. The lunch room coordinator has made the allegation and I am obligated to respond. When I talked with them about it, they neither smelled nor looked stoned to me. Although they seemed fine to me I was obliged to report the incident nonetheless. I don't feel there is any discretion on my part when there is a conflict between a student and a staff member. The student doesn't have a chance. When a teacher turns on a student, there's an unwritten rule that you have to back the teacher. And this rule applies with respect to my supervisors as well. When I decide to take a hard line with a student I expect my assistant superintendent and my superintendent to support me. Similarly, when the superintendent and the assistant superintendent go to the Board with a decision, they expect support for their decisions as well, and on it goes up the line. When the Board goes to the Ministry, they expect to be supported. It's an old boy's network. So you're right. I do have a lot of discretionary power. And that becomes a problem in circumstances where you have an administrator who's a loose cannon.

Tom: Having to respond to conflicts between teachers and students is one of the most difficult parts of our job. It is particularly difficult when you believe the student to be right and the staff person to be in the wrong in a given situation and yet you're seen to be

supporting the teacher. You have to do some careful juggling in those situations. And while you can't undercut the teacher completely, I think you also have to do what's right.

Conor: Teachers, especially ones who have been in the system for a long time have been enculturated to view vice principals as disciplinarians. However it's pretty clear, given the culture that we exist in right now, that vice principals are not primarily ass kickers anymore. They're counsellors and system supporters. Although the nature of the role is changing, we're still in charge of ensuring that school expectations are met and that the tone of the school is maintained. We haven't given up on standards. However, you can perform those functions without having to be authoritarian. You don't have to belittle a student in order to get him to do something. And although there have been circumstances in which I have needed to exercise my authority in a rather crisp manner, in most cases I find that I can get the job done and still be nice about it. As a matter of fact I'm more likely to be misty eyed than crisp when I suspend someone. Suspending a student really bothers me. I think it is contrary to my character in a certain sense, to actually have to say to a student, "You can't be here for three days." But I also understand that it's a necessary part of my job. Getting back to what John and Tom have said about working with teachers, I believe that teachers and administrators can disagree but if teachers perceive that you're not working hard or that you're not true to whatever it is that you profess to be about, you're cooked. It's over. You might as well leave if that happens. And there are teachers in this school who look at me as though they're looking right through me. One by one I'll try to lure them into my office to have a talk.

Patti: To try to win them over?

Conor: Well yes. To present my logic to them and have it say, this is who I am. I'll also let them know that I'll try to look after their needs if that's what they need of me. I'd

rather they looked after themselves thanks but if they need some of that from me, I'm willing to negotiate. But I'll also be very clear on how far I'll go on certain things. For example, one of the critiques that you might get from a teacher is, "You don't support me." But in response to that I'll say to them, "It's really difficult for me when you send students down to my office expecting me to discipline them and I have no idea why they're there." In that circumstance it appears to me that the teacher has just basically divested him or herself of the responsibility of looking after the student for forty minutes. So when the student comes in and I say to them "What happened?" and I only get the student's version of the events that took place, chances are it's going to go how the student needs it to go. And I tell teachers that. So there's the floating line. That's the weird thing about all of this. We have so much power, and that makes our decision-making so critical because depending on how we choose to respond, we can literally affect the outcome of how a student's life goes. So the question that one might ask at this point is, were the eleven people who chose me to do this job a Solomon's house of wise folk who made the right call or were they a bunch of goofs who just took a shot in the dark and ended up with the wrong person? (several people in the room laugh) And do you know what? In some districts, in some schools, and in some situations, you really have to wonder.

Tom: My discretionary ability allows me to negotiate with students. I might say to a student for example, "You're suspended for five days," and then allow them to negotiate it down to two. There's no such thing as an absolutely immutable rule.

Patti: Could you talk a bit more about that?

Tom: Well in life we see that everything is negotiable. And while everything is discussionable there are some pretty firm, fast rules that you adhere to. But there are

always some situations that cause you to reflect on the absolute following of a rule, in terms of how good is it for all concerned. An example would be, shortly before a major event at a school I worked at some time ago, the key student involved was caught smoking pot in the school. Well the rules are that the student is automatically given a five day suspension and is not allowed to participate in any extra curricular activity for a period of one year. Because it was in the school's interest to have the student in question participating in the event, we changed the wording of the rule so it said *may* not be allowed to participate as opposed to will not be allowed. So in cases like these, it's important to have a back up position. Well, not a back up position per se but a position in which to back up into if you have to.

Patti: That's a lovely example and I think it relates to an issue I have been thinking about where from time to time, the needs of the school may conflict with the needs of a particular student. I imagine this kind of situation could result in some really tough calls for administrators. Can we talk about this as a group? (everyone nods) I'll provide an example that might assist us in this regard. When I worked as a youth and family counsellor I heard of a situation in which it was rumored that a female student in a particular school was prostituting and as a result of this presumed activity, the vice principal wanted her removed. The youth and family counsellor who was involved had an interest in having her maintained in the school because this person viewed it as one of the few positive things occurring in the student's life. When the youth and family counsellor queried the vice principal regarding the concerns surrounding the student's rumored activity, he said something to the effect of, "We cannot have her here. Can you imagine the problems we would have if another parent in this community became aware of the fact that we were allowing someone who was prostituting to attend this school?" When I heard about this interchange, I was initially puzzled about the vice principal's response but later concluded that unlike youth and family counsellors, administrators have to be

concerned with more than just the well-being of students. They also have to be concerned with the well-being of the institution. Do you want to comment on that?

Conor: Well the situation you describe concerns me because as I said when we met last time, although we can't be primary advocates, our code of ethics clearly states that our number one responsibility as administrators is the safety of the individual. And as long as the student is not harming anybody else at school, it doesn't matter what the parents think. It's nobody's business. The administrative response you describe is characteristic of the kind of remark I would have expected to hear ten or fifteen years ago. I've got several hundred students attending my school. I'm sure that somebody out there has HIV. I'm sure that I've got young men and young women who are prostituting themselves. They may not even know that they're doing it. They may not know that trading favours of certain sorts for other favours or for money or for drugs is prostitution. We've got students who steal and fence goods. We've got students who are connected to the criminal underground. All of those kinds of things are happening and we don't expel students because they're involved in those activities.

Patti: Well in this case there certainly seemed to be a conflict between what might be done for the student and this whole other thing about what was good for the school in terms of what the circumstance of the student might look like to other people.

Alex: I would put it on the parent to convince me why the student in question doesn't deserve an education. I would say something like "Go ahead. Convince me why I should deny this child an education because of something they're doing outside of school life." The key to this whole issue is, are we a school or not? Do we provide education to students or not? Yes we do. Is this a student? Yes. Do they want to come to the school? Well, then the parent would have to mount a very convincing case as to why that

student should be denied the privilege of attending our school. I guess someone could argue that this student was going to recruit other students or that she might be bringing an element to the school that's going to start all kinds of trouble. So if the parent wanted to mount a really strong decent argument on those grounds I would stick by my guns but I would go to the district level and run it by them. My call would be that this student deserves an education and we're here to provide it. What the other parent thinks is irrelevant. If you needed some direction with respect to this case, you would just look at the School Act. In order for her to be expelled, you would have to prove that she was seriously damaging the conduct of the school.

Patti: Then let me ask: During the course of your work in the school system, have any of you ever come across a student that in your opinion simply didn't belong, and if so, could you give me a profile of such a student?

Tom: Well I'd like to offer an example I'm dealing with right now that I think speaks clearly to the issues you have raised today. It is a situation where a student in my school was suspended for attacking another student from another school. The violent act resulted in repercussions both at school and within the court system. Eventually it resulted in a conviction. Now that student appeared to learn nothing from that experience and has if anything become more violent. Students are justifiably afraid of him. A week or so later this student was involved in an incident elsewhere in town where he beat up or participated in beating up someone, to the point where they became hospitalized. The student who was assaulted doesn't go to the same school as the student who has the violent history. So the issue becomes, do we as a school have the right or the jurisdiction to respond to this incident? On the one hand you could say that the incident occurred outside of our school and hence has nothing to do with us. You could argue that who this student beats up in his own time is incidental. The student I am describing is not

disruptive in class, attends regularly and is doing reasonably well in his studies. As far as his in-school activities go, he has not yet posed a threat to anyone. So you could argue that the violent act that occurred outside school is not our business. On the other hand you could argue that this student is clearly a menace in that he has a reputation for violence. So you have to ask yourself, is this a person who enhances the tone of our school? The answer probably is no. Should we throw him out on the basis of that? That's another question. I'm conferring with colleagues as well as looking at other placements such as alternative school or correspondence. I don't want him here. I think he's bad for the school. I think he's a dangerous person to have around. I think he's going to kill somebody one of these days because he doesn't know when to stop. Of course one also has to consider that the statistical possibilities of a negative outcome are probably higher if we expel him than if we attempt to work with him. By saving the students of the school from the contamination that he can provide, you're sending him off to have him attempt to survive on his own, which he probably won't do. But the point is that we have tried to work with him. We've tried a number of strategies. He was out of the school for a good period of time and was brought back in on the understanding that he'd agree to keep his nose extremely clean which, on school property he has done. Off school property he hasn't. So one of the questions that raises itself is, where does the authority of the school end? As I've indicated, my preference would be that he go. I think if he were to leave the school the whole student body would heave a collective sigh of relief. I think we have a lot of very nice students in this school and I worry that rubbing shoulders with this kind of person could result in some negative consequences. From the point of view of the school, it's nice not to have those sort of people around. And although everyone is entitled to make mistakes, in this case you've got a student who systematically goes around brutally assaulting people.

Patti: You have provided us with an excellent example of the kinds of dilemmas you are faced with in the context of your day-to-day practice. Thank you. I would like to hear from some of the others. In the course of your work have you come across students who simply shouldn't be at your school?

Robin: I have never met a student that I could say did not belong, and I've worked with a lot of challenging kinds of behavior. I don't think an administrator has the right to decide who does and who doesn't belong. I don't think that's fair.

Lily: In the 1980's the School Act changed. The law now reflects the position that all children have the right to an education. The exception would be in the case where a student poses a significant safety threat to others but the onus is on the school to prove that.

John: I think the challenge here is to keep the student's needs at the center. However, as with any other management system, the education system struggles with this. Management systems by their nature have difficulty cutting the client at the center. It's easy to lose sight of this and have the organization end up at the center. Schools are no different in this regard. If you talk to school janitors, they'll tell you that schools are wonderful places when there are no students present because when they're not there, all the floors glimmer. (we all laugh)

Patti: Thank you all for your insightful comments on this topic. My next question relates to the one we have just been discussing. I am wondering about the tension between the need to have a school run smoothly so it gets the job done and the practice of forsaking some of that in the interests of being more student-centered. For example, I'm thinking about students who are chronically late. If we were to come at the problem from a school policy perspective, we would likely be oriented toward minimizing the disruption that

results when students arrive late. We would create rules about being on time and develop consequences for lateness. On the other hand if we were to come at the issue from a student-centered perspective, we might be inclined to put the needs of the individual student ahead of our need for conformity. We might work out a way to creatively accommodate the needs of a particular student who has difficulty getting to school on time so that they too could experience success in the school environment. So I'm interested in how you juggle and balance those priorities within the context of your practice?

Robin: There are some concepts in our Ministry mandate statement that implicitly address the need to focus on what is best for society and I'm sure this compromises to some extent, the needs of the individual. So there's that. But I think as John mentioned earlier in our meeting, that's not just true of schools. I think that's true of society in general. Individuals who are artists or inventors for example probably have a terrible time with the macro demands of society because they don't like to work in those ways. Another example would be teenagers. Their sleeping patterns and requirements are such that they don't want to be at school at eight or nine in the morning. We should be running our schools for teenagers somewhere between noon and five or six or something like that. But I'm told that if we did such things, the system would fall apart. It would mean that the bus drivers would have an extended day and all of the rest of it. So we say we're student-centered but we still make students get up at seven-fifteen so they can arrive at school on time. The Year 2000 research was very good for us however. The foundation papers, which were in fact the best piece, identify students as individuals who learn in different ways and at different rates. The mandate statement that's prescribed by the Minister of Education is also useful. I couldn't quote it exactly but I know it does talk about pluralistic societies and social conscience and things like that. I think it has the very best of societal living for individuals at heart. It looks at multi-cultural issues as well as

gender balance. Unfortunately however, it doesn't talk too much about individuals who don't easily fit into the system.

Patti: So what happens when the needs of an "at-risk" student bump up against the needs of the larger system?

Robin: Their individual needs are always bumping up against the requirements of society and if you will, in the smaller sense, what the Ministry of Education requires us to do. We can't let students come to school just one hour a day. Well, we can and do of course, but in terms of the broad statement, no we can't. "At-risk" students have to learn to work within a set of guidelines that have been set by curriculum developers for what they should learn in this province. That doesn't mean we can't give them directed studies because we do. But inevitably the student is going to bump up against the curriculum base that the Ministry prescribes for us. However, I think we're now doing a better job of taking special cases and petitioning them on behalf of the individuals involved. Older learners who come back to school serve as a good example. Those who have not progressed formally beyond grade eight can take a couple of courses and get credit for grade twelve because they can demonstrate competency. So I think there are people in the school system who are working very hard on behalf of individuals. But it's true that we will miss some. "At-risk" students need a lot of consideration for their individual situations and circumstances, and the Ministry of Education doesn't really help with that. But that's what the people are there for. Administrators and teachers can get involved on behalf of individuals. That's what our jobs entail.

Conor: I agree. I think administrators are beginning to understand more and more that a significant part of their role is one of student advocate, but the ethic of the right of the individual versus the need of the many, and the need to keep the "big ball rolling" is the

focal point of virtually every decision we make as administrators. When you boil it down it looks something like this: “Okay. I want to meet the needs of so and so, but how does that conflict with the greater picture?” I would say that almost every discretionary call we make involves that kind of decision-making.

The recording device beeps, signaling that it is time to end our discussion. We set another time to get together and conclude the meeting.

Chapter Five

Roundtable Discussion #3

Patti: Hello everyone. It is a pleasure to see you all again. If we're ready to begin, I'll turn on the recording device. (the room becomes quiet and the participants focus their attention on me) I have several topics in mind for our discussion tonight so I'd like to get started right away. During our discussions, I notice that the practice of staying focused on the needs of the student seems to come up a lot. I'm wondering if someone can tell me where this style of doing things originated?

Robin: I think it may have been the Sullivan Report (1988) that first talked about listening to the needs of the students.

Alex: The Sullivan Commission (1988) had a strong, cohesive team with a wonderful message about what it means to educate students, and that message has lived on. They created a model that moved away from the traditional authoritarian one where teachers stood at the front of a classroom dictating knowledge to students. The Sullivan Commission focused instead on more cooperative learning strategies and the student becoming more actively engaged. The main thing about the Sullivan Report was that it had a tone to it, of really being student centered. The tone of the document is such that you know it was written by knowledgeable educators who care about children. I like to read stuff like that. But when you read a document like that and then read policy or other ministerial documents, you say to yourself, "Wow, where is this coming from? How can this be possible?" The ministerial documents just don't have a practical reality to them. And while some of the papers written for the Sullivan Report are pretty philosophical, you accept that because that's what they are. I think people have forgotten just how much

work went into the Sullivan Report and how good that work really was. It's really unfortunate that it got turfed.

Patti: Turfed?

Alex: By turfed I mean it got thrown out. A group of talented educators got together and did all this fabulous work, but publicly it was viewed as unacceptable and got turfed. But it's interesting. I think a lot of the philosophies associated with the Sullivan Report have actually come to fruition. They seem to have emerged over time. Like the anecdotal report cards for example. They didn't go over well with some of the public so they disappeared or were altered in form but yet, when you look back twelve or so years later, they're back. It has happened quietly. The public doesn't seem to be aware of it. I wonder how many other curriculum changes were quietly implemented. I'm not personally aware of how many curriculum changes were implemented and how many got lost. I think a significant portion of the direction outlined in the Sullivan Report, especially the principles of learning and the parts of it that were concerned with meeting the diversity of needs in the classroom are present in terms of how we do things today. Concepts like the active engagement of the learner and the idea that individuals learn at different rates are very much a part of how we educate youth today. Many of the individuals who worked on the Sullivan Report are administrators who work here locally, in our school system. If you were to meet or talk with them, you'd find that they still have the same ideas. The bright spots in our education system are those instances where their ideas have been implemented. I think of some of the things we do around IEP's and some of the things we do around prolonging assignments; giving a student an incomplete instead of a fail is very much part of the philosophy contained within the Sullivan Report. It's very supportive of the student. And it's very different from the traditional way of doing things where "a fail is a fail if you don't have it done by November 3rd at three o'clock."

We don't hear that much anymore. Which is good. I like it. And all the fear and concern around the chaos that would ensue if you were to personalize learning has no basis in reality. We manage and we do it quite well.

Patti: Thanks so much for that information Alex. I'd like to move on now to my next question. When someone uses the term "at-risk" in relation to a student, what do you think they mean?

Lily: "At-risk" in my school setting usually goes along with "at-risk" of not completing school on time. It also involves students who have a personal safety problem. It also includes students who are in school but they're not progressing normally. They're failing courses, they're missing school, and they're usually in some kind of conflict with people in the school so even though they're here, it isn't going well and they're probably not going to last very long. "At-risk" students are also usually experiencing some kind of conflict at home. So there's usually an issue on the home front and it could be very serious. It could involve a personal safety issue. These students are often "at-risk" in terms of the law as well, so often times the police know who they are. They are also typically on probation. There is often a court worker or a counsellor involved. These students also seem to be in more physical and emotional conflicts with their peers than other students. They are also typically the victims or instigators of some kind of violent act. They are the ones who are getting beat up on the sidewalk or the ones you've heard have swarmed another student. Students can also be "at-risk" in terms of their personal health. A lot of "at-risk" students are not healthy. They miss a lot of school. They have low self esteem and suffer from depression. There are also problems with nutrition and sleep disturbance. They often don't receive proper medical or dental care.

