

Against the Odds:  
A Phenomenological Study that Examines the  
Academic Success of At Risk Youth


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## ABSTRACT

In recent years there have been numerous studies that have attempted to understand the experiences of high school dropouts. While the literature revealed extensive research on why some students leave school prematurely, there appears to be a lack of understanding as to why some at risk students stay through till graduation. This study focused on the experiences of at risk youth who remained in high school and graduated with their peers. A phenomenological inquiry was used as a guide to examining the lived experiences of the participants. The goal was to understand how the participants were able to remain in high school in spite of tremendous risk factors. Three individuals, who met the criteria for being severely at risk while in high school, were interviewed. Relevant themes emerged and they are presented in the analysis of each interview. Five common themes discussed in the last chapter are: Developing a sense of belonging in the school; Finding nurturance and mentoring relationships; Increasing confidence through accomplishments; Becoming responsible and being in control; Resisting negative influences. The final chapter also discusses what the author has learned from this project and where further research would be useful.

  
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### **Prologue**

Beth is a fifteen year old who's struggling to stay in school. She and her three sisters have been living with their grandparents for the last five years as a result of her parents' alcoholism and heroin addiction. Her life, as she knew it, has changed considerably since the death of her grandmother a few months ago. She now lives with her two younger siblings and her grandfather who has started drinking again. As a result, their house is often filled with various adults who party. It is hard to get any sleep, which makes it hard to get up in the mornings for school. Beth usually arrives late and tired. She knows that her teachers are going to expect to see some completed homework assignments and she will likely have at least one test throughout the day. She is not prepared and she knows her teachers will react to this lack of preparation. She does not really feel up to dealing with this, so instead of going to school, she decides to go downtown. Her homeroom teacher reports her as absent. The vice-principal suspects that she is truant since he has noticed that she has been frequently absent. This prompts the vice-principal to survey all of her teachers in regards to her attendance and grades. The survey reveals poor attendance and subsequently poor grades in all her subjects. Beth has no intention of quitting school. She would like to go on to university to become a child psychologist. She knows how important an education is and struggles with how she can continue given her life situation.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Beth's story is not that unusual. She is one of a large number of "at risk" youth who struggle with varying life circumstances which severely interfere with getting an education. This often results in students like Beth, either dropping out of school, or dropping out of the mainstream school system by transferring to an alternative program. Alternative programs provide educational services to students who for a variety of reasons are not likely to succeed in the regular school setting. These school environments are loosely structured and there are thought to be fewer expectations required of students who attend these programs. From my own experience it seems that few students who enter alternative programs continue with their education to the point of graduation.

Early in my career as a Youth and Family Counsellor in a small Junior Secondary School, I had numerous youth like Beth on my caseload who were struggling academically due to family and life circumstances. The majority of them were eventually referred to an alternative school or they just dropped out. It was disheartening to see so many leave prematurely with little support or hope for the future. I recall my frustration at assisting these youth in their attempts to remain within the mainstream system. I frequently heard comments like, "They're trying to get rid of me!" or "They expect me to be perfect!" Most felt the situation was hopeless and that they would never be able to live up to the expectations of the school. However, there were times when students did manage to survive the challenges of junior high and proceed on to high school. Sometimes they would come back to visit and let me know that they had made it. I

always cherished these visits because they made me aware of the incredible resilience of youth and how often their survival skills led them in the right direction.

What is unusual about Beth's story is that, in spite of her difficulties at home and at school, she managed to stay in the regular school system and graduate with her peers. She was referred to an alternative school but after a few weeks decided to return to the regular system and work on completing Grade twelve. It was a difficult course for her to take and the odds were certainly against her. However, she succeeded where often others have failed or just gave up.

Beth is not the only one who has overcome difficulties in order to continue with school. A few years ago I came into contact with two young women who had been referred to me by the Youth and Family Counsellor at a local high school. They both came from impoverished single parent families and had experienced violence in the form of physical and sexual abuse. One had left home at the age of 14 and lived with a violent boyfriend for two years. The other young woman struggled academically for most of her school life due to severe learning disabilities, and had suffered from flashbacks related to the sexual assaults that she had experienced as a child. In spite of these difficulties, both of these young women managed to graduate from high school with their peers. I was intrigued by their stories of academic success.

When I first entered graduate school I was focused on exploring the process by which students were “pushed out” of the regular system and became alternative students, and how this seemed to interfere in the attainment of a high school diploma. This interest was shaped by my work as a Youth & Family Counsellor at an alternative school for

Grade 9 and 10 students in 1992. During that year, I was increasingly concerned with the lack of structure and the low academic standards which contributed, in my perception, to students being ill-equipped for returning to the mainstream system or higher level of education. I explored these concerns through my graduate courses and found numerous studies that supported my perceptions. However, when it came time for me to conduct my own research, I found that I had little enthusiasm for continuing in this direction. I realized that, as a researcher, I needed to be curious and inspired by my research question. It was only after meeting the two women mentioned previously that I was reminded of Beth and students like her who had broken the pattern of dropping out of school when faced with numerous challenges. As a result I was intrigued with how they were able to withstand the forces that were trying to push them out of the mainstream system. What contributed to their ability to succeed in spite of the odds against them? When it came time for me to do my own research these curiosities were formulated into the following research question: How does it happen that some youth who are severely at risk of dropping out of high school manage to complete Grade 12 and graduate with their peers?

After an extensive review of the literature on high school dropouts I decided to define “at risk” students as those who have experienced two or more of the following conditions: (a) low socioeconomic status, (b) living in a single parent family as a result of divorce or death of a parent, (c) demonstrating poor school performance resulting in course failure and grade retention, and (d) severe personal problems independent of school and family. This last condition includes physical and sexual abuse, substance misuse, pregnancy and conflicts with the law.

The barriers facing students like Beth have been well documented in the research literature. Chapter Two presents a review of the literature which identifies risk factors that place students at risk of dropping out of school. This Chapter also explores how the educational system contributes to the phenomenon of youth leaving school prematurely.

The concept of resiliency has gained in popularity over the last five years and it is a topic that immediately came to mind when various individuals learned of my research question. Chapter Three provides a review of the literature on resiliency and how it might explain why some students are able to overcome the social and educational barriers identified in Chapter Two. I deemed it necessary to look at the literature on resiliency to see if it could inform me on the influences of various protective factors, both internal and external, on the lives of at risk children and youth.

In Chapter Four I discuss phenomenology, the methodology used for this study. This qualitative approach enabled me to use a method of doing research that closely relates to my practice as a family therapist; interested in people's stories and how they interpret and make sense of their experiences. I was therefore drawn to a phenomenological orientation which allowed me to explore the lived experiences of high school graduates who fit the criteria for being at risk of dropping out of school. This chapter also discusses the procedures employed for locating participants, the approach taken to the interviews, and how I analyzed the data.

Chapter Five captures the essence of the experiences described by the participants in this inquiry. It includes descriptive accounts of the individual experiences and the themes that were brought to the surface through the reflective interview process.

In Chapter Six I discuss some of the common themes that emerged in all three interviews. I also discuss some of the possible implications that arise from this study. Since the goal of phenomenological research is to capture the essence of an experience, my focus here is on what I have learned from the stories told by the participants of this inquiry and how this learning can inform educators and school counsellors in their attempts to keep youth like Beth in school.

## CHAPTER TWO

### At Risk Youth

When I began reviewing the literature on high school dropouts, it seemed necessary to gain an historical perspective on this issue. As a society, we have a long standing history of being worried about students who fail to complete high school. The literature revealed extensive research in the last thirty years on the topic of high school retention (B.C. Ministry of Education, 1994; Birch, 1970; Gilbert, Barr, Clark & Sunter, 1993; King, Warren, Michalski, & Peart, 1988; Tannenbaum, 1966; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, R. R., 1989; Young, 1990). In 1966, Tannenbaum examined the concerns around high school retention, as it was increasingly becoming a problem in the United States. This concern represented a shift from the early 1900's when there were few students who went beyond grammar school since employment was considered a higher priority.

At the turn of the century, there was a coalition of professional educators who became increasingly alarmed at the number of children who were dropping out of elementary school along with new entrants to high schools. This provided the impetus for vocational education (Kelly, 1993). Educational researchers found that boys did less well academically, were forced to repeat more grades more often, and subsequently quit school in larger numbers than girls. This phenomenon became known as "the boy" problem, the solution for which was to implement vocational programs in the high schools.

Following the end of the Second World War, education became the vehicle by which one could elevate oneself into modern life and higher socioeconomic class. New

technologies were eliminating many of the unskilled jobs that were held by uneducated young people. By the 1950's the national graduation rate increased to over 50 per cent. By the 1960's it had reached the 75 percent mark. As a result of this trend, dropouts became viewed as deviants. Because the educational system had achieved success with most students, it became easy to argue that it was the dropout and not the school practices that was at fault. If the majority of youth could succeed to the point of graduation then the school must be an effective institution. Dropouts were then seen as "aberrant individuals who are deviant, dysfunctional or deficit due to personal, family or community characteristics" (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989, p.75). Not surprisingly, researchers focused on dropouts in terms of the personal and social characteristics they had in common. These studies successfully deflected attention away from problems within the school itself and had the effect of suggesting that social conditions were causing students to drop out since they appeared deviant, deficient or negligent in regards to school. There was little interest in examining the policies and practices of schools in regards to finding effective means for retaining the potential dropout.

In the 1960's school retention became what Tannenbaum (1966) called a "cause celebre". School withdrawal was seen as a major problem, particularly in large urban communities. The emphasis to keep youth in school was driven from a belief that without a diploma the chances of rising in "prestige, power and economic security are reduced and the likelihood of gravitating towards crime and despair increased" (Tannenbaum, 1966, p.5). Uneducated, unmotivated and directionless teens were seen as a threat and

liability to society. Hence, the remedy for such concerns was through school retention. The evidence was clear that early school withdrawal led to joblessness and lawlessness since unemployment rates among dropouts were double those of high school graduates and the contrast in delinquency rates was even more alarming. Addressing these issues seemed relatively simple since the link between leaving school prematurely and engaging in undesirable behaviour was clear. Therefore, the solution for juvenile unemployment and crime was school retention. If the school dropout rate could be lowered, then one could expect a rise in adolescent employability and respect for the law.

However, the goal of keeping youth in school was not simple. The act of leaving school was seen as a symptom of varied personal and social factors. These included: low socioeconomic status, home environments where the importance of education was deflated, emotional difficulties, and failing course work or being held back one grade level. Further, if the home environment was not supportive, then attendance suffered accordingly. Numerous studies in these personal and social factors revealed that an estimated two thirds of the parents of dropouts were either hostile or indifferent toward school and more than 70% of them had failed to complete Grade twelve (Tannenbaum, 1966). Lower class students were also found to lack the preparation necessary to withstand heavy academic pressures. They entered school without the wealth of experience and verbal capabilities essential for scholastic success. This became a greater handicap as they continued through the grades. Schools seemed ill-equipped to support these students and instead punished them with low grades. They were further punished

when they began to act out in ways that may have been sanctioned in their homes and communities but were “condemned in a middle-class milieu” (Tannenbaum, 1966, p.16).

Other researchers during the 1960’s found similar results to Tannenbaum. In their book Disadvantaged Children: Health, Nutrition and School Failure (1970), Herbert Birch and Joan Gussow found that children who live in impoverished conditions were clearly handicapped and at a much greater risk of leaving school with an inadequate education than their more advantaged contemporaries. They found that given their poor education “such children are doomed in young adulthood to either no employment or only marginal employment” (p.125). As a consequence, their children were much more likely to also grow up with poverty and repeat their parents’ pattern of school failure.

Further review of the literature revealed that educators are still trying to understand this complex problem. A more current study of school dropouts in the United States conducted by Wehlage, et al. (1989), revealed three factors or correlates in the literature that significantly increased the likelihood of youth leaving school prematurely. The first concerns the social and family background of the student. Virtually all studies link low socioeconomic status with higher drop out rates. Similarly, children from homes in which parents have a low educational attainment or where English is not the primary language are more likely to drop out. The second factor involves personal problems that tend to be independent of social class and family background. These include health problems, mental and physical issues, substance abuse, legal problems, trauma from divorce or death in the family, pregnancy; and learning disabilities. The third factor involves the school. Grade retention, course failures, truancy, suspensions and other

disciplinary problems are all strongly associated with dropping out (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1987; Whelage et. al., 1989).

### **Social and Family Background**

The link between low school retention and low socioeconomic status has been well documented. Many studies have found that dropouts are disproportionately from poor families and racial and ethnic minority groups. An extensive study by Ekstrom et. al (1987) found that students at risk of dropping out tend to come from homes with a weaker support system and fewer study aids present in the home. Their research suggests that these students have fewer opportunities to engage in non-school related learning and are less likely to have both natural parents living at home. Their mothers are more likely to have lower levels of formal education, which results in lower educational expectations for their children. Sullivan (1988) and King, Warren, Michalski & Peart (1988) have supported these findings in their examinations of the drop out problem in Ontario Secondary Schools, as has Harte (1994) in his exploration of how to improve school attendance. They found that socioeconomic status was frequently cited as a factor causing students to leave school early. This condition is often linked with other elements, such as, the absence of a father in the home, frequent moving and low academic achievement of the parents. This final point becomes quite relevant as one considers the recent movement in the educational system to have parents become more aware and involved in their children's academic progress.

A Canadian survey of school dropouts revealed a large number of youth who reported growing up in a series of foster homes or group homes (Government of Canada,

1990). They felt little economic and emotional stability in their lives during this time, which severely impacted on their ability to function at school. Others described being raised in dysfunctional homes where one or both parents were frequently absent or did not function as parents due to alcohol or drug abuse. As a group, these youths described themselves as having school problems early in life. Frequent moves and changes in living situations as well as a long history of contact with social service agencies, made school achievement difficult. They were distinct in that they had no aspirations that motivated them toward educational attainment.