Tom: It means that a student is not adhering to the norms and the standards that we regard as acceptable at our school. They're screwing up in some way. It could be behaviorally, it could be in terms of their schooling. Perhaps they're not going to class or they're not doing the work. They could be failing everything in sight. At a behavioral level they're aggressive. They could conceivably be into drugs. They're hanging around with a group of ne'er do wells. I guess that's what it means to me. They're just not functioning well.

Robin: For me it means falling outside of the systems we have in place to support students. Some students don't seem to be helped by the systems we have. They don't seem to fit into them. Those systems don't seem to support who they are and how they live and how they learn. And if we don't change what we have in place or do something differently for those students, then down the line the problem will be exacerbated and the outside of school problems will probably drown them.

Conor: I would define the criterion for "at-risk" as anything that affects a student's ability to be successful at school. It could be an internal state that puts a student at-risk or it could be external. An example of an internal state causing someone to be considered "at-risk" would be behavioral difficulties resulting from the onset of schizophrenia. An external factor might involve something like a group of students who were in a car accident that resulted in one of them developing post concussive syndrome. We've had students that have been beaten. We've had students that have been sexually abused. Being considered "at-risk" can also be a short term kind of thing. It can literally involve somebody having a bad moment or a bad experience such as having a relative or a friend of a friend pass away. When Kurt Cobain committed suicide there was a huge problem in public schools. People were fearful that some students would make sympathetic suicidal gestures or attempts.

Alex: From my perspective, any student in the school can be “at-risk” at any time. There are so many pressures at play in terms of what a student has to go through at this stage of their life. Students have to make a transition from a setting where there’s generally a fair amount of support to one where they’re largely responsible for managing themselves. Then there’s peer pressure, getting a job and so forth. So to me “at-risk” is sometimes an event. “At-risk” is anyone who is experiencing difficulty to the point where their academics or attendance is being seriously affected.

John: I think the whole notion of “at-risk” is changing. Students can be educationally “at-risk”, or behaviorally “at-risk”. It’s sort of a hodge podge of all sorts of things and for me it’s problematic because I don’t like labeling students. Although I should mention that it is necessary to label them in order to have them designated for Ministry funding. We in fact have to prove they’re “at-risk”. So when someone uses the term “at-risk”, in my mind it doesn’t give me any information at all. It just means to me that we have to talk further, have a dialogue about what that person means.

Patti: I think we’ve heard from everyone now on the definition of “at-risk”. Just quickly, before we move on, would you each provide me with a statement that you believe to be true in relation to “at-risk” youth?

Alex: “At-risk” students are worth it, they need support. They’re why I’m here.

John: When the system isn’t working for “at-risk” students, they vote with their feet by dropping out.

Tom: “At-risk” youth have very poor people skills. They’re rude, they’re abrasive, their language is foul.

Patti: Conor?

Conor: They don't want to be "at-risk". They may not know it however. I refuse to believe that children choose to be in crisis. I refuse to believe that people want to have bad things happen to them or that they want to do bad things.

Lily: "At-risk" students have not been normalized in terms of their social behaviors. They need a zillion normal contacts and pervasive caring, consistently, over a period of time.

Robin: The term "at-risk" indicates a failure of the system, not the student.

Patti: Thank you for your thoughts on that. In terms of my next question, I'd like to know, what you think the source of difficulty is with respect to "at-risk" youth. What kinds of things for example, would account for their struggles in getting to school, arriving on time, getting along with teachers or meeting other school expectations?

John: I think a big part of the problem with "at-risk" students is that they have parents who, rather than face their problems, have a tendency to turn away from them. Robert Bly has a new book out that speaks to this issue. He talks about siblings raising siblings. The question he asks in his book is: "Where have all the adults gone?" His thesis is that we have a whole generation of people out there who have rejected their adulthood and the responsibilities that go along with it.

Lily: I think the primary source of difficulty also has to do with these students having lived their life in an environment of chaos and disorder. They haven't been provided with any kind of stability or clear values that would serve to guide their behavior. As John has suggested, I think they've been severely let down by the adults in their lives, beginning in infancy. Many of them have been abused. There are students that come to us from seemingly good homes but when you look into things a little further, you find out that

that's not the case. There are two parents at home, the student has his or her own bedroom, and they get three squares a day, but somewhere within that environment there's some serious dysfunction present on the part of the adults. Another whole area that seems to relate to a student being "at-risk" is in cases where they have a learning disability. You often find that "at-risk" students often haven't been successful in the school system all the way along or that they're slow learners. By the time they get to high school they've been failures at school for a long time and as a result their behaviors become more and more negative. And as soon as you put other adolescent issues into the mix you've got a recipe for "at-risk" behavior. I have found that a student's experiences can be made better or worse by the school environment they've had. If for example, they were fortunate enough to have a teacher or administrator that was understanding in terms of some of their difficulties, they might turn out to be less "at-risk" than if they came into contact with individuals who were less understanding in this regard. When "at-risk" youth come up against individuals who are unsympathetic to their circumstances it has the effect of driving them deeper into a hole. These students often end up dropping out.

Robin: My experience in working with "at-risk" youth has led me to understand that for some students school represents the best five hours in their day. It may be the only five hours that they like or can stand. When you hear that from students and you hear some of their stories, I think you set out to make sure this is the best part of their day by giving them people to connect with and arranging activities for them that they can feel they're having success at.

Tom: My thoughts on this topic relate in part, to something Lily said earlier about "at-risk" youth having learning difficulties. I think that an "at-risk" youth's behavior is often motivated by the frustrations they incur in their classes. When they can't handle the work, they react, and they do it in different ways. Some pull into a shell and some act out.

Alex: In many cases being “at-risk” means coping with a tornado of pressures. It means walking through enormous abuses and coming out the other side. A lot of “at-risk” students don’t have access to the resources they need. They may not have adequate support at home or even a roof over their head. They may not have food in their stomach. The school environment can offer these students a shelter where they can take some time to understand themselves, find out who they are and get back on their feet.

Conor: The social ills that affect “at-risk” students are definitely a significant factor in terms of their ability to cope. However, as I think a number of individuals here have suggested, the right kind of school environment can positively influence outcomes. And I believe this to be particularly true of situations where “at-risk” youth are integrated into the mainstream, where they have access to students who are having some success.

Patti: Something Conor just mentioned reminds me of another question I wanted to ask you. In relation to our discussions concerning “at-risk” youth, I regularly hear you talk about whether a student is being successful and how this success, or the lack thereof, influences outcomes with students. What makes this topic interesting as well as a bit complicated from my point of view is that we all presumably have different measures of what it is that constitutes success and failure. So I’m wondering if you could explain, from your point of view as an administrator, what constitutes success or the lack of it in your school, particularly as it relates to your dealings with “at-risk” youth?

John: Success in school is related to success in life. I want students to have a satisfying life. I want to help prepare them for whatever it is they think they’re going to be happy doing. You only come around once so you might as well be happy.

Robin: For me success has to do with helping students get connected. You want to hook them up to people in the school and to things they can have success at. I believe in

multiple intelligence and I realize that there are some students who are fantastic at things they do with their hands. There are other students who hear a sound and can duplicate it right away. Everyone is different. In my work with students I'm always looking for what they're good at.

Lily: I think success means that a student's needs are being filled. If their needs aren't being filled, then we're not being successful with them.

Conor: I agree. And we now have systems in place that tell us more about students than ever before. Those systems allow us to collect large amounts of data on students so that we can program them appropriately. And as we get better at doing that, students will have more success hopefully, as a result. And in turn, we can do a better job in working with them, whatever their needs are.

Alex: As Lily and Conor have pointed out, success for me means meeting students' individual needs. Success for a lot of students can be as simple as coming to school and feeling like it's a place where they want to be. With some students that's probably all we can do. I know a student who has had a horrible time at school the last two years. He just hated it and didn't want to come. This year it's different for him. His mom says when he gets up in the morning, he wants to go to school. I have no idea what the difference is but that's got to be an indicator of success.

Tom: That having been said, there are students who do not make any serious attempt at being successful. I send out letters to parents all the time that go something like this: Dear Mr. and Mrs. so and so. Your daughter's marks on her first report card indicate that she has made no serious effort to be successful. Her attendance record supports this. I've discussed this with your daughter and she feels she is ready and capable of turning over a new leaf by attending regularly and keeping up to date with all of her assignments. This

attitude I am naturally anxious to support. However she will have to be put on a contract where our expectations of her are made very clear, as much time, effort and energy has already been spent in an attempt to encourage her success. If she falls behind in her work or skips classes it will be viewed as a lack of serious intent to fulfill her own expectations and a series of suspensions will then ensue.

Patti: Thank you for your comments. I'd like to move on at this point and ask you a question that relates somewhat to the topic we have been discussing. Is it your perception that you deal with "at-risk" youth in the same manner as you deal with the general population of youth in the school or are there important differences and if so, could you identify for me what some of them are?

John: You see, the thing you have to remember, particularly in terms of curriculum is that there isn't an alternative world out there. Unless you want to move to Lasquiti Island, (several people in the room smile in response to this remark) there's only one world. So there can be only one standard in terms of teaching "at-risk" youth essential skills. The curriculum we're asking students to do is good curriculum. There's nothing wrong with it. However, I think a lot more students could do it successfully if we were better at delivering learning. The key is to personalize the learning in relation to the acquisition of those essential skills. Individuals learn differently at different rates. We need to be able to accommodate that but unfortunately the education system isn't structured in a manner that allows us to do that very effectively. Our financial system isn't geared that way and our teaching force tends to manage, rather than deliver learning.

Lily: I always like to think that you can treat everybody the same but you can't. Maybe treating everybody the same means that you treat each person as an individual, as John has suggested. Each individual is unique and it's important to pay attention to that,

particularly when you're dealing with "at-risk" youth because they come with a whole different set of issues than other students. So yes, because "at-risk" youth have special needs, you treat them differently. You spend more time with them and perhaps look at other strategies that are a fair bit beyond the regular scheme of things. In other words you might need to be a bit more creative in dealing with them.

Tom: I agree with Lily in that I don't think you can have one set of expectations for everyone. When a student comes from a family where there have been a lot of problems, you can't deal with him or her in the same way that you would deal with a student who has been parented by "Mr. and Mrs. Goodie Two Shoes," where everyone says please and thank you and holds their fork with their pinkie extended. When you work with students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds you have to take into account that they may not have ever been given any advice as to how to behave. You sometimes need to educate them about taking their feet off the chair or chewing gum or wearing a hat. So when I first meet with a student, my task is often to educate myself about where they're coming from in this regard.

Alex: I know that I spend way more time with "at-risk" youth than I do with the general population. They get way more of my attention and as a result, more sympathy and more caring. They also get more of my skills and more of the options that I have to offer. That's just the nature of the vice principal business.

Patti: Do they get more chances?

Alex: That's a difficult question to answer because the students who are being successful don't need more chances. They are able to meet the school's expectations. It's the students who are not able to do that that I spend all of my time with. The students who are meeting the expectations of the school don't come to me asking for chances.

Patti: Well let me pose the question a little differently. Let's say you have two students who have committed the same offense. Let's assume it has been discovered that each of them have been caught smoking hash in the washroom. One student is considered "at-risk" and the other is not. The "at-risk" student is someone you deal with in your office most every week. You've dealt with him around such issues as skipping classes, low level conflicts with teachers, and not having paid fees for extra curricular activities. Let's say you've also heard a rumour that the student in question has had problems at home and doesn't have a place to live right now. Now, let's assume that the student who is not considered to be "at-risk" comes from a good home. He's doing okay academically and gets along pretty well with his teachers and his peers. Would you treat these students differently in response to the same set of circumstances?

Alex: Oh boy that's a tough one. I'd have to know the students I was dealing with. I'm inclined to say no, I would treat them the same but on second thought, I think I probably would treat them differently. I would probably be harder on the student who's not considered to be "at-risk" because I believe they have the support mechanisms in place to help them deal with firmer consequences. If I phone home and tell the father of the "at-risk" student that I've just caught his son smoking hash at school and that he's going to be suspended from school under Board policy for five days, the boy might go home and get the crap beat out of him so in that circumstance I might not even report the event. In case you're not aware of this, I should mention that when you impose a five day suspension it means that the student must submit to a formal process of review run by the School Board before he is permitted to return to school. The Board mandates an automatic five day suspension for drug related offenses.

Patti: You would decline to report the incident even though Board policy mandates that you do so for an offense of this nature?

Alex: Yes. In the circumstance we're discussing I'd be far more inclined to deal directly with the student around the incident, rather than follow protocol, which would be to call the parents and suspend for five days.

Patti: You don't feel constrained by Board policy when determining how you're going to respond?

Alex: No. Not at all. Board policy supports me in that it allows me to set up structures that let students know where I am in my process with them and where I'm headed. It lets the student know where the parameters are. It helps me define the steps that I need to go through to make sure that everyone's rights are protected. It helps me identify the processes I need to put in place to make sure I'm treating people fairly. And when I say fairly, I don't mean from a one to one, personal standpoint. I would do that anyway. I mean fairly from a legal standpoint. So policy is there when I need it. But policy is really written for worst cases or for bad practice. Whenever someone makes a brutal mistake or an inappropriate judgement call, you end up with a policy that everyone then has to abide by. But getting back to what I was saying about using my discretion with respect to disciplinary matters, I would like to provide you with an example of an actual situation in which I chose to deal with a couple of students directly, rather than adhere strictly to Board policy. The situation I had involved two "at-risk" youth who were attending a dance at our school. After the dance I walked out into the parking lot and suspected the youth in question were smoking pot in their car. When I popped open the door of the car smoke billowed out and the smell confirmed my suspicions. I asked them to get out of the car and I said something to the effect of, "What are you doing? How could you make this

mistake given that you know I'm out here, in charge of patrolling the parking lot? You know I'm at every dance and you know this is where you can expect to find me. Why have you chosen to do this ten feet from me?" I told them to leave the school parking lot immediately. The next day I called them into my office and told them that considering all the things we had been through together to date, I felt it was very disrespectful to light up a joint ten feet from me, knowing I would be there patrolling the parking lot. Their response was, "We didn't know you'd be there." I responded with something along the lines of, "You know it would be so easy for me to go the official route, give you a five day suspension and be rid of you." I reminded them of all the times I had cut them slack in dealing with various offenses and told them not to expect any more breaks from me. I felt they had treated me so disrespectfully, given that I had put my butt on the line on more than one occasion on their behalf. There was pressure from other administrators to remove them from the school. If they had known about the incident, my colleagues might well have said to me, "You finally got them. Go after them. Give them five. Get rid of them." I chose not to deal with it in that fashion. I didn't phone home. I just told them that I felt they had treated me disrespectfully and that I had now given them enough chances.

Patti: How do you think you would have dealt with that situation if the students in question had been students who did not have the "at-risk" label?

Alex: I probably would have picked up the phone, called home and given them a five day suspension. But in the case of the "at-risk" youth in question, I just felt like they already had enough on their plate and the last thing they needed was to be suspended. If I caught a student who was not considered "at-risk" doing the same thing and suspended them, I don't believe I would be severing their tie with the school. In the case of an "at-risk"

student however, I think it could well mean the end of school for them and I'm not willing to cut them out of school because they're smoking pot in the parking lot.

Patti: Your example really helps me understand more fully, why "at-risk" youth might be treated differently than someone who has not been assigned this label. Thank you.

Alex: You're welcome. I would like to add that within a short period of time following the incident in the parking lot, I had the opportunity to cash in on the good turn I afforded these students in choosing not to give them a five day suspension. Three weeks after I had caught them smoking pot, there was a fight that occurred on a weekend between some students from our school and a group of students from another school. Someone ended up in hospital. My knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the event prompted me to suspect that one of the boys I had caught smoking pot was a key participant in the fight. So a few days later when forty students arrived at our school and it looked as though a retaliatory rumble was about to take place, I approached the student in question and directed him to use his influence to diffuse the situation immediately. I said something like "I'm cashing in now. Take your gang and get off the school property." He said, "All right. Deal." He left and he took every boy with him.

Patti: Wow. The ending to that story seems to provide a pretty good argument for handling things in the manner you did. May I ask however, do you officially have the discretionary power to ignore the fact that a drug related offense has occurred on school grounds?

Alex: I don't know. It depends on who you're talking to. Board policy states that any student caught in possession of alcohol or marijuana is immediately suspended for five days. So strictly speaking, am I in contravention of Board policy? Yes. However, if you were to ask me to stand up in a Board meeting and justify myself, I think I could. You

see, the student who diffused the fight has a criminal record as long as my arm. Given that circumstance, what should I do? Send him out into the street? What favour would that do society? All things being equal, it's better that he's in school making some attempt at becoming educated. Now, if he's beating up students in the hallway and breaking their arms, then I've got a problem. But if he's out in the parking lot, smoking pot I think it's appropriate to make use of that situation by taking the opportunity to teach him what it means to treat an adult respectfully. To me, doing this makes far more sense than saying to the student, "Great I caught you. I've done my job under Board policy by suspending you for five days."

Patti: Yes, I can see your point. (I glance around the room) Who haven't we heard from yet?

Robin: I too deal with "at-risk" youth differently because they have different needs. Someone once said to me that being fair does not mean that you treat students equally. It means that you give each one what they need. I give more to the "at-risk" students and yet I know in the bottom of my heart that all students probably need as much as I can give. But I do go looking for "at-risk" youth. I don't just deal with them when their actions require a response. Many of my daily routines are planned around the "at-risk" students as opposed to the general population so yes, I think I do deal with them pretty differently.