Tanner, Krahn and Hartnagel (1995) support these findings in their recent book Fractured Transitions from School to Work: Revisiting the Dropout Problem. They found a number of individual factors were associated with dropping out and that dropouts have lower self-esteem and less sense of control over their lives. However, socioeconomic background could explain this sense of hopelessness, since young people from less advantaged backgrounds exhibit lower self-esteem and report lower educational and occupational aspirations. Therefore, the causal role of these individual characteristics can not be viewed as isolated risk factors, since children who come from less-well-off families have both “fewer educational advantages and fewer role models who have gone on to higher education and are responding to lower educational and occupational aspirations on the part of their parents” (Tanner et al., 1995, p. 16).

A significant number of dropouts tend to come from single parent families (Ekstrom et al., 1987; Harte, 1994; King et al., 1988; Tanner et al., 1995; Wehlage et al., 1989). Tanner found in his study that one in four dropouts live with a single parent, but

once again he warns that the underlying causal patterns are not that clear. Single parents typically have much lower incomes and are socio-economically disadvantaged, which might be part of the explanation. Also, single parents are forced to work while looking after household and parenting responsibilities which leaves little time or energy for helping children with their school work.

### **Personal Problems**

#### **Economic**

A number of studies revealed that students who drop out of school tend to have a variety of personal problems that distract them from the business of achieving at school. Some students find themselves no longer living at home and in need of a job to support themselves. Employment is a frequent reason for leaving school early for students who need to either support themselves or their families (Fine, 1987). Many dropouts leave school prematurely because they are offered jobs and they choose to work because of the freedom and financial independence that comes along with employment (Government of Canada, 1990).

A survey of students in Ontario schools found that 40% of senior students who work do so for more than 20 hours per week (King et al., 1988). This amount of time is bound to have an adverse effect on school achievement. However, in this study there is little evidence to suggest that part-time work contributes to students deciding to leave school early since over 40 percent of the dropouts were unemployed at the time of leaving school. Also, a large majority of high school students who do graduate are also employed in part time jobs. Hence, employment alone is not a predictor of leaving school early. In

spite of this, the desire to get into the labour force was listed as the major reason for dropping out by a group of youth in Ontario, and the decision to do so is that much easier if the student already has a job to go to (Sullivan, 1988). Other studies have shown that a few hours of work each week is actually associated with a lower risk of dropping out (Tanner et al., 1995). However, excessive hours of work can clearly interfere in one's education and increase the chances of dropping out. It is quite possible that young people who have little interest in school are more likely to seek paid employment or increase their hours when they are already employed part time.

### **Family Crisis**

Aside from being poor, students in a variety of studies revealed that intense family problems contributed to their decision to leave school early. Many youth indicated parental conflicts provoked them to leave home early which subsequently put them in need of employment to support themselves (Government of Canada, 1990; Wehlage et al., 1989). The need to support oneself becomes a priority that overshadows schooling and contributes to frequent absences that result in falling behind in course work. While these students may fully intend on continuing with school, their immediate need for employment contributes to a perception of school being a detriment that interferes in their ability to take on extra shifts during school time. School is not seen as a benefit leading to employment; if anything it is interference.

Another aspect of family problems cited in the literature relates to the effects of alcohol and substance abuse on the family (Gov. of Canada, 1990; King et al. 1988; Wehlage & Rutter, 1987). A number of students reported having parents whose

alcoholism or drug addictions severely impaired their parenting. This research suggested that these are youth who are frequently subjected to physical, sexual or emotional abuse, which are regular features of their family life. Their home life is described as dysfunctional with parents who are frequently absent both physically and emotionally. For these students it is difficult to accomplish the homework tasks assigned by their teachers due to the home environment being chaotic and stressful. They tended to spend as little time at home as possible and often leave home prematurely to escape the violence and substance abuse.

There are many studies that have examined the effects of alcoholism and addictions on children and they generally suggest that a significant number of children who live with alcoholism have “poor self concepts, are easily frustrated, perform poorly in school and are more likely to suffer adjustment problems” (Ackerman, 1983, p. 48). Developmentally children are very egocentric and they often view parental behaviour as a reflection of their own self worth. Children view something being wrong in their family as something being wrong with them. This internalization has a negative impact on a child’s self image which then affects other aspects of their lives, like school performance. Claudia Black (1990), a leading authority on the effects of alcoholism on the family, found through her research that where there is alcohol or substance abuse, there is also a high probability of physical or sexual abuse as well. She claimed that where people are living with alcoholism they are in an abusive environment. The abuse may not be physical, but most certainly emotional abuse is present. Often children in these families internalize the abuse as shame and a deep sense of inadequacy. These feelings can have

negative effects on school performance since these children and youth grow up with such low self-esteem, believing that they are always wrong or likely to fail (Black, 1990).

Divorce and separation are also seen as family crises that can have severe effects on children and youth. Both are experiences where the children lose something that is “fundamental to their development - the family structure,” (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989, p. 11). Judith Wallerstein and Susan Blakeslee (1989) in their book Second Chances contended that children and adolescents suffer greatly when their parents decide to separate and eventually divorce. The family supports the physical, psychological and emotional needs of its members and when the family structure collapses children are left without support. This lack of support may be only temporary or it could be more long term depending on the coping abilities of the parents. Divorce can be an event that leaves children and adolescents feeling rejected, lonely, angry and often helpless, and these feelings can have adverse effects on the lives of these children for years to come. However, Wallerstein has pointed out that divorce itself is not an accurate predictor of how children will do five, ten or fifteen years later. She found in her study that some children who reacted severely to their parents’ divorce and who were viewed as severely troubled and depressed, seemed to be doing fine ten years later. At the same time, she also found that some of the least disturbed children who were calm and somewhat content following the divorce were in poor shape ten or fifteen years later. Hence, divorce alone cannot be viewed as an isolated risk factor that accounts for developmental problems and poor school performance.

### **Substance Abuse**

Some of the studies reviewed found that alcohol and substance abuse had devastating effects on school attendance and performance. One study found that 13% of the student population in fourteen alternative schools were involved, or had been involved, in drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs (Wehlage et al., 1989). As adolescents become more habitual users of drugs and alcohol their ability to concentrate becomes diminished and the gaps in their knowledge become wider and wider. This inevitably leads to failure in their courses and eventually to dropping out of school altogether (Nowinski, 1990). Students who get drawn into the drug culture are often unapproachable. Teachers in alternative schools describe a “self absorption” of these students that keeps them beyond the reach of adults. They also become distant from their peers and refuse to acknowledge the consequences of their behaviour. This attitude is present in a study conducted by the Government of Canada (1990) where the researcher found that youth who were still using drugs or alcohol viewed their usage as having little influence on their decision to drop out of school. However, those youth who had been abusing substances, but had since stopped, viewed their usage as impacting greatly on their willingness to attend school and their ability to perform academically.

### **Teenage Pregnancy**

Teen pregnancy is the single most common factor that contributes to adolescent girls dropping out of school. While most girls fully intend to return to school after the birth of their child, inadequate support and an inflexible school system make it next to impossible for these girls to successfully return to their studies (Government of Canada,

1990; Tanner et al., 1995; Wehlage et al., 1989). Most teen mothers are without family or financial support, which contributes to an extreme amount of stress. There is also little support from the fathers of these babies, leaving these mothers virtually on their own. When forced to live on their own by means of social assistance the cost of daycare is prohibitive. The financial stress of living as a single parent becomes the focus of their lives, and education becomes a distant goal. Social pressures from remaining in class pregnant or as a teenage parent can also be difficult and may result in some suspending their education. Usually withdrawal from school is viewed as a temporary leave with intentions of returning to school once subsidized daycare is available or they've been accepted into a special program. However, long waiting lists and difficulty in obtaining funds for daycare make it virtually impossible for teenage mothers to return. For those who do find themselves in a position of returning to school most report that they didn't want to return to their original schools because they felt older and distant from the other students. A special program for teen mothers was preferable for these youth since their peer students would understand what they were going through as a teen mother. In addition, they expected that the staff would be more supportive and flexible to their circumstances.

### **Legal Problems**

Delinquency is another factor that significantly interferes in the educational process. Educators attempting to redirect the energies of students susceptible to criminal behaviours are faced with numerous challenges. Youth who live with poverty, adult rejection and school failure may be drawn to the excitement and intensity of breaking the

law. Most students in this category are engaging in a variety of adult behaviours, which increase the likelihood of delinquency, namely drinking alcohol, smoking marijuana and having sex. These youth are hard to engage in personal relationships and personal relationships are required to increase the effectiveness of interventions aimed at redirecting their energy to learning and behaviours less likely to result in trouble with the law (Ekstrom et al., 1987; Harte, 1994; Wehlage et al., 1989).

### **School Problems**

Most of the research reviewed in this chapter indicated that school problems are the most immediate and recognizable factors that contribute to students leaving school early. A number of studies reported that reasons for leaving school prematurely included a combination of feeling alienated from the school and less satisfied with their education (Ekstrom et al., 1987; Government of Canada, 1990; Harte, 1994; King et al., 1988; Sullivan, 1988; Tanner et al., 1995; Wehlage et al., 1989). Further, youth who eventually drop out are often those who: have repeated grades, have lower course grades, score lower on tests, frequently skip classes, have disciplinary problems and have likely been suspended for absenteeism. One study noted that 10% of graduates reported that they did not enjoy school; this figure jumped to 41% for those who dropped (Tanner et al., 1995). Generally, these studies reveal that a majority of school dropouts feel a sense of alienation from the school culture and are less likely to be interested or motivated towards working hard. Their perception is that other students view them as troublemakers, which pushes them toward relationships with others who are also alienated from school.

Low academic achievement has been consistently associated with leaving high school early. A number of studies found that a vast majority of dropouts were taking mainly general level courses at the time of leaving school (King et al., 1988; Sullivan, 1988; Tanner et al., 1995). In one such study, Ontario students who were enrolled in Basic or General courses were found to be five times more likely to leave school before graduation than those students enrolled in the advanced academic stream. Also, only 8% of high school graduates reported failing a grade in elementary school, compared with 36% of dropouts (Tanner et al., 1995). However, these statistics should not be confused with academic ability since most of the research reviewed found no correlation between low academic ability and dropping out of high school. The reason most students did poorly in their courses was due to personal problems resulting in frequent truancies and a lack of motivation to do the work necessary for achieving a passing grade (King et al., 1988; Tanner et al., 1995; Wehlage, 1988).

A majority of the research reviewed found that the single most outstanding feature of a dropout is a history of failure (Ekstrom et al., 1987; Government of Canada, 1990; Harte, 1994; King et al., 1988; Wehlage et al., 1989). Most students leave school because they have experienced a series of failures and received a host of messages from adults and peers that they are not worthy. This inevitably leads to a feeling of disengagement and alienation from school. When the constant message is one of rejection, failure and inadequacy, the “bonds of trust and affection that sustain people in social settings for a common purpose are broken or diminished” (Wehlage et al., 1989, p.176). These repeated assaults on their self-esteem become intolerable and result in frequent truancies

and a slow withdrawal from school life. Because few of them have personal or family resources to counteract the negative experiences of school, most become dropouts. For these students, rejection of the legitimacy of the school may be a way for them to assert their control and superiority over an institution that is making them feel worthless. It is an attempt at maintaining some dignity and self respect in spite of a system that repeatedly tells them, in subtle and direct ways, that they are not good at anything and cannot be successful.

The history of failure is a long and gradual process that occurs over time. The process usually begins with a lack of involvement in extracurricular activities and a lack of friends at school. Students who completed high school report that these activities and their close friendships provide incentives for attending. They too report a dissatisfaction with their education, but having close relationships and involvement in structured and non-structured activities are sources of support that offer a “pull” for remaining in school. For school dropouts who became involved in school activities, withdrawal from these activities was the first step towards dropping out. A variety of factors ranging from drug abuse to family problems contribute to this pulling away (Government of Canada, 1990). For some students the withdrawal begins during a difficult transition to high school where they find themselves having trouble making friends or joining clubs and teams that are highly competitive and exclusive. Skipping classes is one significant step signaling the beginning of the disengagement process. Although most students skip classes at times, potential dropouts escalate their skipping school behaviour till they’re out of class for longer blocks of time. This leads to a vicious circle where the frequent absences result in

poor grades, which only increases truancy in order to avoid tests or a teacher's displeasure.

Another common step in the process of disengaging from school is being suspended for skipping classes or aggressive acts towards teachers or other students. In a number of studies students reported a sense of feeling "pushed out" of school as opposed to actually leaving (Ekstrom et al., 1987; Government of Canada, 1990; Wehlage et al., 1989). Students who experienced behavioural problems in particular described feeling that "someone" wanted them out of the school, be it teachers or administrators, who then pushed for repeated suspensions which eventually led to an expulsion. Students whose appearance or manner of dress was different from the norm also reported feeling discriminated against and were pushed out of school by teachers who perceived and responded to them as troublemakers. These studies suggest that students are sensitive to the negative attitudes of teachers and administrators towards them, and they contribute to their disengagement from the school environment, which often leads to dropping out.

### **Gender Differences**

The literature revealed some gender differences in leaving school prematurely. A number of studies revealed that males are more likely to leave school early and to report leaving school for work-related reasons (Ekstrom et al., 1987; King et al., 1988; Tanner et al., 1995). This suggests that they may be enticed into leaving school early by the possibility of earning more money and perhaps attaining adult status through a full-time job. Males were also more than twice as likely to leave school because of behaviour problems, including not being able to get along with teachers and being expelled or

suspended. Girls on the other hand were more likely to leave school for personal or family reasons such as getting married or having a baby. Girls who are alienated from school tended to stay enrolled longer than their male counterparts, but they put little effort into their studies. These differences could be due to the socialization process and parental control which results in girls being more passive in their resistance or withdrawal from the educational system.

### **How the Educational System contributes to the Problem**

I was interested in the ways in which at risk youth might be influenced by an educational system that makes no allowances for special circumstances, which could severely interfere with the day to day responsibilities of being a student. This assumption was based on my own experiences while working as a Youth and Family Counsellor in a Junior Secondary school. A brief review of the literature on program effects revealed that, for the most part, the educational system is not in a position to respond to the special needs of students who are likely to drop out. Until the late 1980's, most research addressing the issue of school retention focused exclusively on the personal characteristics of the drop out students. While this research focus is informative, it also gives the impression that the dropout problem is a function of the individual. This approach has resulted in an attitude that tends to blame the student. It fosters attitudes like, "If these young people could be just a little bit more motivated and skilled, then their commitment to education would likely increase as well."

The focus on the individual prevented a closer look at the structural causes that may contribute significantly to the dropout rate. The examination of structural factors

such as the characteristics of schools, curriculum content, and the changing character of the labour market may offer a broader understanding of the drop out problem. Perhaps the time, energy and cost of conducting a large scale study of schools could explain why so few studies of this nature have been completed. On the other hand, the lack of understanding about systemic influences allows the educational system to be less than accountable for all its students.

There are some studies that did uncover organizational factors that have a significant influence on learning. A number of studies found that “ a positive image of the school in the community, a strong academic curriculum, high expectations by teachers for all students, and time spent with students outside of classes were all associated with lower dropout rates” (Tanner et al., 1995, p.19). This last characteristic has been cited in other research as the single most important factor for keeping students connected to school, namely developing a school environment where personal relationships between students and teachers are encouraged (Harte, 1994; King et al., 1988; Mann, 1987; Tanner et al., 1995; Wehlage et al., 1989). An examination of Ontario schools by Sullivan (1988) reported that a majority of students who dropped out did not tell anyone of their intentions because they firmly believed that no one cared. He suggested that “ respondents did not feel a particularly strong bond or any strong feeling of belonging in the sense that they believe the teaching staff cared about their welfare (p.23). When students did decide to talk with someone about their decision to leave school, they generally felt it was not very useful since they had made up their minds to drop out and

no one worked hard at trying to convince them to do otherwise (Government of Canada, 1990).

An examination of fourteen high schools in the United States by Wehlage et al. (1989) viewed the dropout rate as an indicator of the general health of that educational system. They found that many students go to school each day only to be told in various subtle and direct ways that they are not good at anything. This ongoing assault on a student's self esteem makes school an intolerable place, which results in a sense of disengagement and alienation. In light of this, Wehlage et al. encouraged schools to do their own self-examination in order to develop educational interventions that improve achievement and retention for at risk students. They emphasized that it is the interaction between student and school that plays a crucial role in an individual's decision to drop out. Although students' home and personal problems contribute to their failure in school, there's a strong case that schools contribute in important ways to the problems of students. They cited evidence from the research that calls into question the effectiveness of "policies and practices that cause many students to be suspended, to receive failing marks, and to be retained in grade.... The wisdom of these practices is questionable if schools are concerned about their dropout rates, since research indicates a strong correlation between such policies and the incidence of dropping out" (Wehlage et al., 1989, p. 26).

An examination of different schools in different communities revealed some fundamental class distinctions that are worth mentioning. Wealthier families live in upper middle class neighbourhoods where more money is typically available for

education. This translates to “better facilities and teaching resources, as well as more specialized services and may also attract and retain more highly skilled and motivated teachers” (Tanner et al., 1995, p. 15). In light of this, the dropout phenomenon becomes part of a process whereby social inequalities are perpetuated. Middle class youth bring more “cultural capital” to school, meaning that they are “more likely to speak like their teachers, to be comfortable in a verbal and symbolic environment, to already know something about the subjects being taught, to have additional skills (e.g. music training), and to have access to educational resources in their homes” (Tanner et al., 1995, p.16). This perspective suggests that differences in educational attitudes and performance have an underlying class basis.

In the United States two organizational factors have been associated with high dropout rates. The first factor was described as “urban social disorganization” which relates to “large schools in large cities, with high proportions of students from minority groups, and located in communities with high unemployment, high crime, extensive poverty and many single parent families” (Tanner et al., 1995, p. 19). The second factor is related to school administrative problems and the social environment within schools, as indicated by “poor teacher-administration cooperation, teachers who emphasized maintaining control over instructional objectives, students’ perceptions that rules were not clear or fair, and large numbers of students with little commitment to conventional social rules” (p. 19). This research resulted in the following recommendations: smaller schools where students are less anonymous; an individualized curriculum and an instructional approach that prevents academic failure and low self esteem; and a school

climate where the rules are clear and there is a normative emphasis on academic excellence that is consistently rewarded.

The literature also revealed a debate that centres on the plausibility of schools being able to respond appropriately to the needs of at risk students to prevent them from leaving prematurely. Some educators, such as Finn (cited in Wehlage et. al., 1989), argued that schools should avoid reforms directed at students who are at risk of dropping out because they are likely to endanger the rising standards of public education. Strategies for preventing potential dropouts are not likely to succeed because at-risk students come disproportionately from the underclass in our society and students drop out because of factors related to their social and family situations over which the school has no control. He contended that "the symptom is not likely to be eradicated by school-based remedies" since dropping out is a manifestation of "linked social pathologies and inherited characteristics" (p.29), and dropping out of school is no different than going on welfare or committing a crime. Therefore, the problems relating to school effectiveness are irrelevant.

### **Conclusion**

Although there is substantive evidence to support the various factors contributing to the student dropout rate, it is important to realize that these factors are all interrelated and interact in ways that are not fully understood. The factors described in this chapter seem to influence some students to drop out while they may have little to no effect on others. Hence, dropping out of high school appears to be a more complex process that involves the individual circumstances and characteristics of a student within the particular

school context. There is a wealth of information describing the individual factors that put a particular group of students at risk of dropping out, and within the last ten years there has been a shift in focus to the organizational factors such as school size that significantly contribute to the dropout rate. While dropping out may seem like a single decisive act it is more appropriate to consider this act as only one event in a gradual process of disengagement from the educational system which begins long before the student finally decides to call it quits.

This chapter has examined why some students tend to withdraw from the educational system prematurely. The dropout problem has been conceptualized within the literature in three different areas. The focus has been on the influences of: sociological factors, namely the effects of poverty and single parent families; psychological factors, like responses to trauma and addictions; and educational factors such as administrative policies for dealing with behaviour problems and lack of support services. The theoretical orientation of the researcher determined the focus of inquiry with social scientists exploring individual characteristics and circumstances, sociologists exploring broader environmental factors, and educators examining school policies and organizational complexities. The result is a fragmented view that overwhelms and confuses the practitioner.

Originally I had intended to duplicate some of the research that has been reviewed in this chapter. In light of my readings, I wondered if it wasn't redundant to do yet another study on the experiences of school dropouts. The findings of the research reviewed here are fairly consistent. It seemed to me that perhaps it was time for educators

and social scientists to approach this problem from another perspective, one with a focus on what contributed to the *successful* completion of high school for at risk students rather than continuing to focus on those who failed. We have been well informed by students who didn't make it through the regular system, and it seemed that it is time for us to hear from the ones who had. Hence, I decided to focus my own research on those students who made it through the system in spite of the risk factors that have been outlined in this literature review. I believed that their experiences could shed some new light on the dropout problem and inform us as to the factors or variables that made it possible for them to succeed.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Resiliency

“Resiliency” was one of the first words that came to mind when people heard about my research question. There was an assumption that resiliency played a role in why the students who participated in this study managed to overcome the odds. This assumption provoked me to explore further the research on resiliency. How is it defined in the literature? Is it something that is dependent on personal internal factors like personality, temperament or intelligence; or is resiliency dependent on external factors such as supportive adults and/or special programs?

There has been extensive research over the last twenty years on the resiliency of children and youth. Even the popular press has explored the subject to some degree. A recent cover of *Chatelaine* magazine (May, 1998) featured a story titled “Strong after Struggle: Secrets of resilient people.” But, what is resilience and how it is understood? The dictionary defines resilience as “the act of rebounding” (Thatcher & McQueen, 1984). According to this definition resiliency would imply people’s ability to adjust and accommodate to harsh conditions and bounce back from the potential harmful consequences. How do they do it?

A variety of disciplines, mostly medical and psychiatric research, have explored the concept of resiliency by identifying personal characteristics and environmental conditions that promote and encourage healthy development. The focus of this research has been on the identification of adaptive strengths in children and youth from high risk environments, and it represents a shift from a pathological orientation which focused

primarily on the development of poor coping skills which were then identified as behavioural, mental or emotional disorders. Resilience research has attempted to identify the ways in which children and youth develop successful coping strategies and adaptive strengths when they are in very stressful and challenging environments. Previously, child development research has characterized responses in children and youth to extreme stress and adverse living conditions as pathological, but resilience research is focused on identifying variables that sustain development and result in high functioning individuals. This shift has been attributed to criticisms of studies that only focused on adjustment difficulties in children. According to Garmezy (cited in Werner & Smith, 1982) mental health practitioners and researchers were predisposed by “interest, investment and training to seeing only deviance, psycho-pathology and weaknesses wherever they looked.” In his view this created an imbalance which “is being righted today” with the research on resilience (p. xvii).

Alan Wade (1995) has explored the concept of resistance as opposed to resilience, and how most victims of oppression and abuse tend to resist their mistreatment in some form. He has contended that "whenever persons are badly treated, they resist. Resistance to oppression may be open and direct or subtle and disguised, depending on the dangers and opportunities that exist in specific situations" (p. 168). I found this concept interesting in that it assumes that all persons who experience maltreatment of some kind protest this treatment in some way. Perhaps resilience is actually resistance against environmental forces that influence children and youth towards maladaptive behaviours? There is a common belief that resilience (or resistance) results in some way from the

interplay between risk and protective factors, but the nature of the interactions “is poorly understood and usually inconsistently described in the literature” (Kirby & Fraser, 1997, p. 17). Nevertheless, I have summarized some of the common themes presented in the resilience literature.

There is a common belief within the literature reviewed that resiliency is the result of an interrelationship between three primary factors: personal characteristics, environmental circumstances and family experiences (Brown & Rhodes, 1991). Personal characteristics include innate and acquired abilities such as intelligence, temperament and individual strengths which contribute to the ability of some children and youth to adapt to different situations and cope with certain events that for some children may prove to be devastating. Environmental circumstances refer to events and situations external to the youth’s family and his or her personal makeup. These include relationships within the extended family, peers and members of the community in addition to events that happen outside of the home such as extracurricular activities, school experiences, professional interventions and social pressures. Family experiences refer to the support, or lack of, provided by immediate family members, and the character strengths that have been learned from family members that help some children effectively deal with their difficulties. These three factors combined have been identified as having the most influence on whether children and youth will overcome the stressors that have put them at risk.

### **Personal characteristics**

A number of studies have found that resilient children possess certain personality traits that enhance their relationships with their peers and significant adults, and enable them to seek out and access support and resources that assist them in overcoming extreme barriers (Anthony, 1982; Bandura, 1986; Garnezy, 1983; Musick, 1987; Seligman, 1997; Werner, & Smith, 1982). One study which has pioneered the development of resilience research was published in a book titled Vulnerable But Invincible: A longitudinal study of resilient children and youth (1982) by Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith. They conducted a large scale research project that examined the lives of children in Hawaii over the course of thirty years. Although their research originally was focused on children who were vulnerable, they couldn't help noticing that the majority were in fact resilient and had tremendous potential for positive change and personal growth. As their research progressed and the children became older they identified a number of personality traits of the youth characterized as resilient. In general they found that:

They were responsible, had internalized a set of values and made them useful in their lives, and had attained a greater degree of social maturity than many of their age-mates who grew up under more favourable conditions. They displayed a strong need for achievement as well, with an internalized appreciation for the need for some structure in their lives. Resilient youth also shared a greater interest in matters that are labelled in conventional wisdom as 'feminine'; they were more appreciative, gentle, nurturant, sensitive, and more socially perceptive than the young men and women who had difficulties coping with the world around them. (p.89)

High self esteem is a personality variable identified by Rutter (cited in Hauser, Vieyra, Jacobson & Wertlieb, 1989) as being associated with stress resistance. In his

study of ten year old boys, he found that higher self esteem related to good scholastic achievement seems to provide a certain amount of protection for disadvantaged children. Intelligence may also play a role here. Intellectually able children possess greater problem-solving skills and higher self esteem related to academic achievements. According to Garmezy (1983) these factors could be protective influences but he warns that “there is still much to be learned about the effects of individual characteristics such as these, and even more to be discovered about how they operate in increasing or decreasing vulnerability to various stressors” (p. 22).

Seligman (1997), viewed self esteem as an aspect of optimism which he identified through his research as a personality trait that can curb depression, boost school performance and improve physical health. He found that children who had optimistic views tended to have high self esteem as a result of doing well at certain tasks and activities. They felt more confident about their abilities to cope with whatever challenges came their way and were likely to persevere when they experienced failures. They had temporary explanations for bad events that occurred in their lives, and permanent explanations for good events.

Werner and Smith (1982) found that both self esteem and locus of control are significant variables that differentiate resilient youth from others, but only when there is a great deal of stress in their lives. They noticed that, in late adolescence, resilient youth “had a more internal locus of control, a more positive self-concept, and a more nurturant, responsible and achievement oriented attitude toward life than peers who had developed serious coping problems” (p. 154). Hence, they identified a positive self concept and

internal locus of control as “two ameliorative or protective factors important in counterbalancing the risk associated with stress” (Hauser et. al, 1989, p. 114).