Patti: Do you deal with "at-risk" youth differently in terms of discipline?

Robin: I'd like to think that I'm flexible in that regard and that I listen to the individual circumstances of all students, no matter who it is that happens to be sitting in my office. But for the "at-risk" students I go an extra five miles and do whatever I can to try to divert them from difficulty before they find themselves in trouble. But in terms of imposing a consequence for let's say, violent or aggressive behavior, I believe that for

everyone's sake, there should be some standard that everyone is expected to adhere to. If someone punches someone else, whether they are viewed as "at-risk" or not, there needs to be some sort of consequence for that.

Patti: So the consequence for punching someone would be the same for everyone?

Robin: It might not be the same. The consequence would likely be similar but it might be applied a little differently. We would have a profile of the student or students in question that would guide our work within terms of imposing some kind of consequence in response to an event. In a case where we have two students fighting, we might choose to have a student work with a counsellor or alternatively we might decide to put the students together and have them work it out. In many cases so called normal students can offer some valuable input concerning what went wrong and can thus be a large part of the solution in working things out. They will often see the impact of their behavior on a problem whereas the "at-risk" youth may not. "At-risk" youth often see their actions as justifiable, given what was said or done to them. If an incident was really serious and involved a weapon, then we would have no choice about how to respond but ordinarily we have a lot of discretion available to us in terms of how to deal with disciplinary matters. It has been my experience that when you're dealing with a so called normal or average student, it's often enough to call the parent, inform them about what has happened and request that they have a chat with their son or daughter regarding the inappropriate nature of their child's actions. When you're dealing with an "at-risk" youth, the problem may be exacerbated by a call home to the parents. As Alex said, they may respond by whacking the student when he arrives home. In circumstances where I have a concern that this may happen, I too may choose not to inform the parents at all and instead, impose a different kind of consequence such as an in-school suspension.

Patti: Conor?

Conor: If you don't mind, before answering your question, I'd like to digress somewhat for a moment or two and speak further to a comment Robin made a minute ago about doing everything possible to divert an "at-risk" youth away from difficulty before they find themselves in trouble.

Patti: Sure. Go ahead.

Conor: Although nothing ever goes as planned and so much of my day involves reacting to events, an essential part of the job is to try to be proactive and head things off as much as possible before they reach a critical point. I think John alluded to this issue as well during one of our other discussions. It's important to recognize that once an event has occurred, you're in damage control. You're in healing. You're trying to put things back together. You're in closure and that sometimes means having to boot somebody out of school.

Patti: And yet it seems that it is the event oriented things you do that receive all the attention in terms of your role. The process oriented aspects of the job seem to have a much lower profile.

Conor: Exactly. And that's the most difficult thing to explain to anybody outside the system. That is, that a huge percentage of what goes on within the context of my day to day work is proactive. And yet it's tacit. It's so subtle. You know, I have days where I open my office door after school and there are seventeen students lined up waiting to see me. But those are seventeen events out of an infinite number of proactive things I'm doing every day to divert "at-risk" youth from difficulty. The point I'm trying to make here is that while most of what we talk about in these discussions is focused on responses

to events and more particularly, responses to students that find themselves in a state of chronic “at-riskedness”, there is a lot of proactive work going on behind the scenes that deserves some recognition.

Patti: Thanks for explaining that. Would you like to comment on the question of whether you think “at-risk” youth are treated differently than youth who have not been assigned this label?

Conor: I don’t think I have much to add in that regard, other than to say that in dealing with situations involving discipline, I think it’s really important to get a student’s attention and to do it quickly. With some kids you can do it in a crisp manner. With others you can’t because they can’t withstand it. They’ll crumble and then you’re dealing with a whole different set of issues. You need to know when to go hard and when to be gentle, depending on what is appropriate, given the student you are dealing with. And as Tom said earlier, this often involves doing a little research; educating yourself about where the student is coming from. And as I think I mentioned in one of our previous discussions, my decision-making is sometimes based on intuition. I look for cues such as whether or not a student looks at me when I’m talking to them or how they carry themselves. I really believe that if you’re a people observer and you understand the subtleties of how humans present themselves, you can come up with a fairly accurate view of that person’s ability to withstand certain things or to do certain things. For example, I can easily pick out youth who are regularly victimized by other kids. I can walk through the school and get a sense that things aren’t going well for a particular student. I can also pick out the ones who are apt to give you the slow eye, the ones that are going to be doing sneaky things behind your back. I am also able to identify pretty readily, the students who are confident and sure of themselves. These are the kids that can withstand me going to the max with them.

The tape recorder beeps, a fourth and final meeting is scheduled and the discussion ends.

Chapter Six

Roundtable Discussion #4

Patti: Hello everyone. This is to be our fourth and final meeting. What I propose to do today is ask questions that are more specific in nature than many of the ones I have asked you thus far. Also, with your help, I would like to try to identify some of the themes that have been present throughout our discussions. In order to cover as much ground as possible, you may find me introducing topics for discussion at a faster pace during the latter portion of this meeting, depending on how many of my questions we get through during the first part. So if everyone is ready to begin, I will turn on the recording device and we'll get started. (everyone nods and the recorder is turned on) My first question is this: Are there different ways of attending to the task of being an administrator?

Robin: I'm sure there are. For example, I find that flexibility is a very important aspect of an administrator's role. There are so many things that come our way during the course of a day that each person who takes on administration needs to be flexible. You need to be approachable, you need to be seen to be able to attend to everybody else's needs whenever you're needed. And while you're doing that, you still have to be able to get your own work done. But I think there are lots of ways of doing that. I have a colleague that I know quite well. He has a routine that he follows and at certain times of the day you just know you will always be able to find him in the hallway because he systematically checks out all of the areas of the school, to see how students are doing. I commend him for doing that but it just isn't my style. I think we all work to our strengths. Perhaps intuitiveness is one of mine.

Tom: It's nice when you work in a school where you have a meeting of the minds on most issues. That is the case where I work. We're relatively comfortable with one another's approaches. On the other hand in situations where you have a "my way or the highway" type of person who's working with a touchy feely person, there's potential for some difficulty.

Lily: In terms of dealing with students, I find that other administrators may want to get on with things a little quicker than I, and in some cases they have been more right than I in that respect. There have been instances where I have gone on too long with a student, rather than letting a natural consequence fall, whereas somebody else in that circumstance might say something like, "We've been through this. That's it. I'm going to take some action now, before this happens again". So yes, there certainly are different styles. There are also different approaches to take in terms of how you exercise your position of power as an administrator. There's the boss management style of leadership where you might say something like, "I want you to do this now. You must do it because I'm the boss and therefore you must do what I say". Then there's the lead management style where you consult and collaborate with those that you manage. This style of leadership assumes that the collective opinion may be better than yours. And while I'm more inclined to be this way than the other, I've certainly seen the boss management style applied by other administrators. There's another style of leadership that falls somewhere in between those two. I think it's referred to as the utilitarian approach and it goes something like this: "I have been given this authority to lead and we agree that I will use it to get the job done, acknowledging that it needs to be used wisely and effectively. Another management style that may be associated with the lead management approach is principle-centered leadership. In this style of leadership your approach is based upon a set of principles or rules for living. Where do these principles or rules for living come from? Well, I think that to some extent, they are learned through practice. They also come from being well

informed. As a school administrator you want to be knowledgeable about the research that's been done and about what other people in your field are currently doing. I have had the privilege of working with quite a few administrators and while we certainly do things differently, I have never been in a position where I've philosophically crossed swords with a colleague. I think that's because we share a set of similar principles in working with students, staff, parents and the surrounding community.

Patti: Would you be willing to identify for me, what some of those are?

Lily: Sure. One is that learning requires the act of participation from the learner. Another is that learning takes place at different rates. A third would be that learning is a social as well as an intellectual process. Another principle that guides my work is that I see students as my primary clients. How many is that, four? Another one that I think is important in terms of my work with young people is that they can count on me to call anyone on unacceptable behavior, no matter who it is. A sixth principle that serves to guide my own work is that I don't just see myself as working in the community. I see myself as part of it.

Patti: Thank you for those examples and for your comments. Would others like to speak to the question of whether or not there are different ways of attending to the task of being an administrator?

Alex: The British Columbia Principals' and Vice Principals' Association did a study of a day in the life of an administrator. They had you write down by a code everything you did in a day. It was a fascinating study. It showed that an administrator's day is just general chaos. As an administrator, you try your best to make sense of the chaos that surrounds you and to survive it. You realize that it's not going to go away and that the chaos is not necessarily bad. In fact, good things can come out of chaos. But each person has to find

their own way to deal with it. They need to find the good in what's happening and bring it to people's attention. But in living with the chaos, every administrator will have a different way of doing that. And one way is not necessarily better than another. I believe that you need a mix of styles in order to have a good administrative team. The team is so crucial and diversity is something you want to have because it brings a variety of perspectives.

John: There's been lots of research done with respect to variance in administrative styles. Some individuals like to push the envelope and others orient themselves to maintaining the status quo. I particularly like the bungee cord example that has been used to describe a particular administrative style, where the goal is to achieve an effective balance between creating change and maintaining the status quo. Imagine if you will a horizontal bungee cord where you have status quo at one end and change at the other. If you pull on one end long enough, you'll end up with so much slack at that end that the bungee cord will pull you back the other way. So if you're resisting change for example, the bungee cord will eventually propel you toward it. So in terms of what's effective in terms of administrative style, I believe that you want to try to strike a balance between pushing the envelope and maintaining the status quo. It's like dancing on top of a wave. You want to be able to facilitate change when that's what is required, but at the same time you want to try to do it in a way that's sensitive to the fact that people don't like change.

Alex: I would bet that every good administrator has some really strong philosophical beliefs that help them survive and cope and support students or the school during any given day. They may have trouble articulating what they are, but I would bet that deep down they have some pretty solid stances on things.

Patti: Could you expand on that a little?

Alex: Sure. I would expect that good administrators have certain values that underpin their philosophies on education and that in order for them to feel good about what they do, there needs to be some sense of harmony between those values and the decisions they're able to make within the context of their day-to-day practice. Take inclusiveness for example. An administrator might be of the firm opinion that any student has the right to attend any class. But this value may conflict with such practices as resource room based education. So you have a conflict between a core value and a practice that is commonplace within the school system. The practice is contradictory to what the administrator believes should be happening. And as a result, he or she is in conflict and probably feeling pretty emotional about not being able to do the things he or she wants to do.

Patti: That's a very interesting theory. Do you think there is a basic, common set of values that you all share?

Alex: No. In fact I think there is a lot of diversity with respect to our values. Myself and several of my colleagues have been talking about this very issue of late. If you were to ask a group of administrators about what they believed were the most important aspects of educating youth, I don't think you'd get a common set of values. Although I bet you could get close if you were to talk about values like honesty and fairness. But when you start getting down to such issues as "Should a student who is HIV positive be attending regular classes?" or "Is education all about preparing students to get jobs or is it about providing them with a path to follow for further education?" you start getting into very sketchy territory and I don't think you'd find common ground among us.

Conor: I think Alex's point relates to a couple of comments I made during our very first meeting, where I talked about how administrators come to administration via some very

different routes and that the manner in which we practice is bound to be affected by our backgrounds and experience. Although we've all been trained as teachers, you'd find our backgrounds to be very diverse if you were to poll a group of administrators. For example, while many administrators seem to come from the P.E. department, some have been music teachers or science teachers and others have come from special education or counselling backgrounds. Now, in terms of whether we operate with a common set of values or not, that's an interesting question. I think if you were to poll a large group of administrators and ask them how they would deal with a particular situation, you'd hit just about every quadrant on the map in terms of the ways one might approach a given situation. And that's okay, as long as there are some fundamental truths that everyone adheres to like, "There's no such thing as a bad kid". In fact, if you were to ask me what the number one indicator was, of someone who should not be an administrator, I'd say, someone who believes that there are bad kids. A person who believes that, in my opinion, should not be a principal or a vice principal. The number two indicator would be someone who, within the hurly burly of trying to get through the job everyday, routinely or flippantly makes decisions that gave the tie to the institution, rather than the runner, who, as I think I mentioned in our first meeting, should always be regarded as the student. On occasions where there is a significant safety issue at hand and an administrator comes to the conclusion that he must decide in favour of the institution, it is a tragic circumstance. It should be one of his or her worst moments. When you come to the realization that you are no longer able to look after a particular student and that he or she needs to be handed off to someone else, you get a bad feeling. Decisions like that should not be made lightly and should only be made when you've exhausted all of your other resources. And interestingly enough, I see the two indicators I mentioned as both being related to a similar concept. I think that the level of chaos in our day is such that administrators seek to achieve completion. We want to see an end to a task. And in wanting to achieve that, it's

possible to slide into a practice where you make negative assumptions about students that are based on too little data. You tend to see the glass as half empty. You have a tendency to say things like, “She’s a bad kid because I know these things about her.” And once you’ve decided she’s a bad kid, it’s unlikely that you’ll go out of your way to find out the things she does well. In fact, I believe you’ll be making decisions that avoid putting yourself in a position where you’re proving yourself wrong.

Patti: So would it be fair to then take it one step further, and say that if you expect good things of the students you’re working with, chances are that’s what you’ll find?

Conor: When you expect good things, you’re at least open to the possibility that you can make a connection with a student, that your work with them can have an impact and that improvement or rehabilitation is possible. I think it’s very important for school administrators to be open to the possibility of success. It has been my observation that too many administrators make an assumption based on too little information that they can’t do anything more with a particular student and subsequently close the door. I operate on the assumption that nobody wants to fail. And although I believe that some individuals are more comfortable with failure than they are with success and will do anything they can to subconsciously manufacture failure, I don’t believe they actually want to fail. I don’t believe that they want to experience pain. And therefore I operate from an underlying premise that assumes everybody really wants to do well.

Patti: Does anyone have any more comments to make on this topic before we move on?

Alex: I would like to say that I agree with Conor’s point about what happens when administrators become overwhelmed by the chaos. It does impact how students are dealt with. I’ve heard administrators make comments like, “Sorry. Our school is full. We’re packed to the rafters. We don’t have the resources to deal with this type of student. She

belongs somewhere else.” And although I have some compassion and understanding for how administrators get to this point, it just seems like such a fatalistic decision to be dismissing these types of students. If we keep going down that road, where will we end up? They shoot them in Brazil. If you take the position that they’re not worth your effort, who is going to invest the time in these young people? And the other thing we might all want to consider is, that it could be our son or daughter that requires the extra time and effort. I regularly come across situations where the most well-intentioned parents have kids who go astray. So I think as administrators we need to be asking ourselves, “If that was my child, how would I want people to respond?” I would hope that someone would do whatever they could to give my son or daughter a fighting chance. And by the way, do you know what the worst part of all of this is?

Patti: No. What’s the worst part?

Alex: The worst part is that we don’t even get the opportunity to work with the toughest cases. Those ones are not at school trying to educate themselves. They’re down on Humboldt Street, turning tricks like Carmen. So that’s why, in my view, it’s so important that we don’t give up on these kids. We need to do whatever it takes to hang on to them, to engage them.

Robin: I wanted to make one final comment as well. It occurs to me that in drawing comparisons we often end up talking in terms of good and bad. And when I say we, I don’t just mean in conversations that take place here. I think there is always a tendency to do that. We may say this is a good school because it is run this way, or that is not a good school because it is run that way. I have problems with that. Alternatively, I find it more useful to think in terms of good and better and then ask myself what those terms mean. Where a school is working well you are likely to find an administrator who is caring and

who understands his or her clients. When I speak of clients I mean teachers, students, parents and the surrounding community. The administrator will be working hard on behalf of them and will have a vision for how everything should fit together and for how everybody can best learn and work together. For example, that vision about being student centered that we talk about so often in here is central to me and my work. Schools are places where we serve students. It is our job to know what they need and want. And yet it's important to understand that administrators have certain limitations that impede their ability to serve students; particularly those who are deemed to be "at-risk". In fact, it could be argued that we're not really the best people to be dealing with them. I can remember someone saying to a group of administrators once, "You must remember that you're not the right people to be helping these youth. You don't really know anything that he or she knows." It's true. We have the knowledge of schools. Although there are a few people who have done other things for a while, most of our knowledge comes from what we learned in schools.

Patti: I had an experience while working in the school system I would like to tell you about that I think speaks very well to the issue you have raised. I once had a teacher knock on my office door and say something to the effect of, "I want to talk to you about one of the students you work with. Are you aware that he doesn't change his shoes from one day to the next? Day after day he wears the same shoes, to the point where the smell has become very noticeable." Well I need to tell you how surprised I was that it hadn't occurred to this individual that the student in question likely only had one pair of shoes. In fact I had to tell him as politely as I could that I believed the student owned only one pair. I remember being amazed that the teacher didn't seem to be able to come to that conclusion on his own. I once worked with an impoverished family where the mother and her twelve year old son actually shared a pair of runners. I learned from these kinds of situations just how diverse our range of experiences can be, and how out of touch we as

educators and human service professionals can be in terms of the level of privilege we enjoy, even within our own community. I think we are beginning to understand diversity as it pertains to race and gender but I think we have a long way to go in terms of being sensitive to how privilege or the lack of it impacts on our experiences. (several people nod in response to my comment)

Robin: There was a cartoon in the paper on the weekend that relates to what you're talking about. A child with a stack of gifts around him says to his dad, "Isn't Christmas wonderful? Look at all the stuff we get." And beside this drawing was one of a family who obviously got nothing for Christmas. I think the cartoonist was trying to point out that while for some Christmas might be a great time, for others it might mean something completely different. Or perhaps he was trying to encourage everybody to remember needy families or needy individuals at Christmas. Although I'm not exactly sure what the intent of the cartoon was, it made a very powerful statement. So, you're right. We need to think about how our circumstance impacts on our experiences. The concept of diversity is actually used in the Ministry mandate statement. Terms such as pluralistic and multicultural societies do appear. But alongside those terms are ones such as the productive citizen. I think it's important to unravel what terms like that mean. Is it meant to refer to someone who receives a salary or pays taxes? But notwithstanding those kinds of value laden terms, it's come a long way from the previous Ministry mandate statement that was written in 1956 or something like that. So although we seem to move slowly, I think we're getting there. Why does it seem to take so long? Well part of the answer might have to do with the fact that I don't suppose we have anyone on staff in my school that's lived in a group home or who's ever done time or been out on the street. And yet, it's students who find themselves in these kinds of circumstances that we deal with on a day-to-day basis. We have a student who's been in his third foster home this term. When they took him out of the last one, no one even told him ahead of time. Somebody just

picked him up after school and took him to his new foster home. To me this way of doing things is just barbaric, but try to explain this student's circumstance to a teacher who's lived in the same subdivision all her life, or to somebody who teaches at the same school they attended as an adolescent.