Bandura (1986) has introduced the concept of “self-efficacy” which describes a belief in one’s ability to effectively control specific events in one’s life. According to Bandura, resilient individuals possess a self system that enables them to exercise a measure of control over their thoughts, feelings, motivations and actions. From his extensive research, he found that “how people interpret the results of their own performance attainments informs and alters their environments and their self-beliefs, which in turn, inform and alter subsequent performance” (Pajares, 1997, p. 2). People who are resilient believe they are efficacious and tend to see their successes as resulting from high ability and their failures as resulting from lack of effort. Self perceptions of capability help determine what individuals will do with the knowledge and skills that they have, and are critical determinants of how well knowledge and skill are acquired in the first place.

Garmezy (1983) also identified a positive sense of self, sense of personal power, an internal locus of control and a belief in the ability to exercise control over the environment as significant factors in resiliency. He found that superior social skills and coping styles contribute to the adaptive abilities of children exposed to very stressful circumstances. Competent and stress resistant children were found to possess certain social skills, such as being friendly and well liked by peers and adults alike, sensitive to others, socially responsible and more cooperative. They also appear to have the ability to regulate their impulse drives and to delay gratification.

Benard (1998) had similar findings and identified the following characteristics as being central to the quality of resilience: social competence, problem-solving skills and autonomy. These characteristics develop early on and carry children through some difficult circumstances. In relation to social competence she found resilient children have the capacity to engage with people from a very early stage. She found them to be “responsive and often funny” resulting in positive relationships and an ability to solve problems, which also develop early in their lives (p. 18). As for autonomy, she noted that they often act independently and are able to exert some control over their lives.

A point worth mentioning here is noted by Armstrong (1994) in her research on the comparisons between characteristics associated with resiliency and those associated with codependency. She found that embedded in the resiliency research is an assumption that “the absence of identified pathology is the same as the presence of health, and that successful coping strategies are the same as healthy development” (p.4). Armstrong cautions us from accepting this fundamental belief that the absence of distress in high stress environments means that children and youth have developed healthy coping skills. She notes that the literature on codependence emphasizes survival strategies developed in childhood does not always “translate into healthy adult coping skills.” A number of the personality traits and qualities that have been attributed to resilient children and youth are also characteristics identified in codependent adults who grew up in alcoholic and abusive families. Hence, one needs to be aware that characteristics positively defined as resiliency could also be negatively defined as codependency.

### **Environmental Circumstances**

Some of the research reviewed examined external protective factors that contributed to the resilience of children and youth. “Protective factors” refer to the strengths and positive forces that are present in the environments of high risk children and youth (Armstrong, 1994; Garmezy, 1983; Kirby & Fraser, 1997; Werner & Smith, 1982). Rutter (cited in Kirby & Fraser, 1997) suggested that protective factors be viewed from an interactive framework where they can be conceptualized as either preventing the occurrence of a risk factor from developing in the first place, providing a buffer against the effects of risk factors, or interrupting the “risk chain” through which risk factors operate. A variety of protective factors have been identified within the immediate family, school environment, and in the broader social context.

Benard (1998) identified three environmental predictors of successful coping strategies in a large number of children from high risk environments. They are: “elements of caring and support” where children are able to bond and establish elements of trust with a significant adult; “high expectations” which contributes to a sense of optimism and hopefulness; and “the encouragement of participation” where they are valued for their contribution and participation in the family or community which elevates their self esteem (p.2). These “protective factors” enable children and youth to experience good health and optimal growth and development even when risk factors such as family addictions and violence are present.

A number of researchers identified the existence of social supports as a significant protective factor that has both direct and indirect effects on children’s behaviour

(Armstrong, 1994; Garnezy, 1983; Kirby & Fraser, 1997; Werner & Smith, 1982).

Caring relationships have been found to promote healthy development for children living with a variety of risk conditions and experiencing various types of environmental stress. The caregiver does not need to be a parent, but may be a “grandparent or other extended family member, a teacher, a mentor, human services worker, or a volunteer from community groups or agencies” (Kirby & Fraser, 1997, p.25).

The family is seen as the optimal place for strong relationships to develop. However, if the family is not a place where children or youth are valued and supported then schools and community environments can become significant contributors towards the resiliency potential of at risk youth. Mentoring programs have been introduced into some schools where members of the community are matched with youth for the purpose of establishing strong adult-youth relationships that foster “unqualified caring and support, high expectations concerning the youth’s abilities to mature and learn, and respect for their ability to contribute to the environment” (de Rosenroll, Saunders & Carr, 1993, p.17).

These programs are based on research which has indicated that resiliency in at risk children and youth will grow if there is at least one significant person who establishes and maintains the kind of adult-child relationship mentioned above. If persons are not present in the family then they need to be readily available in the schools and communities. The presence of a caring and supportive adult has also been known to help children “respond positively to and recover from loss, trauma and stress” (Kirby and Fraser, 1997, p.25).

What these adults have to offer in the way of protection against environmental stressors

may include modeling prosocial skills and behaviour, helping build self-esteem, providing information and access to knowledge, and providing consistent guidance and support.

Werner & Smith (1982) found that resilient youth appear to be quite successful in selecting and identifying sources of support and resilient models to help them develop effective coping strategies. These youth do not seek professional help, but instead prefer a network of “informal relationships that included peer friend, older friends, ministers and some trusted teachers” (p. 104).

### **Family Experiences**

A good relationship with at least one parent has been shown to significantly influence the presence of resiliency in children and youth (Garmezy, 1983; Kirby & Fraser, 1997; Werner & Smith, 1982). Positive parent-child relationships help children feel secure and they often result in more consistent supervision and discipline. These are additional protective factors that help children or youth cope against generalized life stressors such as economic hardship or stressful life events like the death of a parent. The importance of secure caregiver attachments has been examined extensively by Bowlby (1973). His research was primarily focused on the mother-child bond and revealed that the quality of the interactions between parent and child is of primary importance when it comes to protection and normal development. The presence of a parent in a child's life does not guarantee that the child's needs for nurturance and support will be met; rather it is the quality of the relationship that determines the quality of the protective factors present in a child's life (Armstrong, 1994).

Similar to Bowlby, Werner & Smith (1982) found that a strong mother-child bond was of primary importance, particularly for the young women. They consistently confide in their mothers, disclosing personal problems and intimately sharing their concerns. However, they also found that the quality of the relationship with the father, and the degree to which youth identified with him, particularly for the young women, discriminate significantly between resilient youth and those with coping problems. The modeling of fathers has been identified as a protective factor for those youth who were “high in achievement motivation, independence and originality” (Werner & Smith, 1982, p. 103).

Effective parenting has also been identified as a protective factor that promotes “self-efficacy and self-worth through the development of secure infant-caregiver attachments, providing a basis for subsequent cognitive development and social adaptation” (Kirby & Fraser, 1997, p. 26). Werner and Smith (1982) found that family closeness and respect for individuality contribute significantly to bolstering the self-esteem of adolescents in these families. Parents who set clear limits and expect rules contribute to the psychological well-being of the resilient youth since these methods of disciplining them are generally welcomed.

Other key factors within the family environment that have also been identified by Werner & Smith (1982) as playing a significant role in the development of resilience are:

the age of the opposite-sex parent (younger mothers for resilient males, older fathers for resilient females); the number of children in the family (four or fewer); the spacing between the index child and the next-born sibling (more than two years); the number and type of alternate caretakers available to the mother within the household (father, grandparents, older siblings); the workload of the mother

(including steady employment outside the household); the amount of attention given to the child by the primary caretaker(s) in infancy; the availability of a sibling as caretaker or confidant in childhood; structure and rules in the household in adolescence; the cohesiveness in the family; the presence of an informal multigenerational network of kin and friends in adolescence; and the cumulative number of chronic stressful life events experienced in childhood and adolescence. (p. 155)

### **Educational Resiliency**

A number of studies have highlighted the importance of influences outside the home in the development of resiliency. The school environment and the quality of the school as a social institution is seen as particularly important. Since this is where most children spend the majority of their day the possibilities for them to establish meaningful relationships with both adults and peers, be exposed to positive role models and enhance their self esteem by academic achievements are endless. Rutter (cited in Hauser, Vieyra, Jacobson, & Wertlieb, 1989) found in his research that some children who had exhibited behavioural deviance in primary school had low delinquency rates once they moved to secondary school. The reverse was also true. Hence he concluded that “good schools can and do exert an important protective effect” (p.115).

Similarly, Werner and Smith (1982) found in their longitudinal study that resilient youth generally have a positive attitude toward their school experiences with typical statements like: “I got a good education and I like my teachers” (p. 100). There was a significant difference in achievement motivation and level of aspiration between the resilient youth, particularly among the women, and those with serious coping problems.

Resilient girls reported being more involved in their social life, while boys participated more in extracurricular activities in spite of financial constraints.

McWhirter (1993) has identified basic and academic survival skills as protective factors for preventing school failure and subsequently dropping out. Basic numeracy and literacy skills are essential for encouraging persistence in school and when children and youth lack these basic skills it is often attributed to an inadequate educational structure, an uncaring and unresponsive school culture, limited instructional programs and poor teaching. Survival skills are referred to as behaviours such as “attending to the task, following directions, raising one’s hand to ask or answer questions, and writing legibly” (p. 87). The inability to demonstrate these skills affects acceptance by teachers and peers and negatively influences academic achievement.

Garmezy and Rutter (1983) have suggested that social organizational factors can significantly influence the behaviour in childhood and adolescence. They found that schools “vary markedly in rates of disruptive behaviours and absenteeism, and it has been shown that these variations are systematically related to the characteristics of the schools themselves, with their general ethos or social climate as one important feature” (p. 25). Positive school influences can be found in good relationships with peers and teachers alike, and in the successful achievements of academic tasks. Competence is viewed as a significant protective factor which contributes to the development of self-efficacy ( a belief in one’s personal effectiveness) which enhances the motivation to act positively in a variety of settings. There is empirical evidence which suggests that experience of success leads to increased self-efficacy (Garmezy, 1983; Kirby & Fraser, 1997). In this

light, success in school is seen as a protective factor, which protects children and youth against delinquency, substance misuse, teen pregnancy and other social and health problems.

### **Conclusion**

The literature on resilience has revealed a definitional ambiguity where researchers have debated resilience as an outcome and resilience as process. Behavioural and social scientists alike have introduced the concept of resilience into the literature as a psychological construct. They have offered variations of the definition proposed by Garmezy (1983); “The central element in the study of resilience lies in the power of recovery and in the ability to return once again to those patterns of adaptation and competence that characterized the individual prior to the pre-stress period” (p.129).

Some authors have attempted to define resilience by identifying selective individual characteristics, while others have searched for situational or environment characteristics that are protective factors which promote recovery. In the latter, resilience is conceptualized as the result of interactions between risk and protective factors. The two are viewed as polar opposites where risk factors directly increase the likelihood of a particular negative outcome, and the presence of protective factors directly increase the likelihood of positive outcomes (Kirby & Fraser, 1997). In light of this, it is important to view resiliency as a dynamic characteristic rather than a fixed attribute. One needs to be aware of the fluctuating nature of resiliency and how it is the result of interactions between individual characteristics and environmental conditions, which change as children grow older, enter school, develop friendships, and mature into adulthood. Kirby

and Fraser (1997) suggested that resilience be viewed within an ecological framework and from a developmental and multisystems perspective. They recommended that we recognize that a “child’s social ecology consists of many different systems, each of which has the capacity to influence developmental trajectories” (p. 19). An ecological framework that focuses on a broad range of influences such as individual characteristics, familial relationships, and school and neighbourhood systems can help identify all the factors that may affect a child’s life and enhance the development of healthy coping and adaptive abilities. This information can then be used more effectively to design and implement services and programs to protect high risk children and youth from adverse living conditions.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Methodology

#### Overview of a Phenomenological Approach

The literature reviewed in the two previous chapters revealed a number of studies where an experimental methodology was used to isolate specific variables to better understand the high school drop out. Many researchers used this investigative process in order to make empirical generalizations, based on theoretical propositions. However, there are some research questions that lend themselves more readily to a qualitative approach that seeks to *understand* as opposed to the goal of empirical rational science which seeks to test hypothetical explanations.

Struggling through high school is a personal experience and requires personal interpretation. In light of this, I believed that a qualitative approach, and more specifically a phenomenological methodology, was best suited to gain an understanding of the high school experience for at risk youth. Phenomenology refers to “all forms of thinking and inquiry which in some way maintains a perspective on the lived human experience” (Burch, 1989, p. 189). It is an approach to research that tends to humanize the experiences of those who are willing to share them.

As a researcher and practitioner my research objective was to better understand the experiences of youth at risk in school, so that I and others, could act more purposefully and more tactfully in educational situations involving at risk youth. As a family therapist I believe in the value of assisting my clients in sharing their experiences and asking certain types of questions that help me understand how they interpret that

experience and make meaning of it. In the last few years my practice has been significantly influenced by the work of Michael White and David Epston who promote a Narrative therapy in their book "Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends" (1990). The book encourages therapists to develop questioning practices that invites the client to 'reauthor' or develop new perspectives, and then 'perform meaning' to this new perspective.

In light of the influence of Narrative therapy on my clinical practice, a phenomenological approach to this inquiry provided a philosophical framework that is compatible with how I practice as a family therapist. It is a form of thinking and inquiry that maintains a perspective on the lived human experience and is directed by the input from the participants. The phenomenological researcher is concerned with the study of phenomenon within the "lived context" or as it is perceived and understood by the persons living through the situation. It seeks to capture what people have to say through the interviewing process, which then allows us to understand the world as experienced by the subjects of our investigation and to describe "those aspects of a situation as experienced by the person in it" ( van Manen, 1990).

The phenomenological approach guides the research process through interviews and analysis and was a meaningful way for me as a researcher to gather information about the thoughts, perceptions and described actions of each of the participants. It involved elements of the experience, which were meaningfully singled out and preserved with the passage of time by my participants. My intent was to make sense of a certain aspect of the high school experience while at the same time realizing that the analysis and description of that experience represented only one interpretation and that "no single interpretation of

human experience will ever exhaust the possibility of yet another complementary, or even potentially richer and deeper description” (van Manen, 1992, p.25). This methodology provided a framework for me to seek to understand the phenomenon of completing school against the odds and provided an approach that was respectful and sensitive to the subjects of this inquiry. It gave the participants an opportunity to tell their stories in their own language, which permitted a more direct representation of that experience.

Embedded in this methodology is a philosophical framework that helped me through the interview process and constructs an understanding of the experiences of the participants. Objectivity in this kind of inquiry means staying focused on the object of inquiry. The researcher is intent on showing, describing and interpreting the phenomenon without being side-tracked or misled by “extraneous elements.” Subjectivity means that the researcher needs to be insightful and perceptive in order to disclose the object of inquiry in great depth. The researcher avoids the danger of becoming “arbitrary, self-indulgent, or of getting captivated and carried away by our unreflected preconceptions (van Manen, 1992, p.20).

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

A phenomenological analysis requires the researcher to identify and articulate assumptions or preconceptions regarding the phenomena under investigation, and then *bracket* or suspend these preconceptions in order to fully understand the experience of the subject and not impose any prior hypothesis on the experience (Creswell, 1998; Tesch, 1990; Van Manen, 1992). This step is necessary in order to achieve the aims of being “presuppositionless”, which implies the ability to “ward off any tendency toward

constructing a predetermined set of fixed procedures, techniques and concepts that would rule govern the research project” (Van Manen, 1992, p.28).

Throughout my career and graduate studies I continually focused on the experiences of those individuals who did not complete high school. It was only in the last year that my focus shifted to the graduates who participated in this study. However, I carry with me beliefs and assumptions about those who drop out of school that could influence this research project. I also have other assumptions that may have some influence and warrant being noted.

First of all I used a phenomenological methodology which assumes that “lived experience” is an important part of educational and psychological research, and that examining the experiences of the participants would provide useful information for educators on school retention. Secondly, I assumed that graduates who are now in their early twenties would be better able to provide insightful and reflective descriptions of their high school experiences due to their maturity from the passage of time.

Thirdly, while working as a school-based Youth and Family Counsellor I was continuously aware of the demands put on teachers and administrators who were faced with increased workloads and fewer resources. This, in my opinion, often translated into extreme frustration and subsequent intolerance for those students who demanded more time and energy. From this experience I developed a view that the school system was unable and often unwilling to support students who needed flexibility to continue with their studies. I believed the school to be rigidly structured, often to the detriment of at risk youth who eventually dropped out or transferred to a more flexible alternative school.

Hence, I assumed that the participants of this study had found a way of negotiating the inflexible nature of the educational system.

A final assumption was that this study is limited to the experiences of the three participants. All three subjects are graduates from the same high school and their experiences are likely reflective of the culture and attitudes prevalent in that particular school. It is also a school that has a student population that ranges from Grades 8 through 12 rather than offering just Grades 11 and 12. This school structure represents a different kind of learning environment than the one experienced by other high school students who attend schools that offer only Grades 11 and 12. Also, the subjects for this study participated in only one interview. Due to time constraints, work schedules and planned vacations it was not possible for me to re-interview the participants in relation to the analysis.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The issues of informed consent, right to privacy and protection from harm were ethical considerations addressed through my research proposal and application for approval to the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Committee. Participants were asked to sign a Letter of Consent (Appendix A) which was explained in depth during an initial meeting and which clearly outlined their right to privacy and confidentiality. A debriefing session followed each interview to ensure that the emotional needs of the participants were addressed. Since the interview process required participants to discuss potentially painful experiences the Letter of Consent also provided them with information on how to access counselling support at a later date if needed.

## **Participants**

I worked in the school system for a number of years and I maintained contacts with a number of school-based Youth and Family Counsellors (YFC) who counsel at risk youth. They agreed to contact potential subjects on my behalf to ask if they would be willing to participate in this study. A written description of what constitutes being “at risk” was prepared for the YFC’s in addition to a script outlining the purpose of the study and what participants could expect from their involvement (Appendix B). Two Youth and Family Counsellors from a local high school obtained permission from three individuals for me to contact them directly. A number of other YFC’s also had former students in mind for this project, but due to the transient nature of this population they were extremely difficult to locate. Three individuals, two males and one female, between the ages of 21 to 25 years volunteered to participate in this study after being contacted by a Youth and Family Counsellor (YFC) from the high school from which they graduated. They were former students who met the criteria for having been severely "at risk" during their high school years.

Once the individuals agreed to participate their telephone numbers were given to me by the YFC so that I could call them directly to arrange for an information sharing meeting. I met with each of the participants individually prior to the interviews to describe my study in more detail, answer any questions and explain their rights as a participant as outlined in the Letter of Consent.

### **The Interview Process**

Through "informal conversational interviews" (Patton, 1980) I attempted to capture what these three individuals went through in their day to day high school experiences, and how they made sense of those experience as they reflected upon them during our conversations. In my efforts to link my research goals and question directly to the interview process I developed open-ended questions (Appendix C) to guide the interview. I did not stay rigidly attached to these questions in order to allow the interview to be directed by the participants. Since I had no prior knowledge of the history of these individuals the interview began with a line of questioning that was intended to provide a context that illustrated whether they met my criteria of being at risk of dropping out of school. The second line of questioning explored the personal impact of various experiences and events that were described during the interview and the participants' interpretations of those experiences.

This type of interviewing required me to have no presuppositions about what would be learned. I needed to maintain a high level of flexibility in order to pursue information in whatever direction that the interviewee pursued. The questions flowed from the immediate context which meant that no absolute predetermined set of questions was possible (Creswell, 1998; Kvale, 1996; van Manen, 1992). I chose this style of unstructured interviewing because of my desire to create an atmosphere that was flexible and respectful, and to remain close to the lived experience of the participants. I encouraged participants to describe their experiences in detail and the open-ended questions invited them to share stories of their high school experiences that enriched the

general statements that were made throughout our conversations. Each of the three individuals participated in one interview that lasted between 2 ½ to 3 hours. Two of the participants telephoned me a few days after the interview to add some insights that they had reflected upon once the interview was over. These telephone conversations were documented by hand written notes and included in the interview transcripts for analysis. Due to time constraints, work schedules and planned vacations I was unable to meet the participants for a follow-up interview to review my descriptions and analysis.

### ✓ **Data Analysis**

I used the following procedural steps to analyze the data.

1. Each interview of the participant's verbal reports of their high school experiences was transcribed verbatim and each transcript was read a number of times to gain a sense of the overall interview.
2. Significant phrases or sentences relevant to the research question were then extracted from the transcripts by highlighting them.
3. Each significant statement was examined to formulate its meaning and each "meaning unit" was recorded on a separate index card. A meaning unit is a summary of the participant's original statement and my understanding of the meaning of that statement within the context of the entire transcript (Kvale, 1996; Tesch, 1990).
4. Individual interviews were examined and themes were identified. This process involved "clustering" meaning units that were similar in nature.
5. Individual accounts were written to represent each participant's perceptions, reflections and descriptions of their thoughts and feelings during their high school

experiences. The essential “non-redundant themes” from each interview were “tied together into a descriptive statement” (Tesch, 1990, p.93).

6. Shared or common themes across all three interviews were identified and formulated into a general description and “identification of the fundamental structure” of the phenomenon being examined.

The approach to the interviews described previously generated a tremendous amount of information that was, at times, overwhelming. I immersed myself in the data by listening to the audiotapes, reading and re-reading the transcripts. Initially I tried to gain an overall sense of each individual interview. As I became more familiar with the data, I began to look for statements that would capture the essence of the experience being described. This is an approach described by Tesch (1987) as “panning”; where the researcher looks for “precious elements which take the form of descriptive expressions that are ‘at the centre’ of the experience” (p. 79). As I went through this process of familiarizing myself with the data, particular themes began to emerge that captured the essence of the experience.

The steps listed above may lead the reader to assume that this method of analyzing is logical and sequential. In reality, this process is far from linear. After immersing myself in the data, I went back to the literature to consider the context within which the individual’s experiences occurred. This process of moving in and out is constant and necessary for gaining a deeper understanding of the particular experiences described by the participants. The movement between the data and the literature also helped me stay

focused on my research question, limiting the extent of my analysis to school experiences.

The themes that emerged helped me organize and structure the next chapter. They provided a framework for me to describe the essence of the experiences that were illuminated during the interviews and to express my understanding of these experiences within the context of the literature reviewed. Since a narrative approach was used for gathering the data for this inquiry, it seemed natural to use the same style for writing the results of the analysis. I found the individual stories of the participants captivating and the totality of the experience was important for conceptualizing the individual themes. I wrote the analysis in a manner that would capture the reader's interest and provide a holistic understanding.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Findings

This chapter includes a narrative description of the experiences of the three participants as well as an account of the general structure of the thought processes and actions involved with school retention based on an analysis of the transcripts. Each individual account begins with a description of the person's family background and early school experiences. This information provides a picture of the life of these individuals and it also provides a broader context from which to explore the participant's experiences while in their final years of high school. The individual accounts have been written in a narrative form to vividly capture the essence of the interviews and the participant's original descriptions. The names of the individuals have been changed to protect their identity.

### Heather

#### **Family History and Elementary School Experiences**

Heather is a young woman 25 years of age who grew up in a household with her mother, stepfather and younger brother. Her parents separated when she was three and she had contact with her natural father following the separation. Her mother had a few serious relationships during the years after the divorce and when Heather was around eight years old her mother met and later married her second husband. Heather's memories of the transition from a single-parent household to a two parent household are not happy ones. She and her brother were instructed to keep the living arrangement a secret from extended family and she remembers "*that night he came to my bedroom, that*

*night, it was the first night that he had moved in.”* The abuse continued following that night and

*everything really got bad, I was only in Grade 3 or 4, and then he started beating my brother and I, he started sexually abusing me, he started mentally abusing the three of us like verbally, it was just bad, like really bad.*

In the latter part of Grade 7 Heather inadvertently disclosed the abuse to one of her school friends. This girl went home and told her mother about Heather’s disclosure. Morally and legally obligated to report this disclosure, the mother went to the police and the following week Heather was taken out of her classroom by two uniformed police officers and taken to the police station where she was questioned about the alleged abuse. At the time, Heather’s main concern was the impression left with classmates of her being escorted out of the classroom by two police officers. The officers assured her that *“if anything happens we’ll just tell that you stole something from Max convenience store.”* Now, in retrospect she is puzzled as to why they would think that being a thief was somehow more acceptable than being a victim of sexual assault.

Heather was interviewed by the police and later by a social worker from what was then known as the Ministry of Social Services. The outcome of their investigation was for Heather to move into a foster home since her mother refused to have her husband leave the house. Heather stayed in the foster home for a few weeks; it was only after the social worker threatened the mother with charges that she eventually conceded to having her husband move out so that Heather could return home. The stepfather was eventually charged and convicted of sexual abuse and sentenced to 90 days in jail, served on alternate weekends. As she reflects on that experience, she realizes that the extent of the

sexual abuse never really became known to the authorities because they asked closed questions which elicited a very limited response from Heather. She was scared and believed that it was in her best interest to just answer the questions being asked directly, without realizing the consequences for doing so.

*He never really got charged for what he did. Now that I look back I wished that I had said more, because I think that he should have gotten more...he got 90 days in jail every other weekend, and he had to go to counselling and I had to go through counselling which was just...what a waste of money that was, and then we had family counselling which basically said that we were the perfect little family and we should all be living together, and by the end of Grade 8 he was back living with us.*

Her academic performance during those elementary years was not stellar. She struggled with her homework which she did religiously because *“if I didn’t I’d get the crap beaten out of me.”* She admits that her brother was a much better student, and got much better grades. She recognizes that *“academics wasn’t really what I was there for, I was there so I didn’t have to be at home... I joined the chess club and the basketball team, I joined anything that was going on after school.”* At this point in Heather’s life she had found school to be a valuable refuge from the assaults and abuse that she endured when at home. By joining a variety of extracurricular activities she was able to legitimately be out of the house and relieved temporarily from the tactics of terror that she experienced from her stepfather.

She also learned that revealing secrets can be dangerous in that she felt severely punished for disclosing the sexual abuse to her friend. She was the one who had to leave the family home and when she returned both her stepfather and her mother were angry and cold towards her. Her mother accused her of trying to break up the marriage and they

were both suspicious and distrustful of her once she returned home. Counselling was not helpful; if anything it contributed to the return of the stepfather into the family home.

When the stepfather returned to the family home the sexual and physical abuse stopped but the physical intimidation and verbal assaults became worse.

*He wouldn't hit me but he'd hit the wall right beside my head. He would threaten to hit me, he would threaten to take us out and kick the shit out of us ...if our rooms were a mess instead of beating us he would throw everything we owned down the stairs and totally absurd stuff.*

This level of abuse was subtler than the abuse that she had suffered previously. Heather remembers thinking that it wasn't really abuse because it wasn't physical. She just thought that he was "mean" and that there was nothing that she could do about it.

However, she did decide to become her brother's protector. She remembers vividly:

*He moved back in and instead of beating me or sexually touching me or hitting my brother he did this huge mental thing and there wasn't anybody who could do anything right. Like he would talk to my brother like he was garbage, and my brother and I have always been really close and I just took on the role as my brother's protector and he just hated that, he totally hated that.*

### **Sense of Duty and Responsibility to Others**

**"I know I stayed home longer for my brother...I didn't want to leave him there alone."**

The relationship with her brother had a powerful impact on Heather. As the oldest daughter in this family, she had been socialized to be responsible for the needs of others, namely her parents and younger brother. She felt a sense of duty and responsibility to all of them, which gave her a sense of purpose and self worth. Even though her parents never acknowledged her efforts at fulfilling their expectations of her, the relationship that developed with her younger brother became very meaningful. The

following quotes illustrate the closeness of this relationship and Heather's sense of responsibility.