Patti: Thank you all for your insightful comments. I'd like to move on at this point and ask: Is anyone here familiar with the practice of administrators counselling parents to withdraw their child in order to avoid suspension?

Alex: I did it this morning.

Patti: You did?

Alex: Yes. This is a case where the student has not been successful at this school for two years. He's not passing any of his courses. He's a serious disruption in class. He leaves class, wanders the hall, is confrontational with teachers and other students. Although he's not violent, he is constantly getting himself into trouble. So eventually I hooked him up with a counsellor and got him in a behavior program. I also tried a number of other strategies aimed at helping him to be more focused, attend class, arrive on time, complete his assignments and develop more amiable relationships with his teachers and his peers. Believe me, I tried everything, and seemingly got no result. So I had a long talk with this student before Christmas and told him that I was really concerned about what was happening and that we at the school were getting to the end of our rope in terms of the number of interventions we were able to put into place for him. I asked him to think things over during the Christmas holidays and make some decision about whether he wanted to stay here or have me make a referral to an alternative program. When he came back he told me he was committed to making things work here so I drew up a contract

that stated the school's expectations of him and had him sign it. Well he broke the contract within a half day and continued to do so over the course of the next few days. I intervened by hooking him up with the counsellor again and also negotiated a plan with a couple of his teachers where he was permitted to work in an alternate place outside of the classroom. I had also met with the parents and offered them the opportunity to receive counselling. I did everything I could to help this student and nothing seemed to work. So this morning I had the parents in and said to them, "This just isn't working." I listed all the things I had put into place for their son in the past eight months, told them how unsuccessful those strategies had been and suggested that they consider withdrawing him and allow me to find him a placement in an alternative program. I told them that I had the ability to suspend him for skipping class, being disruptive and confrontational etcetera, but that I would rather not exercise that option. I told the parents that given what had happened to date, I thought their son had a much better chance of finding success in an alternative program. So in that instance, yes, I counselled the parents to withdraw their child from the school, and they agreed. And if they had refused would I have suspended him? Perhaps. It may be that in this particular case the best thing for the student might have been to suspend him. There's certainly no indication that if I keep him here, he's going to do anything any differently. In fact, it appears that he's just dying here and that we seem to be allowing that to happen, even though we're tried many things to try to help him.

Patti: I'm wondering what prompted you to finally choose the option of counselling the parents to withdraw him, given that you seemed so determined to keep him up until a certain point, even though you hadn't been having any success with him for a long time? As you said yourself, he wasn't posing a safety risk to anyone in the school.

Alex: Your question is a good one. I think it speaks to the issue that John raised in one of our earlier meetings. That is to say that administrators feel a lot of pressure when teachers get to the point where they refuse to have a particular student in their class. And while I can usually find a place to temporarily house a student for a block or two, I can't do it for a student's entire timetable. When it gets to the point where several teachers refuse to have someone in their classroom, I've got a problem. When my resources become tapped like that I'm at a loss for what to do. I'm out of options. But getting back to the practice of counselling parents to withdraw a student, you will find administrators who use it regularly as a disciplinary strategy to remove students they consider undesirable from the school. I've heard administrators say to students for example, "I can suspend you for five days or you can withdraw." That kind of thing is done.

Conor: I think that when you're in the kind of situation with a student that Alex has described, you may want to consider the possibility that placement in your school for that particular student is inappropriate and that the student would be better served elsewhere. And although I believe that most students are best served in their neighbourhood school, for some kids it just isn't the right place. And in those kinds of circumstances, I have no problem saying to a parent or a student, "I don't think this is the best place for your child. Why don't we try something else?" But I do think it's critical that it's the student or the parent in the case of a student under sixteen that makes the final call on that.

Lily: There's a fine line between counselling a parent to withdraw a student because you think it's the right thing to do and using it as a coercive practice. If I'm counselling a parent to withdraw their child I need to be asking, "Why am I doing this? Am I doing it because I have carefully reviewed all of the alternatives and have since concluded that it's the best one for the student at this time or am I doing it because I want to want to be rid of him and I don't think I have enough ammunition to kick him out?"

Conor: Yes, I agree. There's a very subtle but important distinction between me saying "I want you to leave right now, because if you don't I'm going to suspend you" and "Do you know what? Given this pattern which has emerged, I need to tell you that if one more event like this happens, I am bound by the School Act to bring you before a council of principals who may decide to expel you on the grounds that you have threatened the safety of another student at this school. It would seem to me to be prudent at this point to at least explore the possibility of finding you another location from which to pursue your education." Administrators have a really strong sense of what it takes and what it doesn't take for a student to be removed from their school. And I would be negligent if I didn't try to find some kind of alternative for a student who was acting out to the point where someone's safety was being threatened. So in a case like this, I might say something to a student and his parents like, "Hey you know what? There's a lot of stuff happening with you right now and although we're trying to put some supports in place within the school, incidents are happening faster than our resources are able to kick in. If you think there's a reasonable chance you're going to offend again within the next six weeks, I'd rather look at options other than trying to maintain you here. Why don't we try this? Why don't I arrange for you to be home schooled for the time being, until we can arrange for some support within the school?" That kind of strategy can work really well. It gets the student out of that negative context. It can prevent an expulsion hearing from happening. I'm quite comfortable with finessing students out of my school, if I think I can divert them away from going through the shunning experience of an expulsion hearing. No matter how you sugar coat it, when you expel a student, they're going to feel shunned. Even if you hug the kid on the way out the door, that fact remains, they're being expelled. And for some students, that's all they hear. It's all they feel. So you try to avoid that circumstance occurring in whatever way you can and sometimes that involves counselling

the student to withdraw. However, doing it in the manner I've described is very different from saying, "Either you withdraw or I'll suspend you."

Patti: I understand the distinction now. Thank you. Do you think the style in which administrators practice is changing and if so, how?

Lily: If you look at how we practiced fifteen, twenty or thirty years ago, I think you'd find that it's a whole different ball game now. By and large students were shown the door much more readily than they are today. In the last decade the community has had the expectation that schools do all they can to keep students in school. The community is of the opinion that if students don't graduate they'll be unemployable and hence they'll have to be supported by the taxpayer. They believe that the only way to respectably leave school is with a Dogwood certificate. Twenty-five or thirty years ago there were jobs out there for students who left school prior to graduation. High dropout rates were expected and needed and so there wasn't the expectation that we do our best to keep students in school that there is today. Nowadays if your drop out rate is high, it means that there is something wrong with your school and the manner in which you practice. In keeping with our effort to keep students in school, we seem to have a better understanding these days, of what it is that motivates objectionable behavior. Administrators used to take the position that if students were misbehaving, they were deliberately being non-compliant. In response they'd say something like, "Well to hell with them. If they don't smarten up, I'll send them out the door." We no longer take that position. If students are exhibiting challenging behavior we don't kick them out. We do our best to make modifications to the system to try to keep them in school.

Robin: I agree. I think we're focusing more on the human dimension of our role than we did in the past. We're recognizing the range of possibility in our students. We're

becoming role models and mentors. We're doing more counselling. We're making personal connections with students. And yes we supervise teachers, take inventory and put out curriculum materials but we're here primarily for the students. The conversations we're having now are much different than the ones we used to have as administrators. In meetings we used to talk a lot about exam results and budget crunches and what to do about them. Now we spend most of our time talking about students. People bring articles to meetings on "at-risk" youth. It's been a huge topic for discussion in our district. We talk about what to do in cases where students are hacking into computer systems or bringing drugs to school. A couple of years ago we would use those meetings to talk about things like whether or not to install a security system with a number pad. I used to say to myself, "What am I doing here?" So yes, I would have to say that administration in our schools is changing. In the past few years we've had several individuals retire. At present there are a number of women, as well as several men in their thirties and forties working in our district. It has been my observation that these individuals often assume the role of conciliator, facilitator, counsellor and quasi parent in dealing with students. And these individuals go a hundred and one miles for every student. You didn't see that as much with the previous generation of administrators. It used to be that your job was to make sure your school ran inexpensively, quietly and tidily. As Lily pointed out, we have a much different set of priorities now.

Conor: I think that administrators by and large, are becoming more inclusive. As issues like homosexuality and alcoholism come out of the closet, we are learning to become more accepting and tolerant of diversity. We've accepted that children learn at different rates. We're now learning that students can actually be behaviorally disabled. We've also figured out that if ten percent of the adult population has a substance abuse problem, it follows that significant numbers of students are dealing with consequences of drug and alcohol abuse, be it family circumstance, congenital factors or both. These kinds of issues

weren't talked about fifteen years ago. The shifts we're making as a society are reflected in how students dress and wear their hair these days. Twenty years ago everybody dressed and wore their hair the same way. Conformity was the guideline that most everyone followed. Nowadays you've got kids doing the Grateful Dead thing, the leather thing and the pierce this and that thing. You've also got the preppy crowd and the kids who wear next to nothing. There's much more of a polyglot approach to things and I think it's because society is demanding that we be sensitive to the fact that we're not all the same. Fifteen or twenty years ago administrative bodies were not governed in the same fashion they are now. Parents took a hands off approach to their child's schooling, trusting that administrators in fulfilling their function, would act in the best interest of their children. If a principal or vice principal expelled someone, it wasn't questioned. It's not like that anymore. Society is appropriately making more demands on us. The School Act clearly spells out that our primary responsibility is to the student. More and more, we are being enculturated to understand what it means to be a student advocate. Our responsibility is to the students, before teachers, before parents and before the system; providing the student doesn't represent a safety threat to the learning environment. And even in circumstances where that is the case, our mandate is very clear. If things aren't going well with a particular student and we are unable to effectively resolve the situation ourselves, we must make sure that in a legally appropriate and respectful fashion, we make contacts with people or agencies who can assist us in doing so.

Patti: I think we have time for one more question. During these discussions we have implicitly identified a number of key elements concerning what effective administrative practice is all about. In the time we have left today, I would like to try to identify explicitly, what some of those elements are. Thus I would appreciate it if you could each identify for me, one or two elements of what you would consider to be, elements of effective practice.

John: Well I think it goes without saying that keeping the student at the center of all we do is an essential aspect of our practice but beyond that, I think another one of the key elements of effective practice is one of finding ways to promote a culture of unconditional respect within your school. Without going into detail, one of the Assistant Superintendents gave a presentation on this topic not long ago. He talked about creating a culture of respect for yourself and other in terms of safety. His approach was based on the establishment of a simple set of rules that reflect the core values of the culture.

Lily: I would say that in order to do this job effectively, you have to have a lot of patience and you need to be able to listen well. You also have to have a basic respect for each child as a unique individual. You need to be able to figure out what's behind the behavior you're dealing with. I think it would also be useful to have a personal mission statement that served to guide you in your day-to-day practice.

Tom: As I think I stated in one of our other discussions, for me one of the most important elements is to act in a manner that allows one to be seen as someone who is fair and just. When I'm dealing with students, I often say to them for example, "Do you feel you've been treated fairly?" and "Are you comfortable with what we've decided?" I ask these things because my next comment is likely to be, "I hope you are because if you don't follow through with what we've decided here, we're going to have a major problem." And As Lily mentioned, I think the ability to listen is important. I guess another thing would be that I work fairly effectively through the use of humour. I've had to deal with a lot of situations where a student is very upset because they've been bounced out of school. And yet despite this or some such other dire consequence, many have left my office smiling and without resentment.

Conor: I think another key element of effective practice is the whole notion of recognizing ourselves as students in the system. I think it's so important to recognize that it's not just the students who are learning. As administrators and teachers, there's so much for us to learn every day. I haven't learned all there is to know. I think the learning process for me is just as important as it is for an incoming kindergarten student. Things will get better and better for students in our education system if we as administrators practice from the standpoint that we are not the keepers of knowledge or the ultimate arbiters of justice and fate.

Alex: I agree. I think ultimately that leadership should come from the culture itself, rather than from one administrator or a group of administrators. People have strengths in all sorts of areas and if you recognize that and value what it is they have to offer, they will consistently demonstrate their abilities. This applies to both teachers in the classroom and students in the hallways. Where leadership is part of the culture, it occurs spontaneously. You just need to value the people within the culture and be open to facilitating that kind of leadership, rather than taking the authoritarian position where you say, "We're going to do it my way."

John: I agree. Someone needs to be in charge but quite often that can be the student.

Conor: Absolutely. We don't have to be the keepers of the flame. And I think the whole nature of the beast is changing in that respect. We're moving away from that absolute position of needing to be right and to be in control. I think we're beginning to understand that in terms of learning, we're all after it together. And although there are a lot of things we still have control over, it's remarkable how many things we've given up in that regard. Like the money that's distributed within the school for example. I distribute seventy-five thousand dollars a year to department heads for learning resources. And rather than

dictate what the money is to be used for, I just stand back and say, “Here’s the pot” and direct traffic. My job is to facilitate the process, rather than direct it.

Alex: I also wanted to say that I think effective practice is also about being visible to students. It builds and maintains culture. If you’re visible in your school, students will feel safe. And if they feel safe they’ll take more risks. And when they take risks, chances are those risks will be taken in good, positive directions. So one of the keys to building something extraordinary in your school is to be accessible to kids because doing that then enables good things to happen. One last thing. Being human is also important. You want to find a way to inject some humanity into your school. And one way of doing that is to get out there and greet people; put yourself out there and say, “Hi, this is me.”

John: At my school students have always referred to me by my first name. I’m just me. When I screw up I apologize. I don’t see myself as any better or any worse than anyone else.

Robin: Before this meeting ends, I would like to speak about the enormous responsibility that administrators carry, given the amount of impact we have on students’ lives. It actually scares me sometimes when I think about it. It’s like having precious cargo in your vehicle. When you’re driving a car, you drive especially carefully when you have a child in it. In terms of identifying key elements of effective practice, I think it’s important that everyone understand the seriousness of that responsibility. Our roles are huge in that administrators have a lot of discretionary power in making decisions that affect students’ lives. It is not a responsibility to be taken lightly. Our decision making should always be informed by the knowledge that we have a responsibility to support students and allow them every possibility to be successful. We also need to set high standards for students so they’ll reach for them. I’m not sure everybody does things in this manner. I’m aware of

administrators who use power from the perspective that it's there to be used. They make quick decisions without talking to people and without stopping to consider what the best thing to do might be. I also wanted to mention something about reflective practice. I always like to be asking questions, both of myself and of other people. I like to ask for example, "Why are things done differently there than they are here?" "Why is it that this happened out of the blue here and it hasn't ever happened there?" I find that if I'm careful and ask questions in a way that doesn't offend people, it often gets other people asking questions too, and that sometimes results in people changing the way they do things. I find that thinking about thinking is important but thinking about doing is essential. I don't think enough administrators make time for reflective practice. It needs to be something you do all the time. It's important to be continuously asking yourself, "Why is it I do this?" and to be creating opportunities for others to ask, "Why is it you do it this way?"

The recorder beeps, signaling the end of our final discussion. I thank the participants once again for their thoughtful responses to my questions and we conclude the meeting.

Chapter Seven

Identifying Commonality and Distinction Within Administrative Practice

The most prominent feature of roundtable discussion groups from my perspective is the level to which the participants have committed themselves to caring for and assisting young people. Their responses consistently reflect the extraordinary lengths these individuals go to on a daily basis to try to engage as well as maintain, students who are experiencing difficulty. And while their responsibilities demand so much more than just being youth advocates, it is evident to me that most, if not all of them consider it by far and away, the most important aspect of their role. One need only be reminded of Conor's analogous comment that, "when the umpire has to decide whether or not the person is out, the tie always goes to the runner and the runner is always the student"(Roundtable Discussion #1, p. 45) to understand the context in which most of these administrators view their responsibilities and order their priorities.

Having hopefully established student centeredness as absolutely central to the spirit in which most of the administrators I interviewed practice, I find it useful to identify at this point, the sorts of attitudes that reflect this kind of approach. When the participants responded to questions regarding the important aspects of their role and their perception of themselves in relation to it, words like intuitiveness, relationship, visibility, accessibility, leadership, respect, care, fairness and honesty came up regularly. Similarly, themes such as being there for students, being proactive, personalizing learning, staying current, setting the standard, building and maintaining culture, latching on, hooking students up, diverting students from difficulty, meeting students' needs, not giving up whilst knowing when to let go, setting a vision, listening well, building a team, working as a team, being grounded, staying the course and being seen as a safe and skilled person to deal with were recurrent throughout the interviews. These words and themes have a common element in that they

reflect a particular style of administrative practice; one that conscientiously, tenaciously and compassionately puts students at the center of all that they do.

Common elements of practice are present throughout the case studies as well. Most of the administrators I interviewed raised similar kinds of concerns in response to the information that had been presented to them regarding Carmen and Lyle. For example, the participants consistently identified the lack of attachment to a key adult as problematic in their assessment of both cases. Strategic intervention most often focused on information gathering, teamwork and the mobilization of resources.

The discussion of Lyle's case in particular serves to bring to the forefront, an aspect of administrative practice that appears to be near and dear to the hearts of several of the participants; that is, the notion of needing to be proactive in one's approach. Both Alex and John for example raise this issue in response to my case study question, "What interests or concerns you about this situation?" Alex questions why there hasn't been any intervention to date, pointing out that a variety of supports should have been put into place for this student years ago. In like fashion, John speaks about how the situation with Lyle reached a point of crisis very quickly and suggests that this escalation was inevitable, given that those in charge of managing it had apparently taken a reactive, rather than proactive stance. He offers that, "...when you have a plan in place from the start, incidents like the ones you describe here would have been nipped in the bud long before now. The bomb wouldn't have gone off. You would have seen fuses going out" (Roundtable Discussion #2, p. 66). During this discussion he also talks about not being one to buck pass. I find this comment to be of particular interest, given the comment Robin made early on in the interview process when asked how she would describe herself in her role as a school administrator. She states, "Well I'm very much the buck stops here person" (Roundtable Discussion #1, p. 43). She also speaks specifically to the issue of being proactive in her approach in dealing with discipline. In the same discussion regarding

how she perceives her role in this regard, Robin states "...I try very much to be out there and gather it up rather than have the kids sent to me" (Roundtable Discussion #1, p. 43). Similarly, in response to my question about whether or not "at-risk" youth are treated differently than other students who have not been assigned the label, she offers "...for the "at-risk" youth I go an extra five miles and do whatever I can to try to divert them from difficulty before they find themselves in trouble" (Roundtable Discussion #3, p. 97-98). Conor also places a strong emphasis on adopting a proactive approach in relation to one's practice. He contends that "while nothing ever goes as planned and so much of my day involves reacting to events, an essential part of the job is to try to be proactive and head things off as much as possible before they reach a critical point" (Roundtable Discussion #3, p. 99).

Such illustrations of commonality were evident throughout the transcripts. I found the similarities to be remarkable, especially given that the interviews were actually conducted separately, rather than in a group format as the roundtable discussions would suggest. Consider for example that in the transcripts Conor regularly makes reference to the role intuition plays in the decisions he makes regarding discipline. Correspondingly, Robin, in my interview with her, identifies intuitiveness as one of the strengths she brings to her administrative role. Rather than regard these examples of commonality as mere coincidence, I would suggest they reflect that the administrators I interviewed speak a common language.

Before moving forward with a discussion which focuses on the distinctive aspects of administrative practice I would like to identify one other aspect of commonality that also contained some distinctive elements. During the interview process the participants initiated discussion with me about the difficulties associated with the administrative task of dealing with and resolving, conflicts occurring between teachers and students. The frequency with which this issue was raised suggests to me that it is one school

administrators commonly struggle with. And yet, as evidenced by the comments made surrounding this topic, there appears to be a significant amount of variance in the degree to which administrators feel they are able to make autonomous decisions, given the power dynamics influencing relations between students, teachers and administrators. Consider for example, the comments made by each participant regarding this issue. John advises, "I don't feel there is any discretion on my part when there is a conflict between a student and a staff member. The student doesn't have a chance. When a teacher turns on a student, there's an unwritten rule that you have to back the teacher" (Roundtable Discussion #2, p. 71). Alex makes a similar kind of comment in relation to this issue: "...administrators feel a lot of pressure when teachers get to the point where they refuse to have a particular student in their class. ...When it gets to the point where several teachers refuse to have someone in their classroom, I've got a problem. When my resources become tapped like that I'm at a loss for what to do. I'm out of options." (Roundtable Discussion #4, page 114). Tom's comments on this issue suggest that he too feels pressure in having to support the staff member in circumstances where there is conflict present between a student and a teacher. He states that, "It is particularly difficult when you believe the student to be right and the staff person to be in the wrong and you're seen to be supporting the teacher. You have to do some careful juggling in those situations. And while you can't undercut the teacher completely, I think you also have to do what's right." (Roundtable Discussion #2, p. 72). While Lily, Robin and Conor readily acknowledge the difficulties associated with dealing with and resolving conflicts that arise between students and staff members, they offer a different perspective on this issue in that they do not perceive their autonomy to be significantly compromised when dealing with these kinds of situations. Lily for example, alludes to this issue in her assertion that, "(students) can count on me to call anyone on unacceptable behavior, no matter who it is." (Roundtable Discussion #4, p. 104). Robin refers to the task of dealing with and resolving conflicts

between teachers and students as “an art”, and seems to have developed some effective strategies in working through these kinds of situations (see Roundtable Discussion #1, p. 47). Conor offers some insightful remarks concerning the manner in which teachers have been enculturated to view vice principals and appears to be able to maintain his autonomy with respect to that which he calls “the floating line”, through negotiating and setting clear limits with teachers (see Roundtable Discussion #2, p. 73).

In some ways it is more difficult to tease out the distinctive aspects of administrative practice than it is to identify its similarities. The distinctions in practice can be more subtle and as a result one is less apt to be able to gather up, and make sweeping statements about difference.

The opportunity to begin distinguishing one style of administrative practice from another presented itself to me early on in the research process. It arrived (literally) on my doorstep in a not so subtle fashion soon after I began working in the field conducting interviews. I received a memo by fax, from an administrator working in one of the local school districts I had approached who evidently thought it important to respond in writing, to my request to have him participate in my study. After expressing concern regarding some terminology I had used in my letter of introduction, (See Appendix I) he stated that he was declining to participate on the basis that he couldn't afford the time to do so. He then punctuated his comment about the lack of time school administrators have for such projects with a further statement that, “Getting a principal or vice principal to spend an hour answering open ended questions on three or four occasions would likely prove problematic (in that) colleagues that I know are going a mile a minute and don't have time to finish properly the things they are supposed to do and want to do” (Anonymous, personal communication, October 10, 1998).

Fortunately for me, there were sufficient numbers of administrators working in the two districts I had approached who had a different opinion concerning my proposal to

spend four hours with them, than the one I had just received. The individuals who agreed to participate in my study each expressed interest and enthusiasm in response to my letter of introduction and spoke of the project in terms of it offering them a valuable learning opportunity. And while I remember initially feeling both flattered and grateful in relation to the fact that these six very busy people thought my project worthy of four hours of their time, what later struck me most about their responses was how much they differed from the one contained in the memo I had received. I asked myself: What might account for the fact that at least one administrator (and perhaps several more) had viewed my proposal to conduct research as a frivolous use of an administrator's time, while others considered it an opportunity well worth spending time on?

Another early opportunity to look at differences in administrative style was offered to me when I reviewed the transcript containing Conor's introductory comments that, "Administrators come to administration via some very different routes" and "(I'm wondering) how many understand what their responsibilities are in terms of what they need to do for kids? My experience has been that some may not" (Roundtable Discussion #1, p. 42). These comments were the first of a whole series made during the course of the twenty-four interviews that eventually served to confirm my hunch that there were indeed, different kinds of administrative practice operating within the local public school system.

John for example, also distinguishes between different kinds of practice when he identifies a particular administrative response in one of the case studies as "old think school". He describes it as one, "(that) is based on an agrarian model where school is something we do ten months of the year from nine to three... (where) you come to us, we don't come to you. It isn't looking at the big holistic picture of caring for a child, treating a child or nurturing them twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week" (Roundtable Discussion #1, p. 55). The distinctions he makes between the two styles of practice

suggest that “old think school” may be regarded in some administrative circles as the antithesis to student centered practice.

Although the term “old think school” was not used by the other participants, several of those I interviewed make repeated reference to a particular genre of practice consistent with the one John has identified as such. Reference to this style of practice is most often made in instances where the participants are seeking to draw distinctions between one form of practice and another. Alex and Robin for example make these kinds of distinctions in their responses to the manner in which Carmen’s case was being dealt with in the first case study. Alex states, “I would never have written a letter. It’s so formal. The letter is just asking for mom not to show up” (Roundtable Discussion #1, page 55). Similarly, Robin makes the comment that, “We have people who go to kids’ houses when they don’t show up at school. And if there’s no phone, that kind of follow up is essential” (Roundtable Discussion #1, page 56). Alex later punctuates his perception of the difference between one administrative style and another in relation to Carmen’s case when he states, “I believe that if we don’t take steps, personal steps, not a letter in the mail, that student is going to disappear. I guess that’s why I wouldn’t have sent the letter. A letter like that can be used as a formality to get rid of a student. It’s a very nice, neat process. I send the letter, you don’t reply, you didn’t show up at the meeting, you’re suspended for five days. You are required to show up at Student Review, you didn’t attend, therefore you are suspended indefinitely. Goodbye.” (Roundtable Discussion #1, page 57).

The “nice, neat process” of ushering undesirables out of school was one that I had become all too familiar with, working in the local public school system. This style of practice was so disturbing to me that it became the motivating force which fuelled my resolve to return to university and embark on a learning journey that promised to teach me

more about the process by which school administrators make decisions affecting “at-risk” youth.

During the course of my interviews with the participants I was introduced to another disciplinary strategy commonly used by administrators, which provided me with additional opportunities to distinguish one style of administrative practice from another. The strategy to which I refer here involves counselling a student to withdraw from school and is one that can be used in a variety of ways, for very different purposes. For example, as Lily points out, counselling a student to withdraw may be used as a coercive practice in instances where an administrator is seeking to “to be rid of a student... (but doesn’t) ...have enough ammunition to kick him out” (Roundtable Discussion #4, p. 114). Alternatively, this very same strategy may be used in instances where an administrator is in fact doing his best to prevent a student from being expelled. Worth quoting at length, Conor’s presentation regarding the practice of counselling a student to withdraw allows the reader to distinguish clearly between the sort of practice he is referring to, and the one described by Lily. Consider for example, the intent, as well as the compassionate undertones present in Conor’s comments:

Administrators have a really strong sense of what it takes and what it doesn’t take for a student to be removed from their school. And I would be negligent if I didn’t try to find some kind of alternative for a student who was acting out to the point where someone’s safety was being threatened. So in a case like this, I might say... ‘Hey, you know what? There’s a lot of stuff happening with you right now and although we’re trying to put some supports in place within the school, incidents are happening faster than our resources are able to kick in. If you think there’s a reasonable chance you’re going to offend again within the next six weeks, I’d rather look at options other than trying to maintain you here. Why don’t we try this? Why don’t I arrange for you to be home schooled until we can arrange for some support within the school?’ That kind of strategy can work really well. It gets the student out of that negative context. It can prevent an expulsion hearing from happening. I’m quite comfortable with

finessing students out of my school, if I think I can divert them away from going through the shunning experience of an expulsion hearing. No matter how you sugar coat it, when you expel a student, they're going to feel shunned. Even if you hug the kid on the way out the door, that fact remains, they're being expelled. And for some students, that's all they hear. It's all they feel. So you try to avoid that circumstance occurring in whatever way you can. And sometimes that involves counselling the student to withdraw (Roundtable Discussion #4, p. 115-116).

Examples of difference are also present within the small group of individuals I interviewed. Perhaps the most striking example of value difference among the participants was the one that came up in response to my queries regarding the hat rule. While Tom for example, took the position that the rule was an entirely valid one that should be upheld in any and all circumstances, others suggested they believed the logic associated with it to be somewhat flawed. Some even ventured so far as to suggest that one's insistence regarding adherence to such a rule represented an inappropriate use of administrative authority.

While I have by no means exhausted the indications of difference present within either the transcripts or the roundtable discussions, it is my intention at this point to make some closing comments on this subject and then move on to other topics. My primary purpose in identifying difference was to provide my reading audience with sufficient evidence to adequately support my premise that, 1) there are distinct, identifiable sets of beliefs, values and assumptions operating within schools which serve to guide administrative practice, and, 2) that administrative decisions (particularly those involving discipline) are made in accordance with those beliefs, values and assumptions. I consider the significance of this supported premise to be substantive, given the amount of discretion available to administrators in making disciplinary decisions, in that their decision-making has the capacity to impact so significantly, the future of a young person. And while the responses from the participants clearly reflect that in a formal sense they perceive their

discretionary authority to be very limited, they also, in my view consistently indicate throughout both the interviews and the roundtable discussions that informally, they have a huge amount of discretion available to them in their day-to-day dealings with young people. My contention here is that this level of discretionary authority becomes problematic if one accepts my premise that disciplinary decision-making in schools is guided and informed by the particular beliefs, values and assumptions of individual administrators, in that, depending on what those beliefs, values and assumptions are, their day-to-day decision-making may or may not be done in accordance with current legislation, standards of practice or the profession's code of ethics.

Reflecting Upon the Traveled Path

As I begin to draw this discussion to a close and tie up some loose ends in relation to this research, it would seem appropriate at this point to spend time reflecting upon the path(s) that I have traveled within the context of this learning journey. In doing so it occurs to me that throughout both the interview and the analytic process, the research questions I formulated served as an invaluable research tool in assisting me to stay focused on what it was I was particularly interested in learning about. In like fashion, these questions (both the initial ones and those that emerged as the research process continued to unfold) have served to guide me in determining those aspects of the journey that seemed most important to convey to my reading audience. And although there are a variety of ways one might choose to conclude this discussion, I find it useful to do so in a manner which recognizes the significant role the research questions have played throughout this process of inquiry. With this in mind, I have chosen to try to bring my learning process full circle by winding the discussion back through the path(s) that I have traveled, revisiting and offering responses to, the questions I posed for myself along the way.

How was it that some of the school administrators I had worked with seemed to be following an agenda dissimilar to mine with respect to this particular group of adolescents? Was there some relationship between the “at-risk” label that had been assigned to these students and the manner in which they were dealt with? What was the underlying rationale for administering these youth in a manner which appeared to alienate them from successful outcomes?

This cluster of questions reflects the good/bad, us/them dichotomies present in my thinking when I first embarked on this research. The disquieting experiences I had had while working in the school system prompted me to cast some of the administrators I had worked with as my adversaries. Looking back, I believe I constructed them in such a manner because doing so provided me with some avenue for making sense of my experiences. It could also be argued that construing administrators as bad guys was, in some respects, a self serving enterprise in that the existence of villains in one’s midst necessarily requires the mobilization of ambitious heroes/heroines to counteract those evil forces. Although my good/bad, us/them conceptual understanding offered me some short term relief from the confusion I had been experiencing, it was not long before I realized that it did not begin to address the complexity inherent in what it was I was proposing to study. I recognized early on that if I was to achieve any depth of understanding of the social forces influencing/governing the actions of school administrators, I would need to find a way to avoid the conceptual trap of constructing them as bad guys. The first step in shifting my conceptual understanding was to set these questions aside and begin formulating new ones.

Should the experiences I had while working in the school system be considered old, out of date and no longer valid?

While I think it is fair to say that the school system has changed in several respects in the past few years, (for examples of change, see Chapters Three, Four, and particularly Chapter 6) the series of comments made by the participants at various intervals in the roundtable discussions would suggest that many of the disturbing kinds of practices I observed while working in the system continue to exist today. Consider for example,

Alex's comments regarding the "nice neat process" of getting rid of students by creating a formal process where a series of letters are sent home, or Lily's presentation regarding the fine line that exists regarding one's intent, in circumstances where an administrator counsels a student to withdraw from school. Given that such comments were regularly made within the context of current as opposed to past forms of practice, they support my argument that not all administrators working within the local public school system today practice in a manner consistent with one which puts the needs of students at the center of all that they do.

Should the experiences I had while working in the school system be regarded as typical or atypical? Could the experiences I had while working in the school system be explained away as simply an anomaly?

The participants consistently made comments throughout the interview process which served to affirm my belief that the questionable kinds of practices I observed while working in one school were also present in other schools. For example, Conor's introductory remarks concerning whether or not administrators "understand their responsibilities" spoke volumes to me, particularly given that they were made in response to my very first interview question of him, which was, "I wonder if you have any questions before we start?" His comment suggested to me that he fully understood the nature of my research interests and that perhaps he too had had experiences while working in the school system which had raised cause for concern. Robin's response to my queries regarding the hat rule served to provide me with some further indication that at least one of the concerning kinds of practices I had observed while working in one school was recognized as one that was present within the larger system as well. Her comment that, "This style of discipline represents the 'my way or the highway' approach and I think we've all seen it" confirmed for me that this authoritarian style of leadership was prevalent enough to allow

this administrator to state with some degree of assuredness that individuals working within the system would regard this style of practice as familiar.

While I do not intend to begin making a series of sweeping generalizations about how schools are run in other districts, I think it is reasonable to assume that the less desirable (my value) disciplinary approaches to which I have been referring, are present in, if not prevalent throughout the larger school system. The Ombudsman's (1995) report *Fair Schools* speaks to this issue. The report addresses a variety of concerns regarding the manner in which education is administered to children and youth throughout the Province. As the title suggests, *Fair Schools* is concerned with the implementation of policy that serves to promote fair practices within BC schools. The Ombudsman is also an advocate of policy and practice which recognizes that youth have the right to be heard, to voice their concerns, and to participate in the decisions that affect them. Early in the report the Ombudsman identifies a set of guiding principles which serve as the cornerstones for her proposed policies. These principles are constructed around a particular set of values and beliefs relating to the manner in which children and youth should be treated by adults. They include but are not limited to, the principles set forth in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The modest tone, the conciliatory remarks and the commendatory comments that appear throughout the document would suggest that Ombudsman has skillfully constructed *Fair Schools* in a manner which seeks to avoid offending her primary reading audience. That having been said, her pervasive message that, large scale change within BC schools is both warranted and necessary, is unequivocal.