*I looked forward to seeing him at school, when I'd see him I'd be like 'Oh there's my little brother.' I encouraged him to play basketball, I helped him with his basketball skills, if he had homework that he didn't understand I'd help him. I know I stayed home longer for my brother and if I dropped out of school I had to move out and I didn't want to leave my brother there alone until I turned 18 and I couldn't take it anymore....I don't know, I just had this bond with my brother.....I watched out for him, if he was getting into trouble for anything [at home] I said it was my fault, I felt like I had taken the brunt of the abuse anyway, there was no point in both of us getting it. Everyone to this day say they can't believe how close [we are], like I just mother him, I mean in a good way now, we both respect the relationship, but yeah I was responsible for a lot.*

Two of the essential features of resilience, self-understanding (Richman & Bowen, 1997) and self-efficacy (a belief in one's personal effectiveness) are evident here (Kirby & Fraser, 1997). We see the development of Heather's understanding of herself as a strong and competent person, one capable of enduring severe adversities. Heather had inadvertently come to the conclusion that she was stronger than her brother was and somehow capable of enduring the mental abuse and physical intimidation from her stepfather. She took on the responsibility for deflecting her stepfather's rage away from her younger brother whenever possible in order to protect him. She was familiar with the responsibility that came with being an older sister since she started babysitting her brother when she was in Grade 4, and the two of them worked as a team, doing their homework together and making dinner.

Heather's brother made her feel special and his dependency on her contributed to a feeling of being needed. She felt valued by him and this increased her self-esteem and

feelings of self worth. This relationship had elements of caring and support and in essence was a significant protective factor that contributed to Heather remaining in school until she graduated. Her determination combined with a sense of duty and responsibility gave her the resilience to develop her skills and persevere through various challenges, both at home and at school. She was committed to her role as protector and stayed at home until she was confident that her brother was capable of looking after himself. In order for her to stay at home she also had to stay in school. However, as she matured she began to view her education as a means for gaining greater independence and graduating from high school was just one step towards living her life the way she wanted.

### **Identifying Strongly with the Role of Helper**

**“I thought that if I could connect with somebody...and if that person had something going on then maybe they would open up...”**

The school environment offered Heather an opportunity to expand on her helping skills through the Peer Helper Program. She identified strongly with the role of being a helper and assisting others meant something to her.

*I guess I wanted someone to help me, but no one could because no one knew what was going on, so if I helped other people it was kind of the same thing only different you know. I was helping somebody, I feel better if I can help somebody...I like to feel like I'm needed.*

Heather felt that the counselling she had received in Grade 8 was a waste of time and that because of her experiences she would better understand students who were having a difficult time. The Peer Helper Program was an opportunity (or so she thought) for Heather to utilize her skills and participate in a meaningful way in the school environment. Her enrollment in this program demonstrates an ability to reflect on her

experiences and use the information as a means for helping younger students who might be struggling because of personal issues. She wanted to make a difference, which according to a number of researchers shows evidence of self-esteem (Garmezy, 1983; Kirby & Fraser, 1997; Seligman, 1994; Werner & Smith, 1982). She also recognized the value in sharing painful experiences with others who might be in a position to offer support and encouragement, and she saw herself as that kind of person.

However, she found the experience of being a Peer Helper somewhat frustrating. The rigid structure of the program seemed to inhibit the development of personal relationships with clients, and Heather described her involvement with the Grade 8 students as unfulfilling and unrewarding.

*In Grade eleven I thought nobody understands me...I was just like forget this I want to help somebody, and all we got to do, we got to meet the Grade 8's. So you know you get through these questions that you have to ask them, you never really get personal. 'Oh, do you live with your mom and dad? Do you like that?' Well, why are they going to tell me they don't? You know I really just thought that I could sit there and say 'So, I'm Heather and you know I'm going to be your friend. I'm going to say hi to you in the halls, you know, feel free to say hi to me. If you want help with your homework or you've got basketball practice or soccer practice and you need someone to walk you home cause its dark.' That's what I wanted to do but we weren't allowed to do any of that. Maybe that's what I wanted someone to say to me but I thought that if I could connect with somebody...maybe if you thought that person had something going on then maybe they would open up to you, but it's so rigid. So, you know my name and my grade and I'm going to graduate next year, I don't think anybody really cared about that, they didn't connect with me for any reason.*

### **Finding Adult Guidance and Support**

**“I think I got most of what [I needed], the essentials, I think I got most of that through school and the people I knew at school.”**

When Heather entered the Junior/Senior high school in her neighborhood she felt that the whole community was aware of her ordeal with her stepfather because the local newspaper had printed a story on the conviction including her initials, which diminished her privacy. Her main goal was to become invisible. This shouldn't have been difficult because she was attending a school with a population of approximately 1,000 students. However, elementary feeder schools often do an “alert” list of students who are at risk and Heather's name was likely on it, because when she arrived in Grade 8 she experienced a significant amount of unwanted attention from the school. She was referred to counsellors both within the school setting and also in the community. The counselling she received through various community agencies was not helpful and as a result she had a negative view of counsellors.

However, by the time Heather reached Grade 10 she was looking for an adult that she could talk to; there were some things that she couldn't tell her friends. Developmentally Heather was at a stage where she was questioning her own identity and trying to make sense of her life. Most youth have parents who help them navigate through intense feelings of confusion and anxiety. Heather had been left on her own to parent herself and her younger brother and around Grade 10 she needed someone to be there for her. She gravitated towards a variety of people both in school and in the community for that support. At the school she sought two different counsellors with

completely different approaches to working with students. When she needed a certain kind of nurturing she would seek the female counsellor and when she needed to be challenged she would seek the male counsellor. She illustrates this ability to access the services of these two resources depending on her needs in the following quote.

*The counsellors that I thought were helpful to me - the one's I saw out of school I thought were a joke, I didn't want to go there at all, but in school the counsellors there like B, and I think her name was Mrs. D. I felt that they were like, she in particular ... I liked to spend time with her because she was very emotional... I felt like I could be emotional with her and she'd be very calm, collected and sensitive and she'd reach out and touch me and that would be okay, and she'd just sort of bring things out slowly, no pressure. B on the other hand was a little bit more direct, like he'd ask me questions point blank and I really needed that cause I wasn't telling anybody anything unless they asked me, point blank, so I needed that and he always made me feel like I was welcome to come and see him whenever I wanted to and sometimes I just needed to talk to somebody about things that you can't talk to your friends about cause it's embarrassing, and you're not going to talk to your parents about it because it's about your parents and I needed that and he gave that to me.*

When Heather first experienced counselling it was to deal with the sexual abuse; then later the focus was on family issues. It was not her choice to participate and she was essentially forced into these counselling relationships. Eventually, she decided what she needed in the way of counselling support and sought out those individuals who could meet those needs. Her need to focus on her own issues is evident in the following statement.

*B [counsellor] had asked a few times if I wanted him to meet with my parents and I always said no. I didn't want it to become about my family, I wanted it to be about me. I don't know if that's selfish or what, but I needed that I guess. And so it was about me and I could talk about me and I could say whatever I wanted.*

Here we see the development of a mentoring relationship. Clearly Heather felt supported by both counsellors but it was the male counsellor that she visited more frequently. She appreciated his direct approach and it allowed her to share and disclose the events of her life that she would have otherwise kept secret. He had created an environment that was safe, nurturing and reliable, and one where she could focus completely on herself.

*He never broke his promise. If he said he was going to do something he did it. Teachers sometimes say 'oh, if you need extra help I'm always here' and then you'd go around after class and they're not...but when the counsellors said [come] whenever you want, it was whenever I wanted. I'd come down there sometimes without an appointment and he'd see me come in and he'd open the door and he'd say 'I'll just be fifteen minutes. You can sit and wait or come back, whatever you like.' He had said he'd be there and he was, there was no beating around the bush.... I could depend on that.*

It seems reasonable to speculate that this relationship had a parental component because Heather began to look towards her counsellor for confirmation and she was confident that she would get what she needed. She explains this in the following excerpt.

*I guess I kinda thought that my parents should always be there, but they weren't, so when a complete stranger really was there that was kind of special, pretty...you know, this person is taking time out of their day for me whereas my parents won't. I mean at times it was hurtful, like I'd want to brag about my project or my basketball game and I had to tell a stranger instead of my mom, but once you told them then they're like 'That's great! You did good! Good for you!' ...I'm sure if my parents had said it it would have meant more to me but that was enough to get me through, and eventually I began to not even worry about my parents and I'd go directly to whoever I knew was going to say 'good for you!'*

Heather had also established relationships with her basketball coaches that were very meaningful in terms of her feeling valued and acknowledged for her skills. By being on the starting line Heather began to see herself as a good player, and it was important for her to be good at something. Being good at something meant that she “*wasn't a total*

*failure*” and that she did have skills and competencies. Through their words and actions the coaches relayed that she was an important part of the team and that they were counting on her.

The influence of these caring relationships and the personal acknowledgement that she received was significant in regards to her overall performance at school. She recalled one difficult year when there was a coach who *“made a bunch of empty promises and for the first three games he didn’t play me at all.”* Heather couldn’t understand why this particular coach was so dismissive of her talents and she subsequently had a bad year, *“I think I was doing worse in my classes for that part of the year cause I wasn’t getting all that....I really needed to play.”* Heather knew that she was a good player, but the emotional nourishment that she received from her previous coaches nurtured her sense of competence, which gave her strength to take on other more challenging situations such as math.

Heather had also established close interpersonal relationships with adults in the community. She began working at the age of 13 in order to support her extracurricular activities. Her mother and her stepfather were both addicted to alcohol and other substances and although they both had good jobs there was little money available for extracurricular fees, toiletries and personal items. She described her relationship with her boss as a close friendship that evolved over the six years that she worked for him. She also received support and encouragement from the parents of some of her friends who seemed to recognize her need for adult guidance.

*I had friends and I had one good friend and her dad wanted me to at one point to come and live with them. So when it got bad I could talk to her or just go over to her place. I felt like family there, he treated me like family, like it was just my girlfriend and her dad and he treated me like family and if I wanted anything ever, and I could tell him anything and he would say if you don't want me to tell anybody then I won't, no matter what it is, and I think at that point I was old enough to know what right and wrong was and I told him some stuff and he wouldn't tell anybody. So I felt at home and secure there and if I needed a little pick me up I could go there. So you know they helped out...*

Heather also felt close and connected to a few of her teachers. She found them to be fair and nonjudgmental, and they challenged her in supportive ways, which sometimes resulted in high marks and praise. She particularly enjoyed working on projects because she was allowed to use her “*own mind*.” She proudly described one such project in great detail and it was clearly evident that she had obtained a great deal of satisfaction from this experience.

*I liked projects, the one's where I could use my own mind. I had this one project that I was doing and I worked on that project for so long...and I was so happy because I got 100%, and we had a test on it and I got another 100%. I was so happy and [my parents] didn't even look at it...when I got it they just said its cause you were doing your homework...but the teacher asked if she could take a photocopy of the test and use it as an example for her other classes. I loved that project...I think I have a copy of it at home still, I was really proud of that one.*

Benard (1998) described caring relationships as a protective factor that creates the conditions for empowerment. She found in her research that successful learning and development is stimulated by caring relationships that provide love and consistent support, compassion and trust. Heather clearly identified close nurturing relationships both in the school and in the community as having a positive influence on her

determination to stay in school. They acknowledged her successes and accomplishments and gave her support and encouragement when she was faced with various failures.

In essence, these relationships countered the negative messages that she was receiving at home since they conveyed high expectations and respect for who she was as a person.

### **Fulfilling the Expectations of Others**

**“I guess I felt like I didn’t want to let them [the counsellors] down...I didn’t want to let my teachers down, I felt like I’d let my family down and I didn’t want to let everybody in my life down.”**

The close relationships mentioned in the previous section had an influence over Heather in terms of developing a sense of accountability to those who were there for her. She didn’t want to let them down since they had made themselves available. They had expectations and she felt it was her responsibility and obligation to fulfill those expectations. This was not true for relationships that didn’t have that interpersonal component. Her sense of accountability was reserved only for those individuals who had proven themselves dependable. The following quotes illustrate the power of these mentoring relationships as she talks about her feelings toward the people who were there providing a “service”.

*I didn’t want to let [the counsellors] down, that’s for sure, and I never lied to [my girlfriend’s dad] about anything, like with my parents I was lying about everything in the end because that was the only way to do it...I wasn’t going to lie to him because I didn’t want him to think I was a liar like my parents did you know... but with the teachers I guess [the relationship] wasn’t as strong [as with the others] because I’d skip their class, I mean I don’t think that’s respectful to keep skipping somebody’s class, but I wasn’t rude or obnoxious about it...I’d be like ‘I’m sorry I missed your class yesterday what was the assignment?’*

Relationships with most of the teachers were of a different nature than the one she had with the counsellors. They weren't as personal, but there were a few who engaged with their students in a more respectful manner and Heather appreciated their approach. The following excerpt from the transcripts illustrates the influence some teachers had on how Heather viewed herself and how their praise and acknowledgements could carry her through some difficult times.

*There were some teachers that treated everybody like maybe there's a reason for what they're doing...they didn't judge anybody in their class. They never went into their class and said well you're dumb, or you screwed up...you know they didn't say any of those things. Some teachers even though I didn't get good grades in their class they didn't say, you know, they didn't belittle me about it, like they didn't make me feel like I was stupid because I didn't get a good grade, it's just maybe you weren't trying hard enough which was true because I was skipping half their classes and not doing their assignments and when I applied myself to their class they were like you're really good at this.*

### **Strong Sense of Optimism and Hope**

**“The main thing is to look at the bright side cause if you look at the other side it's just going to bring you down.”**

There is such a strong sense of optimism and hope that is the foundation for a lot of Heather's experiences. She talked about having difficult weeks, but then come Monday she would put it all behind her and just start over. This optimistic spirit seemed to give her the resolve to effectively deal with daily or weekly challenges, and to view obstacles as opportunities for growth.

*My grades were average, I wanted to drop out lots of times but I was always scared of what would happen if I did, or sometimes I'd have a really bad day and I just wanna, I would just skip out, see Wednesday I'd skip one class and so then I wouldn't even bother going for the rest of the week, but Monday was always a fresh start for me, okay Monday's fresh, we'll go back in and I would do*

*everything that week and be fine until something else would happen at home that was really unbearable and then I'd do the skip thing again.*

It was the same attitude that kept her redoing courses that she had failed, and she failed French twice! The dictionary defines an optimist as a “person who tends to look on the bright side of things and make the best of any situation or event as it comes about” (Thatcher & McQueen, 1984). Using this definition Heather gave numerous example of this optimistic view and an underlying belief that she had control and that ultimately everything would work out. When she found herself in a class with an uncaring teacher she would skip and eventually fail with the full knowledge that she could make it up the next semester, and there was no doubt in her mind that she would get through it. When she found herself in a class with a caring teacher then she devoted her energies to the assignments and projects and felt rewarded for her efforts by the praise and acknowledgments that she received. She determined where she was going to place her energy with the full knowledge of the benefits for doing so.

Along with an underlying sense of optimism she also had a sense of her own power and self-esteem. School offered a variety of resources and services to Heather and she recognized and accessed the ones that were meaningful to her. By grade 11 she had the school system clearly mapped out and when she was feeling vulnerable she would initiate and elicit the type of support that she needed to get her through that day, or that week.

### **Being in Control**

**“I began to figure out who I could get each need filled by, like I could go to so and so for this, and so and so for that...they provided a service to me I guess....”**

After being in the school for three years Heather became quite efficient at selecting and identifying sources of support that helped her develop effective coping strategies. She was able to differentiate between those individuals who were trustworthy and those who were likely to let her down. She was also knowledgeable of the semester system and how to organize her courses so that she never had to worry about failing her grade. She started each September taking the “*essential classes*,” the ones she needed to graduate, and then the following term she would take elective courses. She never got behind because if she failed an essential course in the first term then she could repeat it the following semester. Her school year had become predictable and by organizing her courses in such a way she could continue towards graduating without any major roadblocks. Some classes were easier to attend than others and if she failed a course then it just meant that she’d have to take it again the following semester instead of an elective. Also, she planned her courses so that she always had “*something to look forward to*.”

*H - “When I planned my courses I planned them like okay I have to take these to graduate and they went on first, cause you got to make your own schedule basically, and then my alternatives, I think every year the first semester I took all essential classes and all my alternatives the last semester.”*

*M - “Was this just in case?”*

*H - “Just in case and then I sort of wanted you know to know the next...I wanted something to look forward to, it’s not going to be as hard the next term, cause the beginning of the year was like a fresh start, like I was doing really well for probably the first couple of months until I started to not be able to handle it so much, so the second part of the year I always knew was not going to be as hard as the first.”*

Self esteem as described by Seligman (1997) is strongly linked to successes and failures, and how one interprets and explains their successes and failures is indicative of an optimistic or a pessimistic worldview. Heather repeatedly shows an explanatory style that is indicative of a deep sense of optimism and hope. She recognizes that the conditions for her successes and failures are dependent on her efforts which includes a realistic assessment of the conditions that support or interfere in her successes. To illustrate this point she made repeated statements like “*when I applied myself*” and “*I’m sure if I went to all my classes I would have had great grades.*” However, she also recognizes that there were times when it was necessary for her to escape, “*sometimes you just need a break, cause that’s why I skipped out, I just needed to be alone....*” This comes back to an element of self-understanding described earlier since it is clear that Heather never lost sight of her goal to graduate, but she did it in a way that fit best for her given the circumstances under which she lived.

## **Marty**

### **Family History and Elementary School Experiences**

Marty is a young 22-year-old man of First Nations descent. He was born and raised in Victoria and has many relatives on reserves on Vancouver Island. He is the youngest of three; he has an older half brother on his father’s side and an older half sister on his mother’s side. His parents were never married and they separated shortly after his mother became pregnant with Marty.

While in elementary school Marty lived with his sister, mother, and his mother's boyfriend. His father lived nearby and Marty frequently stayed at his house or with different relatives when his mother was out with her boyfriend. He recalls moving around a lot during this time.

*My mom had this boyfriend and he drank a lot...and he was on social assistance, well my mom was, this guy didn't have any income whatsoever, and when they went out my sister would be going to my grandma's and I'd be going to my father's place, or she'd be going to my Auntie's place and I'd be going to my grandma's. So, we were moved around a lot.*

Elementary school was not a pleasant experience for Marty. He was usually the only First Nations student and he remembers a lot of racism and "*insensitivities*" from teachers and students alike. By the time he reached Grade 2 there were a few other First Nations students and he recalls them "*being outcasted from playing sports...and so myself and a couple of other [First Nations] students would hang out together and just wander around the school.*" The school environment became increasingly uncomfortable for Marty. In Grade 2 he had a substitute teacher who "*really gave [him] a hard time*" and said things like "*you dirty bastard, you can't do anything right.*" Marty told his mother about these incidents with the end result being a move to another school.

Marty reported this new school as being just as bad in terms of feeling uncomfortable and unaccepted. Once again he was the only First Nations student and he recalls feeling "*picked on*" for missing a lot of school due to frequent "*moving around,*" in addition to attending cultural events. Marty's mother was quite involved with her culture and she and her children often participated in activities and ceremonies, which

interfered with Marty's school attendance. This put Marty in a difficult position because when he returned to his class he was usually confused.

*I think the teachers were kind of frustrated that I was missing so much school, but I didn't consider it too much because one year I missed 27 days in the whole year and I didn't think that was too bad, and you know considering the things that I was going to and doing...It was kind of tough in a sense because some of the work that we did.....I was just trying to go with the flow, but you know I didn't understand most of the things we did...and the teachers weren't too helpful, not very supportive.*

Marty struggled through elementary school. However, one thing that inspired him was learning that he was good reader and a good speller. These abilities likely contributed to his teachers passing him into the next grade level at the end of each year, although Marty believes that the only reason this happened was because "*they wanted me out of their hair.*"

In Grade 6 Marty was sitting at his desk waiting for a math test when the teacher made a comment that he seemed "*more dead than alive.*" He remembered thinking:

*Oh what encouragement that I needed before one of those things. I was thrown down, here was the whole class and I was sitting in the middle of the room and I didn't like it, I wanted to leave. But I stayed there and did the test, stayed right through school, left, told my mom, and that was it. That was the last straw, cause you know, ... what I had to put up with was not worth staying there.*

So, in the middle of Grade 6 Marty transferred again to a new school. This time he went to a school located near the reserve which had a large First Nations population. Marty was with some cousins and he found the teachers to be more aware and "*sensitized*" to what was going on for the First Nations students. Moving to this new environment was a positive experience for Marty in that he felt supported and comfortable for the first time.

The transition into Grade 7 went smoothly until once again he started to miss school for long periods of time.

*I started missing again for different reasons, like the impact of things happening growing up, a lot of things that needed to be taken into account. Like my sister was initiated into the long house that year, I believe, and after that I missed like a few weeks in a row and I'd just go back and I'd miss more and it just got to the point where I didn't go anymore.*

During this time Marty was struggling with a number of issues. He had been sexually abused from age 4 to 8 years and as he entered puberty he increasingly felt confused and isolated by this experience. He was also being picked on by some of the other students in the school, some of whom were relatives. He recognized that although they were related they didn't necessarily adhere to the same set of beliefs or values. The following quotes illustrate Marty's struggle with these two issues as he described his disengagement from this new school.

*I tried to live in a different reality, when I was four I was sexually assaulted and so I remember you know just thinking about it as being regular. You know, I thought it was a regular thing, that it was normal because it kept happening and I think that was one of the things that made me walk away from reality a little bit at school and stuff because I didn't know how to deal with it. I was just always in my own little world. I think that was why I was a little bit disoriented all throughout elementary school. I was just trying to cope with it and say well, is this happening in every home? Is this normal? Is this something that should be done you know because it didn't feel normal, and I just kept it to myself.... I didn't know what to do at the time except to have an alternative reality and just kind of kept to myself.*

*Another factor too was that I was getting picked on in Grade 7 even by a couple of relatives and I was like hey, you know I was brought up by my Grandmother and mother and some other family members like my auntie and uncle, and the values that I cherish then were getting thrashed, so to speak, because being brought up by people's old teaching you learn it, the values of*

*respect and discipline...and being a child at that time I didn't know how to deal with it.*

Being Native was something to be proud of, and Marty's Grandmother, as an Elder, had taught him the values and the teachings of his people. What he observed in some of his cousins was a denial of their heritage.

*They were just going with the flow of Caucasian people, and they would want to be like them, live like them, dress like them, and it didn't take on me because I wasn't going that route, I basically was just trying to be myself in some sense.*

It seemed that Marty was becoming more aware of racism as he grew older, and the tension between his own culture and the dominant white community in which he lived. The different values did not seem compatible and he struggled with trying to live in both worlds. He described himself as a shy person who had poor social skills. He wasn't involved in sports or any extracurricular activities in the school and once again he felt like he didn't belong. At this time Marty was living with his Auntie and more and more he began to realize that he felt a tremendous amount of comfort in being with his family on the reserve. He didn't like going to his father's place for a number of reasons, the most significant being the level of racism that he felt from the "white community."

*I didn't like going to my Dad's place for some reason because there wasn't much comfort there, I mean there was my brother but my father had his own grocery store and was always busy...and the community was white and that wasn't very supportive in the sense that I was used to coming from the reserve. Like I'd go to the park with my sister and I'd be like every other child you know swinging on the swings, just wanting to have some fun and you know when I went there I'd get picked on. One instance was when I'd go down the slide and the kids at the top would throw rocks down, you know, let big rocks drop and I got a few bumps, hurt a few times. So I wouldn't go there and I kind of didn't care to some degree. I just wanted to be with family in like a comfort zone, you know.*

The accumulated experiences of being sexually abused and picked on by his peers resulted in Marty withdrawing from both school and the white community. He retreated to a place where he knew he would be nurtured and supported. With relatives on the reserve he always felt welcomed and this was a refreshing change from what he was used to. As Marty moved into adolescence he needed a safe place to determine what he wanted for himself and how he was going to get there.

It was the intervention of a First Nations Counsellor at the elementary school and the encouragement of his Grandmother that helped Marty decide that education was worth pursuing. Both his Grandmother and his mother frequently encouraged him to follow a path that was different from that of the “typical Indian.” They consistently gave him the message that they expected him to be successful and that an education was important and necessary in order for him to fulfill their expectations.

*My Grandma would say ‘you’re doing better than me, grandson’ cause she only made it to Grade 3, and my mom only made to Grade 10, so they wanted me to be successful and they really helped a lot with that.*

The First Nations Counsellor at the elementary school had negotiated an arrangement with the local Junior/Senior high school that was significant in terms of re-engaging Marty back into the school system. Instead of returning to the elementary school he could attend the high school in the mornings only, and complete his Grade 7 courses there. The following excerpt illustrates the meaningfulness of this intervention.

*Marty – Sometimes he’d [the counsellor] come to the trailer to talk to me.  
Interviewer – He must have seen that you needed something at that time?  
Marty – Yeah, he did, it was great. He was helpful and observant at seeing where the problems were and helping me out, [we] started setting goals and things, and I was like this person is actually talking to me! You know, trying to get at who I*

*really am, really understand where I was coming from. And he thought that this would be beneficial and motivate me more to go to school, and so it kind of was, you know, a little bit more acknowledgement and a little bit more help.*

*Interviewer – “Was this counsellor First Nations as well?”*

*Marty - Yeah*

*Interviewer – So being First Nations, was that important for you to have somebody from your own culture?*

*Marty – Yeah, it was really helpful at the time. It was kind of neat to have this person offer to help.... It really helped me realize what I needed and what I wanted to do.*

Marty didn't have a strong relationship with this particular counsellor because he hadn't been at the school for long, but the encouragement and the creative solutions he offered were greatly appreciated. It meant that someone other than his family cared about him, and this feeling of being understood and supported encouraged him to transfer to yet another school.

The transition into high school was a smooth one for Marty. The offer to move before he actually finished Grade 7 was a boost to his self-esteem. He felt that the counsellor must have confidence in his abilities, since this was an unusual arrangement. He found himself in a Minimum Essentials (ME) class, which is a modified program for students with learning difficulties, where there was a small group of eight students all working at their own pace. His attendance improved tremendously and he completed Grade 7 with no problems. Marty remained in the Minimum Essentials class for both Grade 8 and Grade 9.

His family life at this time was more stable since his mother had decided to move onto the reserve to look after his Grandmother, whose health was failing. They all lived in a two-bedroom trailer for a few years before his Grandmother obtained a three-

bedroom house. The Ministry of Social Services had apprehended Marty's sister a few years earlier and she lived in a series of foster homes before she ended up prostituting on the street. His mother had broken up with her boyfriend because he had beaten her up quite badly after a night of drinking. Marty worried a lot about her previous to this incident because he knew that this man had the potential to be quite violent. When Marty was in Grade 9 he remembers his family being together.

*My mom had a job and on her days off she'd be home to see her mom. My Grandmother was basically home all the time. She was isolated to an oxygen unit and she couldn't do much. And my sister was back in the picture and we were in the house by then and she drank and her boyfriend drank and my mom drank once in awhile...that wasn't in the house though. They would go out and come home late most of the time and that was kind of hard when you're in school cause I would have to get up and open the door for them because they forgot their keys or something like that. But I didn't care, I just slept in...*

Once again Marty started to miss a lot of school, although the reasons for skipping were slightly different than they were when he was in elementary school. The courses weren't all that challenging nor interesting, and a number of his friends and relatives had stopped going altogether. He also became interested in sports and extracurricular activities outside of the school. It was difficult to go to school when all your friends were playing basketball.