What might account for the fact that at least one administrator (and perhaps several more) had viewed my proposal to conduct research as a frivolous use of an administrator's time, while others considered it an opportunity well worth spending time on?

Given the enormous number of demands and responsibilities school administrators are expected to cope with on a day-to-day basis, it is not surprising that several would turn down my proposal to conduct interviews with them and that most would choose not to respond at all. It has been my experience that busy professionals are usually very skilled at identifying their priorities and ordering them accordingly. That having been said it is of interest to me that a small number of administrators working within the local public school system chose to order their priorities in such a manner that my research interests featured prominently on their list of things worth doing on no less than four separate occasions. Hazarding a guess at why this might be so, I suspect that the participants' decision to spend this time with me relates specifically to their commonly stated belief that staying current with research or continuously "sharpening the saw" as Lily mentioned, is viewed by them as a very important aspect of their work, and thus an appropriate and worthwhile place to be investing their time. Further, I think that their decision to participate in my research reflects the importance these individuals place on relationship and on attending to matters which have the capacity to affect the students they work with. Their agreement to participate in my study also reflects the compassionate manner in which these administrators go about their day-to-day work. In response to my comments regarding the fact that some administrators had agreed to participate and others had not for example, one of the participants offered the following remark: "The paperwork never goes away. You will never, ever catch up with it. It's always going to be there. So why not take the time to extend a hand to someone who has asked for your help?".

What are some of the beliefs, values and assumptions that underpin the disciplinary practices of school administrators? How do administrators perceive their role? How do these beliefs, values, assumptions, and the way(s) administrators perceive their role relate to the manner in which “at-risk” youth are dealt with in the public school system?

In 1989 Frances Ricks developed a model for examining the relationship between one's experiences, one's beliefs and values, one's decision making and one's actions. In a subsequent publication in which she and her colleague refer to this model, Ricks and Griffin (1995) offer that,

as you grow up you are affected by your experiences and from those experiences you draw certain conclusions about reality. These conclusions come in the form of beliefs and values. What you decide to believe and value becomes the foundation for your rules of how to run your life. It is these rules that guide how you operate. (p. 3-10).

In keeping with the model, these research questions are based upon my premise that the manner in which administrators practice has a great deal to do with what they believe to be true and what they consider to be most important within the context of their role. And while the reader may regard this assumption at the outset as one too obvious to spend time commenting on, I would suggest that it warrants some further consideration. I believe for example that if, within the context of your day-to-day work, you operate from the assumption that putting students at the center of everything you do is by far and away the most important aspect of your role, your practice will look different from the practice of someone who believes that the most important aspect of his or her role is to make sure the institution is running smoothly. Having said that I make this statement with the full recognition that someone could effectively argue in response that all administrators place a great deal of importance on those aspects of their work that pertain specifically to youth,

and correspondingly, that all administrators need to concern themselves with making sure the institutions they preside over are running smoothly. My contention here however is not whether all administrators are, or need to be concerned with such things, but rather, the degree of emphasis each individual places upon the various facets of their role.

Both the transcripts and the roundtable discussions are full of statements which reflect the beliefs and values of each participant. A close review of the roundtable discussions indicates that there is a high degree of consistency with respect to the belief and value statements made by each individual. That is to say that the ideas and themes that each participant presents in one roundtable discussion is very similar in form to the ones he or she makes throughout the others. The reason for this consistency I believe is that meaning-ful (As Frances would say, pun intended) conversation continuously reflects in a surprisingly congruous manner, the nature of our core beliefs and values. And while the speaker may or may not be consciously aware of that which he or she is communicating, the belief and value statements are nonetheless identifiable and available for the trained listener/reader to discern, albeit in an interpreted form.

I believe there to be a strong relationship between the core beliefs and values held by administrators working within educational institutions and the manner in which they are run. Several of the participants alluded to this notion when they talked about the culture or "ethos of the place" in the transcripts and the roundtable discussions. Their comments on this topic consistently suggest to me that school culture emanates from the core beliefs and values of those who inhabit the institution and particularly from those who are charged with the responsibility of its leadership. Several of the comments made by the participants also suggest that effective leadership requires that an administrator be clear about, committed to, and able to articulate, the values and beliefs that guide and inform his or her practice.

Critical and feminist writers are strong proponents of the notion that theory and practice are governed by values. Some argue that as gatekeepers of knowledge, educators transmit the values inherent in our culture (Simon, Dipppo, & Shenke, 1991). Kanpol (1994) uses the term *hidden curriculum* to describe the process by which schools reproduce inequality. He argues that promoting values such as competition, success, excellence and achievement alienate and subordinate students of lesser ability. Kanpol (1994) also suggests that the practice of stereo-typing students is a form of hegemony which serves to alienate disadvantaged students from becoming successful. To illustrate his point he recounts his experience of interviewing an elementary school principal who judged Hispanic students to be “hard workers” yet nevertheless, vocationally bound. Wexler (1992) provides an example of the destructive influence (my value) stereotyping can have on the tone of a school when administrators (in this case a vice principal in the US) use it as a means of recounting or making sense of their experiences:

They aren't into the education theme...Plus the country itself produces fewer people that are going to be of benefit to society as a whole. The 'me generation' - you have more people from that generation on welfare in that seven or eight year span than any other age group, and that will continue right on. And you still have the flower children walking around who are now wearing three piece suits. They still have that basic philosophy. A lot of them have surrendered that, but they really can't cope and they still fantasize. When they deal with their kids and when you deal with them, you find a lot of them are frankly out to lunch (p.14).

In relation to the kinds of themes presented here, Doyle (1993) argues that educators need to appreciate the power of their own knowledge, and recognize that this power is politically burdened. He contends that there are significant discrepancies between

dominant versions of reality and the experience of subordinate groups and argues further that all forms of knowing are both subjective and value laden (Doyle, 1993).

In the 1970's, social theorists concerned with the notion of how culture is transmitted examined ways in which class hierarchies were perpetuated from one generation to the next (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990). This theory was referred to as social reproduction and proponents of it argued that schools were instruments for reproducing class structures that serve to maintain capitalist ideology (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990; Wexler, 1992). Social reproduction theorists and those of like mind have provided a comprehensive analysis of the process by which schools in Europe and North America transmit ideology. Holland & Eisenhart (1990) argue for example that, "schools promote the interests of the upper classes by unobtrusively reproducing a non-rebellious working class, one that is trained and willing to take a subordinate place in the capitalist system" (p. 26). They and other proponents of this theory have suggested further that through such practices as *tracking* and *streaming*, schools allow students occupying positions of privilege the opportunity to build bright futures through further education while the working class is simultaneously herded along a path which leads them into a docile acceptance of a system which has placed them at a distinct disadvantage (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990).

Although social reproduction theorists have made an important contribution to our understanding of the ways educational institutions reproduce class hierarchies, their ideas on this subject were rather one dimensional in that they did not offer an explanation for the manner in which ideology is internalized by the working class (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990). This issue however was later addressed by a another group of researchers who used the premises associated with social reproduction theory to study youth cultures and the role of oppressed groups in the perpetuation of class hierarchies (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990). This research resulted in several ethnographic case studies which have since

become classics in the field of critical pedagogy. Of particular significance are Paul Willis's British study, *Learning to Labour* and John Ogbu's study of ethnic and racial minorities in the United States. Unlike the position put forth by the early social reproduction theorists, these researchers contend that youth actively participate in the reproduction of class structures. Both Willis and Ogbu argue that youth of lesser privilege are well aware of the lack of opportunity afforded to them, and in fact develop a series of cultural responses to accommodate social reproduction. Ogbu offers that Black youth respond to the barriers to achievement they anticipate having to face by developing "folk theories of making it that differ from school and mainstream social ideology" (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990, p. 31). Willis coined the term *cultural production* to describe the process by which youth submit to social reproduction (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990).

My clinical background prompts me to consider that there is an important principle embedded in the research that speaks to the notion that class structures are produced and reproduced within educational institutions. If one accepts the idea that youth do in fact actively participate in the process of social reproduction, then it follows that relationships between administrators, teachers and students should be considered as dynamic, rather than static in nature. The significance of this from a clinician's perspective, is that dynamic, open-ended interactions occurring between individuals always allow for the possibility of unique outcomes in relationship, and thus in the potential for social change.

While the ultimate goal of critical pedagogy is to promote social change and social justice within schools, this field of study has been criticized for its inability to move from intent to action (Ellsworth, 1992; Gore, 1993; Lather, 1991; Tierney, 1993). That is to say that critical pedagogues are often seen as failing to bridge the gap between theory and practice. For some critical and feminist writers, achieving social justice and social change has meant engaging in the practice of identifying the values and beliefs associated with a particular culture and then proposing one set of values in favour of another (the

Ombudsman's (1995) Report, *Fair Schools* provides a good local example of this kind of strategy). Ellsworth's (1992) suggestions for effecting social change within educational institutions, reflect the value laden nature of the critical pedagogy discipline. She proposes that critical pedagogues, as well as quotas of women and people of color be hired as school administrators. She also suggests including critical pedagogy as a mandatory part of the educational curriculum (Ellsworth, 1992). Ellsworth (1992) argues that the role of the critical pedagogue is to find ways of working with students that enables the full expression of multiple voices. Tierney (1993) speaks in similar terms, offering that transformation is rooted in democratic pluralism and dialogue.

In his effort to forge the link between theory and practice, Tierney (1993) identifies four basic principles. First, he suggests that change is indeed possible and desirable. Second, he contends that critical pedagogues must become involved in political work to effect change. Third, he argues for the preservation of individuality in pursuing common objectives. Fourth, he stresses that there is hope that we can work together to achieve equity in the world. Hope for Tierney (1993) is a vision for the future, an expression of what might be. Hope is something that allows individuals to come together, expressing both common and conflicting desires (Tierney, 1993).

Closely connected with his thoughts regarding hope, are Tierney's (1993) ideas regarding *agape*. *Agape* is a Greek word, made reference to in the New Testament, which refers to a selfless form of love (Tierney, 1993). *Agape* is clearly distinguished from romantic love, which is directed toward other, and often characterized by a sense of longing in relation to the absence of one's beloved (Outka, 1972). *Agape* is characterized by a *regard* for one's neighbor, and occurs independently of the individual's attributes or actions (Outka, 1972). *Agape* does not consider the needs of self, and does not contain the element of reciprocity. It is a simple act of loving one's neighbor, for love's sake. It is a stable form of love, provided unconditionally, and without concern for compensation

(Outka, 1972). The object of this form of love is viewed as "irreducibly valuable" (Outka, 1972, p.12). He or she is valued solely for his or her membership in the human race. This membership is entirely inclusive. Partiality, elitism, and exclusivity do not exist within the concept of agape (Outka, 1972). Each person is regarded as valuable, and this value is afforded, solely on the basis of one's status as a human being. In keeping with this theme, Tierney (1993) quotes a passage from the writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. which captures the essence of agape. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote:

Agape is disinterested love. It is a love in which the individual seeks not his own good, but the good of his neighbor. Agape does not begin by discriminating between worthy and unworthy people, or any qualities people possess. It begins by loving other for their sakes...It springs from the need of the other person...It is love in action...Agape is love seeking to preserve and create community...
(p. 23).

Tierney (1993) argues that organizations which practice agape operate in a fundamentally distinct manner from those who do not. He emphasizes that the underlying principle of agape, is the notion that as human beings, we are all inter-connected with one another. Our task is to understand our connectedness to each other, and to work together in building a sense of community. Tierney (1993) contends that we need to incorporate the concept of agape into practice within educational institutions. He contends that agape will guide us in achieving social justice within schools.

Tierney (1993) contends that we must not mistake agape as a principle which directs us toward a consensual community based on similarity. He suggests that "to engage in agape does not imply either that consensus will be, or ought to be reached" (Tierney, 1993, p. 24). He acknowledges the existence of multiple realities, and argues for a celebration of difference, recognizing that conflict will inevitably present itself as we

struggle to build community. Tierney (1993) suggests that we are threatened by difference, because it challenges our assumptions and beliefs about the world. Difference disturbs the norm, creating discomfort. He argues that there is not one irrefutable truth, but many truths, which can best be understood through the expression of multiple voices and identities (Tierney, 1993).

It is as if some of the answers to the critical dilemmas concerning the effective delivery of educational services to youth can be found in our own back yards. As children we learned about honesty, fairness, kindness, and the golden rule. As adults concerned with the well-being of our young citizens, we may find it useful to take the time to consider the ways in which we might increasingly incorporate such principles as tolerance, respect, humility, acceptance, sensitivity, humour, compassion, agape, inclusion, participation, interconnectedness, community and generosity of spirit into our practice.

What perceptions, understandings and expectations do administrators have of/in relation to “at-risk” youth and how might they influence the manner in which these students are dealt with?

I was intrigued by some of the comments made by several of the participants in response to my question concerning their definition of the term “at-risk”. While one or two of them made what I would consider to be, classic kinds of statements pertaining to “at-risk” that identify youth as having a series of deficits which in turn hamper their ability to be successful, several others made comments that offered a different kind of conceptual understanding of the term. Rather than identifying “at-risk” as a static quality intrinsic to the individual, some of the participants described it as more an extrinsic condition that a person could freely move in or out of, depending upon their circumstance. Viewed from a clinical perspective, conceptualizing “at-risk” in this manner creates some interesting and exciting possibilities for assisting youth who are experiencing difficulty. Consider for example, the problems associated with assisting an “at-risk” youth to be successful when

you believe their source of difficulty to be associated with a host of intrinsic deficits, inadequate parenting and/or a chaotic home life. School administrators are the first to acknowledge that they are not trained clinicians and that they cannot be primary advocates for youth. Further, it has been my experience that administrators who view “at-risk” youth in this kind of context evaluate the prospects for achieving success with them as quite limited. Alternatively, the future tends to look much brighter for these young people when the term “at-risk” is understood as something that exists outside of the individual, in that problem solving then becomes a matter of mobilizing resources within a school, and/or within the larger educational/social welfare/judicial system. I will argue that the opportunities for achieving success with “at-risk” youth would open up exponentially if educators (and other human service professionals) were to consciously, deliberately and consistently, set aside notions about intrinsic deficits and dysfunctional families, and alternatively focus their attention on reframing the multitude of “problems” associated with assisting “at-risk” youth, as a series of interesting systemic challenges.

Another one of the other interesting features of my discussions with the participants was the remarkable degree of recognition and understanding they seemed to have in relation to the enormity of day-to-day pressures and challenges facing “at-risk” youth as they try to maintain themselves in school. The participants’ comments on this topic consistently reflected for me that they must spend a great deal of time listening to young people and have, as a result, developed a solid understanding of the kinds of circumstances that make it difficult for “at-risk” youth to stay in school.

This information came as a relative surprise, given that, for the most part, the teachers and administrators I had encountered while working in the public school system did not seem very knowledgeable in this respect. Many of the teachers and administrators I had worked with appeared to be operating from the premise that anyone can be successful, given a sufficient amount of motivation and determination. Conversely, my

experience in working with “at-risk” youth had taught me that they arrive at school often having overcome a host of obstacles just to get there. They may be pregnant, homeless, depressed, without food, or anxious about a school fee their parent cannot afford to pay. Moreover, when these students arrive at school, they do so with the knowledge that they are likely to face a series of other hurdles. For example, as evidenced by my recounting of my experience with the hat rule, when an “at-risk” youth does not arrive at school on time, administrators are not necessarily predisposed to regard their lateness as a positive alternative to absenteeism. Alternatively, they may choose to focus on the fact that a rule has been broken, demand a reason for it, communicate their dissatisfaction with the answer they receive and deliver some unpleasant consequence that may involve the student actually being suspended from school. Given these sorts of disciplinary responses, it is perhaps a testament to the strength of the human spirit that these youth arrive at school at all.

The significance of the participants’ recognition and understanding of the difficulties “at-risk” youth are coping with on a day-to-day basis, from my perspective, is the influence that it appears to have on the manner in which “at-risk” youth are dealt with in the school system, particularly in terms of discipline. It has been my observation for example that in instances where an administrator has a limited understanding of the circumstances that might explain a behavior or set of behaviors, he or she will have a tendency to make assumptions about the individual (as opposed to the behavior) in question in order to try to make meaning of the circumstance(s) prompting administrative involvement. These assumptions are often articulated in the form of one dimensional comments such as “she’s lazy” or “he’s obviously not interested in being here” and have a tendency to prompt the administrator to begin formally escalating their expectation of the student (this often takes the form of having students sign contracts) or, to take some other form of punitive (my value) action. Conversely, I have observed that in circumstances

where an administrator has been able to gather a sufficient amount of information that allows he or she to develop some contextual understanding of the circumstances which might prompt a student to act in a certain manner, the administrative response is much more likely to be a compassionate one. This relationship between understanding, interpretation and action presented itself consistently throughout the interview process. It was my repeated observation for example, that recounted stories of “at-risk” students struggling to cope most often invoked administrative responses that reflected compassionate, creative and non-punitive decision-making. I consider this style of decision-making to be consistent with that which those concerned with ethical decision-making refer to as *the ethic of response and care*. According to Ricks and Griffin (1995) the key principle which separates this ethical decision-making style from those such as utilitarianism or the Judeo-Christian ethic for example, is “one of being sensitive to the needs of unique individuals in each case, rather than applying principles to all cases or most of the cases” (p.1-8).

Before moving on, it should be mentioned briefly that the ethic of response and care is associated with feminist writing and that some feminist scholars have proposed the existence of a female ethic; supporting the argument that women’s values and ethical priorities are different from, and perhaps superior to those of men (Grimshaw, 1992; Ricks & Griffin, 1995). In response to this argument, I accept the suggestion that men and women may see the world differently, given the differences in their social experiences. I am also somewhat accepting of Grimshaw’s (1992) suggestion that as a result of these different experiences, men and women may have different perceptions regarding ethical issues and priorities. My experience in conducting this research however, would prompt me to wholly reject any further argument which might suggest that men are incapable of making the kinds of ethical decisions consistent with those commonly associated with the ethic of response and care. The responses from the male participants in my study indicate that men are in fact quite capable of making ethical decisions which are sensitive to the

unique circumstances of individuals. The opposing viewpoints regarding the existence of a female ethic is perhaps best resolved with Grimshaw's (1992) insightful (my value) statement that, "Experience does not come neatly in segments such that it is always possible to abstract what in one's experience is due to 'being a woman' (or being a man) from that which is due to 'being married', 'being middle class', and so forth" (p. 233).

Is this adolescent group dealt with differently than students who have not been assigned this label?

The responses of the participants consistently indicated that, with a couple of qualifications, "at-risk" youth are indeed treated differently than students who have not been assigned the label. Before discussing the manner in which they are treated differently however, I shall attend briefly to those statements which would suggest that, in some respects, administrators perceive themselves to treat "at-risk" students in the same manner as they treat other students. There appear to be two primary areas in which the expectations for "at-risk" youth are similar to that of the larger student population. They both pertain to expectations regarding standards and were identified in Roundtable Discussion # 3 as the need for one standard in terms of curriculum and the need for across the board expectations regarding behavioral standards or codes of conduct.

Particularly in Roundtable Discussion # 3, the participants provided a series of examples which suggest that "at-risk" youth are not, by and large treated in the same manner as the larger student population. The notion that "at-risk" youth are treated differently by administrators should, in my opinion and for the most part, be viewed in a positive light. While this statement may appear somewhat contradictory, given my earlier contention that the degree of discretionary authority afforded to administrators can in fact be problematic (see p. 132), I would argue that when consistently exercised in a deliberate, reflective and principled manner, it has the capacity to influence significantly, desired outcomes with "at-risk" youth. The deliberate and principled use of discretion as described to me by several of the participants reflects for me that the system, or more

particularly, practitioners within the system are recognizing the extraordinary pressures and challenges facing “at-risk” youth and in keeping with this understanding, have begun to develop responses that have the capacity to more effectively (my value) meet the needs of students deemed to be “at-risk”. One important and essential shift has been the ability of administrators to conceptualize the need for change as more systemic rather than endemic. While the participants consistently articulated the need to have a student participate in any planning which would traditionally have been done on his or her behalf, their comments on this topic regularly reflect their recognition that the onus is on the school to find ways to accommodate the student, rather than insisting that the student find the resources to accommodate the needs of the system. This alternate style of thinking, represents in my view, a huge paradigm shift and has the potential to create profound change in relation to the manner in which educational services are delivered.

There are further indications that the school system is changing and that administrators are developing progressive views and practices in response to the significant challenges associated with educating “at-risk” youth and keeping them in school. One example worth taking a closer look at is the manner in which administrators can choose to use their discretionary authority. While traditional forms of practice would suggest that administrative decision-making should always be done in accordance with Board or Ministry policy, there is reason to suggest, both within the roundtable discussions and the literature, that such rigid “rule following” may not always represent the best or most appropriate course of administrative action. Consider for example, Alex’s decision to decline to act in accordance with Board policy by choosing not to report incidents where he believes that following protocol could actually compromise a student’s safety. Given Conor’s earlier statement that the administrative code of ethics clearly identifies student safety as an administrator’s number one responsibility, Alex’s decision-making style in my view, represents a sophisticated level of practice in which effective decisions are made not in perfect accordance with policy statements or codes of

ethics per se, but rather, in accordance with the ability to reason, to choose, and to sort through and resolve, a multitude of complex and in some cases competing, ethical issues.

Alex's comment that policy is written for worst cases or for bad practice, and his suggestion that it should be used to set parameters or to create a baseline for one's practice, rather than have it rigidly determine the most appropriate course of action in any given circumstance would be well received by such writers as McKenzie and Wharf (1995) who have taken a critical stance in relation to policies which do not take into account, those who are most affected by them. These authors propose that practitioners (as well as consumers of social welfare programs) oppose such restrictive policies and develop a series of resistance strategies in response to them (McKenzie & Wharf, 1995). One such strategic approach is referred to by McKenzie & Wharf (1995) as *islands of excellence* and is described as

...an organizational vision or ideology which embraces the principle of minimizing the effects of adverse, externally imposed policies... (by engaging in) ...agency-based forms of resistance (which) may include strategies such as ignoring certain policies, implementing them in form rather than substance in order to minimize their negative effects on consumers, and negotiating exemptions or adaptations designed to be less harmful.
(p. 89)

What might account for the discrepancy between my early and subsequent experiences in the school system? Are there different kinds of administrative practice operating there?

I think I have effectively argued throughout this document that the differences between my early and subsequent experiences can/may be explained by my inference that there are different kinds of practices operating within the local public school system. As I indicated in the second chapter however, I do not wish this statement to imply in any way that these identified differences should result in the construction of dichotomous

categories of good and bad administrators or even of right and wrong forms of practice. This overly simplistic kind of reasoning would certainly not address the complexity I associate with developing an understanding of the dominant forces which govern/influence social relations within the education system, or other institutions and organizations for that matter. Moreover, it would seem appropriate at this point to underscore my earlier suggestion that notions about good/bad and right/wrong are so value laden that individuals attempting to build an argument based on these constructs would soon find themselves standing on shaky theoretical ground.

If the identification of difference is not intended to suggest the existence of such dichotomous categories, what then does it have to teach us about the relationship between “at-risk” youth and administrative decision-making? First, I would offer that it assists us in identifying the beliefs and values which undergird particular styles of administrative practice. Second, I believe it provides us with information about how these beliefs and values influence administrative decision-making, particularly with respect to disciplinary matters involving “at-risk” youth. Third, I would suggest that *given a particular value orientation*, juxtaposing different styles of practice also serves to assist us in identifying those elements of practice that we, as educators and human service practitioners, consider to be particularly effective, and thus may wish to discuss, develop or emulate. However, in the interests of continuing to stay clear of good/bad, right/wrong dichotomies in this context, I consider it wise, as Robin suggested, to develop a framework in which the concept of difference is both viewed and stated in terms of good and better. Fourth, I am in agreement with my advisor who has suggested that the identification of difference offers a peek into the complex ways in which administrators “...are caught within a system which demands or at least evokes certain responses from them... responses (that) may have consequences for youngsters that are anti-educational... responses (that) may even be counter to what administrators themselves might wish to be able to do” (A. Oberg,

personal communication, April 15, 1998). Unraveling this complex topic proves to be no easy task but I think it would be useful, as a starting point in this regard, to revisit the comment made by the administrator who sent me the fax memo stating that, "Getting a principal or vice principal to spend an hour answering open ended questions on three or four occasions would likely prove problematic (in that) colleagues that I know are going a mile a minute and don't have time to finish properly the things they are supposed to do and want to do" (anonymous personal communication, October 10, 1998) (see page 127). Although perhaps more revealing than its author intended, this comment suggests to me that the education system constructs administrators in a manner which has them spending a great deal of time doing a series of tasks which may in fact preclude them from doing their jobs in the manner they think they should be done, and which moreover, may not be representative of what it is they wish to be doing.

The suggestion that there is conflict between administrators' core values and the systemic demands placed upon them is supported by a number of comments made by the participants. In response to my direct question regarding whether or not they perceive there to be different ways of attending to the task of being an administrator for example, Alex stated that, "...administrators have certain values that underpin their philosophies on education and in order for them to feel good about what they do, there needs to be some sense of harmony between those values and the decisions they're able to make within the context of their day-to-day practice" (Roundtable Discussion # 4, page 106). In relation to this issue, Conor suggests that achieving or maintaining some degree of harmony in this regard may pose a significant challenge to administrators, given the demands associated with the role. He states that, "...the level of chaos in our day is such that administrators seek to achieve completion. We want to see an end to a task. And in wanting to achieve that, it's possible to slide into a practice where you make negative assumptions about students that are based on too little data. You tend to see the glass as half empty"

(Roundtable Discussion # 4, page 107-108). The notion that administrative practice is governed/influenced by social forces that may or may not reflect the core values of school administrators is further supported by Alex's comment that, "...when administrators become overwhelmed by the chaos, it does impact how students are dealt with. I've heard administrators make comments like, 'Sorry. Our school is full. We're packed to the rafters. We don't have the resources to deal with this type of student. She belongs somewhere else'" (Roundtable Discussion # 4, page 108).

Have I conducted this research in an ethical, effective, responsible and reflexive manner? Have I represented what I have learned in a such a way that my writing captures the attention of my reading audience to the point where it provokes resonance, reflection, discussion, passion, controversy or intellectual excitement?

In response to the first question, I offer an affirmative answer. With respect to the second, I leave the reader to decide.

References

- Arvay, M. (1998). Narratives on secondary traumatic stress: Stories of struggle and hope. Doctoral dissertation, University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.
- Atkinson, P. & Hammersley, (1994). Ethnography and participant observation. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), Handbook of Qualitative Research (pp. 248-261).
- Baker, C., Wuest, J., & Norager Stern, P. (1992). Method slurring: The grounded theory/phenomenology example. Journal of Advanced Nursing17, (pp. 1344-1360).
- Boyle, J. (1994). Styles of ethnography. In J. Morse (Ed.), Critical issues in qualitative research methods (pp. 159-185). California: Sage.
- Campbell, J & Bunting, S. (1991). Voices and paradigms: perspectives on critical and feminist theory in nursing. Advances in Nursing Science, 13(3), 1-15.
- Clifford, J. (1986). Partial truths. In J. Clifford & G. Marcus (Eds.), Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Covey, S. (1989). The 7 habits of highly effective people. New York: Fireside.
- Creswell, J. (1998). Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Doyle, C. (1993). Raising curtains on education. Toronto, Ontario: The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
- Ellis, C., Kiesinger, C. E. & Tillmann-Healy, L. M. (1997). Interactive interviewing. In R. Hertz (Ed.), Reflexivity and voice (pp. 119-149). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Fair schools. (1995). Office of the Ombudsman. Victoria, BC: Queen's Printer.
- Ellsworth, E. (1992). Why doesn't this feel empowering: Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy. In C. Luke & J. Gore (Eds.), Feminisms and critical pedagogy. (pp. 90-119). London: Routledge.
- Gendler, J. (1988). The book of qualites. New York: Harper and Row.

Gerlach, N. (1996). The business restructuring genre: Some questions for critical organizational analyses. Organization,3(3), (pp.425-453).

Gore, J. (1993). The struggle for pedagogies. New York: Routledge.

Grimshaw, J. (1992). The idea of a female ethic. Philosophy East and West,42, (pp. 221-235).

Hammersley, M. & Atkinson, P. (1983). Ethnography: Principles in practice. London: Tavistok.

Hammersley, M. (1992). What's wrong with ethnography? London: Routledge.

Hammersley, M. & Atkinson, P. (1997). Ethnography: Principles in practice. (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.

Harding, S. (1987). Introduction: Is there a feminist method? In S. Harding (Ed.), Feminism and methodology (pp. 1-13). Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Hertz, R. (Ed.). (1997). Reflexivity and voice. Thousand Oaks, California:

Hycner, R. (1985). Some guidelines for the phenomenological analysis of interview data. Human Studies,8, (pp.279-303).

Holland, D. & Eisenhart, M. (1990). Educated in romance: Women, achievement, and college culture. Chicago: The University of Chicago.

Kanpol, B (1994). Critical pedagogy. Westport, CT: Greenwood.

Knafl, K. (1994). Promoting academic integrity in academic research. In J. Morse (Ed.), Critical Issues in qualitative research methods (pp. 357-374). California: Sage.

Kvale, S. (1996). Interviews. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

Lather, P. (1991). Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern. New York: Routledge.

Leininger, M. (1994). Evaluation criteria and critique of qualitative research studies. In J. Morse (Ed.), Critical Issues in qualitative research methods (pp. 95-115). California: Sage.

Lincoln, Y. & Guba, E. (1985). Naturalistic Inquiry. Beverly Hills: Sage.

Manning, K. (1997). Authenticity in constructivist inquiry: Methodological considerations without prescriptions. Qualitative Inquiry 3, (1) (pp. 93-115).

McKenzie, B. & Wharf, B. (1995). Connecting policy and practice in social welfare. Unpublished manuscript, University of Victoria and University of Manitoba.

Morgaine, C. (1994). Enlightenment for emancipation. A critical theory of self-formation. Family Relations, 43, 325-335.

Morgan, D. (1985). Critical perspectives. In The family, politics, and social theory (pp. 208-261). London: Routledge and Kegan.

Muller, M. & Dzurec, L. (1993). The power of the name. Advanced Nursing Science 15, (3) (pp. 15-22).

Nielsen, K. (1992). On the status of critical theory. Interchange, 23(3), 265-284

Outka, G. (1972). Agape: An ethical analysis. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Ray, M. (1994). The richness of phenomenology: Philosophic, theoretic, and methodological concerns. In J. Morse (Ed.), Critical issues in qualitative research methods (pp. 117-133). California: Sage.

Reinharz, S. (1997). Who am I? The need for a variety of selves in the field. In R. Hertz (Ed.), Reflexivity and voice (pp.3-20). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Richardson, L. (1994). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), Handbook of qualitative research (pp. 516-529). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Ricks, F. & Griffin, S. (1995). Best choice: Ethical decision making in human services practice. (Available from The University of Victoria, Victoria, BC)

Sandelowski, M. (1986). The problem of rigor in qualitative research. Advances In Nursing Science, 8(3), (pp. 27-37).

Sandelowski, M., Hutchinson, S., Morse, J., Ray, M., & Boyle, J., (1994). Dialogue: Good phenomenology is... In J. Morse (Ed.), Critical issues in qualitative research methods (pp. 116). California: Sage.

Segal, L. (1986). The myth of objectivity. The dream of reality: Heinz von Foerster's constructivism. New York: Norton.

Shor, I. (1993). Education is politics: Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy. In P. McLaren, & P. Leonard (Eds.), Paulo Freire: a critical encounter (pp. 25-35). New York: Routledge.

Simon, R., Dippo, D. & Schenke, A. (1991). Learning Work. Toronto, Ontario: The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

Spradley, J. (1979). The ethnographic interview. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Sullivan Report (1988). Royal commission on education. Victoria, BC: Queen's Printer.

Tierney, W. (1993). Building communities of difference: Higher education in the twenty-first century. Toronto, Ontario: The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

Wexler, P. (1992). Becoming Somebody. London: The Falmer Press.

Winston, J. (1995). Approaches to methods. In Methods: Doing social research (pp10-12). Scarborough: Prentice Hall.

Wolcott, H. (1990). Making a study "more ethnographic". Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 19,(1), (pp. 44-72).

Appendix A

Is it too late to unlearn/re-learn what it means to understand and write from an alternative epistemological stance? Will I ever be able to take my other foot out of the positivist paradigm? I can't seem to let go of my need to do things "the right way". What will it mean for my research/defense if I can only talk the talk without being able to walk the walk? There's this feeling of being brought back from the brink of... what... terminal positivism perhaps. I am aware that as I write this, it sounds like I am exaggerating... making too much of nothing. And yet paradoxically it's everything and it's nothing all at once. I am beginning to recognize the value of this journal writing in that it causes... no... this term suggests a positivistic belief...asks me to consciously question things, to move my thinking a little further along than perhaps a fleeting thought might allow. To revisit topics I have previously written about. I think this kind of writing keeps me supple, moving, open, in touch with my vulnerability, willing to take risks, try new things; overturning and (re)examining the beliefs and values that orient me in one direction or another.

Journal Entry, Spring, /98

Appendix B

Research Dilemma: It would appear that until recently, it has been considered common practice for a researcher to conduct a review of the literature within his or her chosen field of inquiry and include this information in a separate chapter of one's thesis or dissertation. Presumably, the rationale for this sort of approach is based upon the notion that doing things in this manner will result in "grounding" the research within in a particular methodological or conceptual context. This tradition may also serve the purpose of providing the reader with some assurance that the researcher is indeed familiar with the established terrain of his or her chosen field of study. Developing familiarity with a particular theoretical or conceptual framework can also be problematic from my point of view, in that it may predispose the researcher to look to the literature rather than the "data" for concepts and meaning. My dilemma then, is this: How do I demonstrate that I am knowledgeable about the literature contained within my chosen field of study, without creating a situation where that knowledge unduly influences the manner in which I interpret the information provided to me by the participants? Resolution: Structure the research so that it is the "data" rather than the literature that guides and informs your interpretations. Once you establish how to use the transcripts to provide the foundation for those interpretations, relevant themes and concepts from the literature can then be used to augment and support your arguments.

Appendix C

God it was awful working in the school system. I was told by the principal I had to come to staff meetings and yet because I was not considered a “regular” staff person (I was paid by Social Services through a community agency rather than through the school district.) I had no capacity to vote on issues that came up during the meetings. So I would sit there simmering for two and a half or three hours one day a month. Also, I remember someone once making reference to youth and family counsellors as “twofer” because they are paid half the salary of a “regular” school counsellor. Even my access to students was severely restricted in that teachers had absolute right of refusal if they didn’t want me to take a student out of their class for a counselling session. (Students were very reluctant to meet with counsellors outside of school hours.) I believe the teachers regularly refused my request to take someone out of class to exercise their power. I was an alien in the school world. Planted there by Social Services and caring community folk (I believe) to interrupt the rampant patriarchy.

Journal Entry, Spring, /98

Appendix D

Most of what I have read focuses on the researcher as the powerful one in the research relationship. What does/will it mean when the individuals one is interviewing have the lion's share of the power in the research relationship? How will I respond if administrators start to lecture me during our interviews? What will happen when I bump up against my issues with power and authority in the research setting? These are just some of the challenges I anticipate facing as I embark upon my research....

Journal Entry, Spring, /98

Appendix E

When I woke up this morning, I was thinking about the following: The far reaching, real life implications of living one's life based on the assumption that there is but one objective version of truth and thus reality. Overlay on top of that, the notion that those individuals who have the most power in society are the ones whose version of truth/reality becomes validated. Those who write textbooks, interpret the law, or diagnose and treat mental illness. How crazy making it is for those of us who enjoy lesser positions of power (I am aware that this is all relative and that I would be perceived by some/many to occupy a position of power and privilege.)to have one's sense of reality continuously invalidated. Children, people of color, or plain old community folk. If our beliefs and values (and hence notions of reality) necessarily emerge from our experiences, then by definition, there must be a fundamental disparity between the reality of those who occupy positions of power and the reality of those who do not. So how does one manage the incongruence between one's own beliefs and values, and the beliefs and values belonging to others that are continuously thrust upon them? What are the choices? Again, it has to do with power and privilege. If you're bright (and for me, brightness is largely measured by how well you can demonstrate your knowledge and acceptance of the beliefs and values of those who occupy positions of power and privilege in society) you can strive to excel in school, attend university and transcend the boundaries established by racism, heterosexism and poverty by becoming a member of the academy. If learning does not come easily to you however, your choices are much more limited. And if you have the misfortune of being labeled learning or behaviorally disabled by someone who occupies a position of power, you are likely to simultaneously be assigned a future that will profoundly impact you for the rest of your life. You are likely to believe, in

Appendix E (continued)

accordance with the label(s) that you are stupid and thus that you can't learn (the implication of this being that you are unlikely to consider pursuing any form of higher education to achieve a "better life"...it could be argued that life long learning is a value espoused exclusively by those who are successful at, and therefore enjoy learning) or worse yet, that you are not worth anything. (Where do I start with the implications of this one?...alcoholism, depression, suicide to scratch the surface.)

The saddest part of all of this is that we become (and we are all affected by this to some extent; it applies to even the most powerful among us in that we are all subjected to dominant relations of one kind or another) so immersed in this positivist version of reality that we lose our ability to distinguish it from our own ways of knowing/being in the world and thus we inadvertently become an integral part of the very system which perpetuates hegemonic relations.

Journal Entry, Spring, /98

Appendix F

I have what would appear to me to be an ambitious goal. I want to take the understanding that critical theory has provided me with in terms of the social processes operating within educational institutions and find some practical means of sharing this information in a way that creates opportunity for change. To attend to the formidable task of forging the link between theory and practice, so to speak. On the one hand systems theory gives me the tools to create change. It doesn't however provide me with the tools I need to understand the power structures operating in relationships. On the other hand, critical theory provides me with knowledge regarding power relationships but it doesn't (in my estimation anyway) offer me the tools I need to create change. Thus I would like to base my understanding of the social forces operating within schools on critical theory and then look at ways of incorporating systems theory into my research. Is this feasible or am I inappropriately mixing theoretical apples with oranges? Given that each of these grand social theories has limitations and that the strengths of one tend to complement the limitations of the other, it occurs to me that it might be useful to look at ways of having the two of them operate side by side within the context of my research. Doing things in this manner would have the effect of marrying the knowledge I have gathered in graduate school with the clinical knowledge and experience I have spent the last twenty years acquiring. Am I too ambitious here? Is it going to be logistically/theoretically impossible/irresponsible for/of me to mix theoretical apples and oranges? In all my reading travels I have only seen it attempted once. Adele Mueller wrote a paper about the social organization of agencies who assist Third World countries. Interestingly, she wove

Appendix F (continued)

such systems/therapeutic terms and concepts as *circular processes* and *feedback loops* into her theoretical discussion of the complex dynamics associated with dominant relations occurring within development institutions. Can I effectively put critical and systems theory together, using the strengths of each to address the limitations of the other, without losing my focus and thus creating a series of insurmountable problems for my research? I would like to try as this is the kind of knowledge contribution I want to be able to make in doing this research.

Journal Entry, Spring, /98

Appendix G

It occurs to me that in order to continue to learn at the pace I want to learn, to continue to understand myself and my experiences as fully as I would like, I need to be at the university. I need the structure, the guidance and the opportunities to learn that it offers. And yet, paradoxically, it is while I am involved in this institutional form of life that I encounter so much inner struggle. I struggled as a young person in school. I struggled as a youth and family counsellor working in the school system. I struggled working as a clinician for government. And yet here I am, choosing to be at university, struggling as a graduate student. Participating in institutional life and feeling the intensity on a daily basis. I am cognizant of how it enriches my life, but also, what it takes from me. So instead of disengaging as I have in the past, I currently find myself fully engaged. And it is through this process of painful and painstaking engagement that the grip of patriarchy and positivism finally begins to loosen. My struggle, my engaged struggle with these powerful social forces is allowing me to free myself. Finally. And how ironic it is that this freedom comes through active and sustained engagement with institutional life.

Journal Entry, Spring, /98

Appendix H

Research Dilemma: Given the subtle, yet important differences between the terms informant and participant, how should I position myself in this regard with respect to my research? Resolution: Use the term participant rather than informant. The word informant sounds stiff and seems more in keeping with the positivist paradigm where “omniscient narrators” (Richardson, 1994) dispense “truth” and expert knowledge. Conversely, the word participant suggests to me an atmosphere of participation and collaboration; where conversations between regular folk result in co-constructed ways of knowing.

Appendix I

Sample Letter of Introduction

Date

Name of Principal or Vice-Principal

Name of School

Address of School

Victoria, BC

Postal Code

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am a graduate student at the University of Victoria who has recently received permission from the school district you work in, to conduct research. I am currently seeking to invite to participate in my study, school administrators who regularly interact with “at-risk” youth within the context of their day-to-day work. Given the “front line” nature of this inquiry, I am particularly interested in interviewing administrators who assume primary responsibility for discipline within a school. My research project is concerned with administrative decision-making as it pertains to matters involving “at-risk” youth. The results of this research will be reported to the school districts who have granted me permission to conduct the study and will be published in a Master’s thesis. As a participant in this study you would be provided with a small number of wholly fictitious case examples of situations that would likely result in a school administrator taking some form of action with a student. You would be asked to review these case examples and respond to a series of open-ended questions during interviews with the researcher (Patti Anderson). These questions are designed to explore the context in which administrators practice and make decisions. Some examples of the kinds of questions you might be asked are: What interests or concerns you about this situation? What factors seem most relevant to your decision-making? What further information might you be inclined to gather as you prepare to make your decision? What is your primary consideration in making this decision?

This study is likely to require one hour of an administrator’s time, on three or four separate occasions. Each individual who responds to my invitation to participate in this research project will be contacted by telephone. Of those who indicate an interest in participating, up to seven individuals will be selected at random. I hope to begin

Appendix I (continued)

interviewing participants in September 1998. Interviews will be scheduled at the convenience of the participant. At the conclusion of each interview a period of time will be made available for debriefing. Participation in this activity is optional. If a participant chooses to make use of the debriefing time set aside, it will increase slightly, the amount of time required of the participant. I anticipate the total time commitment to amount to somewhere between three and six hours (inclusive of debriefing time) over a period of three to four months.

This project is entirely voluntary and a participant may withdraw his or her agreement to participate in this study at any time, without explanation. A participant may also decline to respond to any question he or she does not wish to answer during the course of an interview.

It is my intention to audio-tape the interviews I conduct with participants. I may also wish to take notes during these interviews. All recordings and field notes will remain completely confidential and the anonymity of participants and third parties will be strictly maintained at all times. Confidentiality and anonymity will be observed and maintained by ensuring that the names of participants, other individuals or schools do not appear on any transcripts or published material. Audio tapes and field notes will be assigned a code number for identification purposes and will be stored in a locked filing cabinet when not in use. In the interests of maintaining the privacy of third parties, participants will be reminded to omit from the interviews, any information that would identify a particular individual or school. I anticipate that once the data analysis portion of the project is complete, the data gathered for this study will be destroyed.

If you are interested in participating in this project, I can be reached by telephone, fax or e-mail. I am also available to answer any questions you may have in relation to this project. Thank you for taking the time to consider this request.

Sincerely,

Patti Anderson
935 Richmond Ave.
Victoria, BC
V8S 3Z4

Telephone: (250) 595-6706
Fax: (250) 595-8935
e-mail: panderso@uvic.ca

Thesis Supervisor: Frances Ricks
Telephone: (250) 721-7989

Appendix J

Consent to Participate in a Research Project Entitled: “Dropping in on School Administrators: Conversations Regarding “At-Risk” Youth and Administrative Decision-Making”

This research project studies administrative decision-making as it pertains to matters involving “at-risk” youth. The results of this research will be reported to the school district(s) granting permission to conduct the study and will be published in a Master’s thesis. As a participant in this study I understand that I will be provided with a small number of wholly fictitious case examples of situations that would likely result in a school administrator taking some form of action with a student. I will be asked to review these case examples and respond to a series of open-ended questions during interviews with the researcher (Patti Anderson). I understand that these questions are designed to explore the context in which administrators practice and make decisions. Some examples of the kinds of questions I might be asked are: What interests or concerns you about this situation? What factors seem most relevant to your decision-making? What further information might you be inclined to gather as you prepare to make your decision? What is your primary consideration in making this decision?

I have been advised that this study is likely to require one hour of my time, on three or four separate occasions. I am of the understanding that interviews will be scheduled at my convenience. At the conclusion of each interview a period of time will be made available for debriefing. I understand that participation in this activity is optional. If I choose to make use of the time set aside for debriefing purposes, I am aware that it will increase slightly, the total amount of time requested of me.

I am aware that my participation in this research project is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw my agreement to participate in this study at any time, without explanation. I am also aware that it is my right to decline to respond to any question I do not wish to answer during the course of an interview.

The researcher (Patti Anderson) has explained to me that she wishes to audio-tape the interviews. She has indicated that she may also wish to take notes during these interviews. I understand that all recordings and field notes are to remain completely confidential and that my anonymity as a participant will be strictly maintained at all times. I understand that confidentiality and anonymity will be observed and maintained by ensuring that the names of participants, other individuals or schools do not appear on any transcripts or published material. Audio tapes and field notes will be assigned a code number for identification purposes and will be stored in a locked filing cabinet when not in use. I have been advised that in the interests of maintaining the privacy of third parties, participants will be reminded to omit from the interviews, any information that would identify a particular individual or school. I am of the understanding that once the data analysis portion of the project is complete the data gathered for this study will be destroyed.

If I have any questions or concerns about this research project I am free to discuss them with Patti and/or her supervisor, Dr. Frances Ricks. Patti can be contacted by telephone at (250) 595-6706. Frances can be contacted at the University of Victoria at (250) 721-7989.

My signature indicates that I am willing to participate in the research project as it has been described to me, under the conditions set forth in this consent form. I understand that if I agree to participate, I will be provided with a copy of this form.

Signature of Participant _____

Date _____

Appendix K

Case Example #1

Referral Information

Carmen is a grade nine student who transferred to your school in the middle of her grade eight year. The intake record filled out by a school-based counsellor indicates she was previously enrolled in a school program located in Vancouver; one specifically designed to assist students with exceptional behavioral and emotional difficulties. Although you have a similar program housed within your school, this student was enrolled in a mainstream academic program; the rationale for which has not been made clear on the intake report.

Carmen's academic record indicates she is achieving at a C minus level in three of five primary subject areas. In the other two, she is achieving at an A level. A recent interim report suggests that Carmen is frequently disruptive in class, argumentative with her teachers, resists adult direction and often hands in assignments late.

Carmen's mother is a single parent who has demonstrated some willingness to meet with teachers and administrators regarding her daughter's schooling. She is difficult to reach however, in that she has no phone. Carmen's mother disclosed in a meeting she had with you last year that the family's move to Victoria was initiated in response to her desire to remove herself from an abusive relationship with her live-in boyfriend. During the course of your discussion with her she also told you that she became pregnant with Carmen at the age of thirteen and that raising her daughter at such a young age has been a constant source of struggle.

Carmen's provocative style of dress has been a source of concern among teachers and administrators. In the staff room recently, a teacher commented that she had observed Carmen standing at the corner of Humbolt and Government Streets late one evening. Rumors have been circulating around the school that Carmen is now living with her boyfriend; an individual who is reportedly a heroin addict in his mid-twenties who has recently been released from prison.

Appendix K (continued)

Circumstance Prompting Administrative Involvement

Administrative records indicate that Carmen's attendance has dropped off markedly during the past four weeks. Her attendance record reveals that she has only attended on three of the past twenty school days. Because the family has no phone, it is difficult to make contact with Carmen's parent to discuss your concerns. In light of this circumstance you write a letter to Carmen's mother, requesting that she and her daughter attend a meeting at the school at a pre-arranged time. In the days that follow, Carmen's mother does not call to confirm that she and her daughter plan to attend the meeting . On the day of the meeting neither Carmen or her mother appear at the pre-arranged time.

Appendix L

Case Study #2

Referral Information

Lyle is a fourteen year old student who has attended your school for the past year and a half. For a variety of reasons his appearance regularly attracts attention. His hair has been artfully dyed in leopard skin fashion. His nose, lips and ears have been pierced many times and are adorned with an impressive assortment of rings, studs, and safety pins. Lyle most often comes to school dressed in black leather. His jacket has a skull painted on the back and two cobras embossed on the front. The seams on his leather pants are coming apart to the point where the clerical staff are visibly uncomfortable interacting with him when he comes into the office. When he wears a T-shirt, two vertical six-inch slash marks on the inside of his forearms are exposed. Although he is somewhat small for his age with a slight build, it appears that Lyle has been getting thinner in the past couple of months. This observation is of particular concern, given that there has been rumor and speculation circulating around the school that this student is HIV positive.

A review of this student's file indicates that Lyle is an only child who currently lives in an affluent neighborhood with his mother and her live-in boyfriend. A counsellor's report identifies that Lyle's mother is a well known author, whose work frequently takes her out of town. Lyle's father is a school principal in a neighboring district. Little is known about mother's boyfriend. Information regarding the family history contained within the report suggests that Lyle's mother has a history of unstable relationships that apparently result in frequent moves from one area of the province to another. School records indicate that Lyle has been enrolled in seventeen schools throughout the province in the past nine years. Despite the unstable nature of his home and school life, this student attends regularly, achieves moderately well and is regarded as a gifted artist and a talented musician by several of his teachers.

Circumstances Prompting Administrative Involvement

Three incidents involving this student occur on a particular day: Lyle's art teacher approaches you in the hallway at noon and requests a meeting with you after school. At the outset of the meeting she hands you a drawing that Lyle has submitted to her earlier

Appendix L (continued)

that day. The drawing is done in black and white and while somewhat abstract, appears to portray a large pair of hands covering the face of a young man. Upon closer inspection of the sketch it appears that one of the hands is pressing firmly on the eyes and forehead of the youth in the drawing, while the thumb on the opposite hand is being forcibly inserted into the youth's mouth. In place of a signature at the bottom right hand corner of the sketch, the artist has drawn a clenched fist holding a knife.

Lyle and another student become involved in a heated argument in the hallway. Lyle is apparently grabbed by the jaw and pushed up against a locker by the other youth. In the midst of the scuffle an IV needle falls to the floor. Some younger students who happen to be passing by when the incident occurred go directly to the office and report their observations to you. It is unclear from their description of the incident who the needle belongs to.

Lyle's mother phones you late in the afternoon, angry that her son has been victimized once again by a group of peers. After venting her frustration for several minutes she announces her plan to immediately withdraw Lyle and begin home schooling him.

Appendix M

Research Dilemma: The more information I provide concerning the individual circumstances of the participants the more likely it is that their anonymity could become inadvertently compromised. How do I determine where to draw that fine line between including information that could potentially be considered pertinent to the study's integrity and excluding information that has the potential to compromise the anonymity of the participants? Resolution: Make every effort to exclude any information that could identify the participants, trusting that the integrity of the research will remain intact, despite my decision to exclude some information from the text.

Appendix N

Research Dilemma: How do I fulfill the interpretive obligations associated with producing a document such as this, while simultaneously fulfilling my desire to honor as fully as possible, the words and understandings of the participants? Resolution: Be generous with the interpretive space available within the text. Use it to create extensive opportunities for the words and the understandings of the participants to stand alongside that of your own; with the intent of preserving as much as possible, the richness contained within their responses.

VITA

Surname: Anderson

Given Names: Patti Lynn

Place of Birth: Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

Educational Institutions Attended:

Family Therapy Institute of Vancouver Island	1992 to 1994
University of Victoria	1975 to 1979

Degrees Awarded:

B.A.	University of Victoria	1979
------	------------------------	------

PARTIAL COPYRIGHT LICENCE

I hereby grant the right to lend my thesis to users of the University of Victoria Library, and to make single copies only for such users or in response to a request from the Library, of any other university, or similar institution, on it's behalf or for one of its users. I further agree that permission for extensive copying of this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by me or a member of the University by me. It is understood that copying or publication of this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Title of Thesis: Dropping in on School Administrators: Conversations Regarding "At-Risk" Youth and Administrative Decision-Making

Author: 
(Signature)

Patti Lynn Anderson PATTI LYNN ANDERSON
(Name in Block Letters)

Date: June 14/2000