### **Beginning to feel safe and Comfortable**

**“If I had a problem I could go see [my cousins], I had a lot of back up in that sense.”**

Marty entered Grade 8 with renewed enthusiasm for school. He was happy for the change in environment and he found the small classes supportive and helpful. Once again he encountered racism but this time he had the support of cousins with whom he felt

close and connected. He recalled an incident where he felt threatened and how his cousins came to his aid.

*In Grade 8 in ME I had a few friends and relatives who were also going there once in awhile. And being in that kind of social organization was kind of different. It was like you know Wow, this is kind of neat. But in some sense it was like too much, but I stuck it out and sometimes I met racism. You know, I'd walk to the store with my cousins and then come back and there'd be a couple of us walking down the hallway and we'd get picked on by guys with skateboards. And they'd say 'you stupid Indian, watch where you're going.' And here I am just walking by and stepping over his skateboard cause he's got it like in the middle of the hallway. So I went and told my cousins who were like 15 or 16 years old, but they were like 5'10" and 5'11". So I went to see them and there's like six of what we call skaters, you know people who skateboard and two or three of my cousins and they went after the skaters and they were scared....and they almost got beat up because my cousins were mad. So I had a lot of back up in that sense. If I had a problem I could go see them.*

Marty's elementary school experiences had accustomed him to racism. However, what seemed to be different about this encounter is that Marty didn't have to cope with it alone, and having close family members in the school meant that he had a support system that was accessible and readily available. This meant a lot to Marty because he no longer felt alone or isolated or had to tolerate racist comments or insults from other students. The incident described above resulted in Marty being referred to the First Nations Counsellor who encouraged him to find other ways for dealing with conflict. This counsellor approached Marty in a sensitive and caring way, which facilitated the beginning of a close mentoring relationship.

Having a First Nations Counsellor at the school was important because he felt confident that this person from his own culture would understand him. This further reduced the sense of isolation that was so familiar in his previous schools. He had often

felt misunderstood and dismissed by teachers as a result of their “*lack of awareness*” and “*insensitivities*” to Native issues. Having access to someone from his own culture meant that there was someone other than family to turn to. Also, the Native Counsellor from his last elementary school had been quite helpful in assisting Marty with returning to school. This created an impression in Marty that there were people other than family members who could be supportive and resourceful.

The Native Counsellor in the high school seemed to focus on bringing Native students together which created a sense of community for Marty; he was beginning to feel like he belonged. A room was open to First Nations students and they would often hang out there. Marty developed friendships with other Native students and became more involved in extracurricular activities that were available on the reserve. By Grade 9 he was developing confidence in his own abilities, particularly when he encountered racist remarks, as he described himself as being “*a little bit more rebellious and verbal.*”

### **Sense of Accomplishment from Doing Well**

**“Finally, I was getting real credits. That year I stopped attending cultural events and I was hitting the books...and I went into Grade 11 and it was real good.”**

In Grade 10, a number of significant events occurred that seemed to strengthen Marty’s commitment to the school. With the help of the Native Counsellor Marty was able to register in regular classes. Most Native students like Marty are routinely enrolled in special education programs in an attempt to keep them in school, and for Marty this intervention was successful. However, there was a point where he and other Native students began to recognize the demeaning aspect of being in such a program. The

following excerpt of the interview illustrates Marty's perception of being in the ME program.

*Marty - I started to do better in regular classes, that's what kept me going, these were regular classes cause I was out of ME.*

*Interviewer – What did that mean to you, to be out of ME?*

*Marty – It meant a lot. I didn't want to be considered a below average student, you know...to be put in the low classes like that.*

*Interviewer - So in Grade 8 you were just put into the ME program and at the time you didn't really know what that meant. When did you get a sense of that?*

*Marty – When other people started talking about it. When older peers in Grade 10 and 11 started talking about being in trouble [academically] in their regular classes when they first started...but now I'm doing fine so why did they put me in here? You know we'd talk about it for the whole year and there were times when I was like 'this is redundant', we just seemed to do the same thing over and over.... Maybe they were just trying to go slow because of the mistakes that were made in elementary school where teachers would just push me through, putting me up to the next level higher so they wouldn't have to deal with me.*

*Interviewer – So once you were in regular classes then that meant something?*

*Marty – Yeah, it made me feel a lot better and personally I felt like I accomplished something. Finally I was getting real credits.*

*Interviewer – So did you start to develop faith in yourself?*

*Marty – Yeah, I did. It was about that year and the year before that I stopped attending cultural events...and so I was hitting the books and stuff.*

This reveals a perception of the ME program as being modified to the point of substandard when compared to the credits received for regular courses. It would appear from Marty's description that he and other ME students felt that they weren't getting a "real" education because the modified courses weren't "real" credits. Marty could see the benefit in being in the ME program initially, but even when he was doing well in certain subjects there was no incentive or encouragement for him to move into the regular stream. He had decided for himself, once he realized what it meant to be in the ME program, that he wanted to register in regular classes. He didn't want to be considered a

low functioning student and there was an intense need to prove that he was capable of handling the work in the regular program.

By the time Marty reached Grade 11 the school had introduced courses such as Leadership, Native Art and Native Issues which gave him a greater understanding and appreciation of his culture. At the same time, he was going to community workshops and conferences focused on Native Law and Healing is Justice that were also inspiring. He received credits for participating in some of these community events; this was significant in terms of acknowledging their importance. For example, Marty was involved in a week long Ventures Program that was offered by the RCMP which motivated him towards a career in law enforcement. This Program introduced him to Vision Quest, which is a joint venture between the RCMP and Native communities to raise funds for a First Nations Drug and Alcohol Recovery Centre. The following excerpt describes the significance of these events.

*Marty – I really liked being in Native Art. I was finally grasping the artistic qualities to doing good designs rather than being dependent on copying from others...that and the Leadership course which was a First Nations oriented course, it was an inspiration that kept me in as well...In Grade 11 I went to police camp and that was really successful and it inspired me more to be an officer.*

*Interviewer – How did you hear about this camp?*

*Marty – Through an announcement. I just happened to be listening and I thought it sounded interesting and that was a time when my mom had really slowed down on her drinking and she was like ‘I don’t want you to be a typical Indian like those people who drink and toke up and have no job.’*

*Interviewer – And this police camp was during school time?*

*Marty – Yeah, and it counted as credit towards graduation. It was for a week and I felt really happy about it because I did the training and I got my certificate. I had something to show for it, make something different with my life rather than being like my cousins and going out behind the school and toking up...*

Marty returned from this camp with a sense of accomplishment and enthusiasm for returning to his studies. School became more than just attending classes on subjects that might be relevant; it offered him opportunities to participate in events that were meaningful and interesting to him. As he became more involved in these kinds of activities there became less of a distinction between culture and education. Prior to this point Marty felt that he needed to choose between the two. He described a process whereby he had to consciously withdraw from cultural events on the reserve in order to be successful at school. He realized that he couldn't graduate if he continued to miss numerous classes like his friends and cousins, and participating in these Native courses and extracurricular events made it a little easier for him to leave his "comfort zone."

*A big difference was having the Native Art and the Native Issues course that I was involved in. Those opportunities that are culturally relevant were positive factors that helped me be successful. They were motivating and inspirational. I looked at it again, hearing my teachers talk about [being frequently absent] and I was like why do my cousins miss so much school? I think I have to stay back again which took me out of my comfort zone. That's one of the factors why I missed so much is because I wanted to be with my cousins and spend time with them...and I started realizing that culture is taking us away from education. That's why our people are stuck on social assistance...they're just stuck and I didn't want that to happen to me. So I just pushed that culture away for awhile...and I was involved in the RCMP Ventures Program and things were really great...I was doing really good in school...and in Grade 12 there was lots of opportunities compared to when I first got there. There's now anti-racism groups and all these other things. There was a workshop that I got involved in and we acted and we put on these plays, and a "Justice is Healing" conference, a First Nations studies conference, and you know it was really successful to have the opportunity to express ourselves through the play. And another advantage was the school was having workshops of its own, you know workshops in different rooms...there was so much more finally being put into the curriculum.*

### Feelings of Entitlement and Power to Influence Others

**“I feel like I have more control now...I lost control for awhile and I was just here and there, and I was like ‘where do I belong?’ But I just got to the point where I was like, ‘This is where I belong.’**

By Grade 12 Marty had achieved a balance between education and culture. He no longer felt that he needed to choose between the two, or withdraw completely from the cultural events in his community in order to stay focused on his goal to graduate. He had matured over his high school years to recognize that it was possible to have both; but keeping them in balance was a difficult task.

*In my culture the Long House is like a school, you learn the rules of respect, records of learnings and teachings...you just learn so much its never ending...but school is limited to one thing which is earning your Grade 12 diploma. You forget so much about yourself and you just delve into that. You get so caught up in getting that piece of paper that you almost forget all the things that are important, you know, the learning lessons that you could have benefited from. Teachers push you so much and you get that ‘dog eat dog’ attitude. I tried to balance it in Grade 12 because I saw what was going on and I knew what I had to do. That’s why I went to a few Long Houses to keep that spirit alive...I was just living it inside myself and going to conferences...and my teachers knew what my beliefs were, like ‘justice is healing’, that was one of my strong points and in my First Nations course during the discussion groups where we were talking about issues I would speak out and share what I learned in my law class...and coming back from the Long House and having a Healing Circle in class, passing the feather around...it was a balance, but not a total balance so I would seek out other ways like the Vision Quest.*

Through courses and workshops Marty became aware of the assimilation and annihilation tactics of the dominant white culture to keep First Nations people oppressed. He was still confronting stereotypes but he had a sense of his own power to challenge the biases of teachers and administrators at the school in addition to some of the criticisms that he faced from the Native community. Education was not viewed positively by some

Native people on the reserves because of historical residential school experiences. Marty endured criticism by friends and relatives for wanting to be a “*white man*” and wanting to work for the “*white man*”. There was a lot of pressure on him to choose between the two worlds. However, Marty realized that there was a way for him to take advantage of the school system and to use it as an opportunity to better his own future and perhaps the future of his people as well. He developed aspirations of being a leader for his community. His involvement in cultural workshops that were political in nature inspired him to become an activist and work towards improving the standard of living for Native people, and to challenge the racist assumptions and stereotypes that he still encountered from the white community.

The changes in the school had resulted in some teachers becoming more “*sensitized*” to Native issues and Marty no longer felt that he needed to ask for a teacher’s permission to miss classes in order to participate in cultural events. He felt capable of handling both and when he encountered teachers who were less than supportive he forced them to be flexible.

*I pushed them for more flexibility and it got to the point where I would miss three or four days a week, but not in a bad sense. I needed to do things like training [for Vision Quest] or going to conferences, and I’d know that I’m responsible and old enough to handle it, I’m not going to screw off...and a couple of teachers would be iffy, but I’d be like ‘Hey, look I’ll be back.’ I just didn’t want to be that little Indian who’s like, ‘Can I do this and can I do that?’ I just got to the point where [I’d tell the teachers] ‘I’m going to this and I’m coming back and whatever there is to do I’ll do it cause I’m going to finish...I think that was a real learning experience for them... I think they were stereotypical in a sense...I was a First Nations student, one of five in Grade 12, and all their other experiences with other [Native] students is that they would leave and they wanted this to do and then they wouldn’t do it...I’m sure they thought the same thing about me, but I proved them wrong and I made a point of always coming back and finishing the*

*stuff that they gave me...I wanted to challenge their stereotypes and their authority, cause it's a power trip for teachers to say 'do what I say or go to the office'...I knew my rights and I didn't step over the line and I just emphasized my need...I just told them that I shouldn't have to sacrifice cultural learnings and activities just so that I could go to school...I know you're a teacher but you can also learn from me...*

It seems evident from this part of our discussion that Marty had developed a sense of entitlement; he no longer wanted to sacrifice culture for education or education for culture. He wanted both and he now felt comfortable challenging the authority of the teachers and administrators in order to meet his needs. It took a few years for him to risk being out of his “comfort zone” but his mother and Grandmother had strongly influenced him in this direction.

*I chose to go the academic route because of what my mom and Grandma would say, you know 'you don't want to be like that drunk Indian in the corner panhandling over there, I heard that all the time...I just stayed away from people that said 'let's go drink' or 'let's go party'...I just said no because that was when it was still in my head that I didn't want to be a typical Indian, I wanted to be different and still hold on to those values that I learned. I didn't want to be a white man's Indian as they would call it. I'd be educated but I'd still be a First Nations person and still know a lot about my culture, and still know a lot of the education that was taught to me so that I could live in both worlds successfully, but that's pretty tough.*

### **Feeling supported and encouraged by Relationships in the School**

**“There’s people [teachers and counsellors] over here who are trying to make a difference, help me out...and I started talking to them and things worked out really well.”**

During the junior high grades (8, 9 & 10) being on the reserve with his friends and family was far more comfortable and attractive than being at school. There was a repeated pattern of Marty “*petering out*” in the spring and missing a lot of classes. Most

of his friends had sporadic attendance or they had dropped out of school altogether, which made it difficult for him to attend. He was much more motivated to spend his time playing basketball and attending cultural activities. It was during these times that the Native Counsellor would intervene and encourage Marty to attend school part-time in order to finish the courses that he was likely to pass, and at the same time invite him to apply for culturally relevant summer employment opportunities. The Native Counsellor was instrumental in encouraging Marty to participate in cultural events in the community while at the same time remaining focused on his studies. Finding culturally relevant employment during the summer months also provided Marty with experiential learning, which he found inspiring and motivating in terms of returning to school. The following quote illustrates this point.

*F [Native Counsellor] came to see me with an application and he said you know you only have two courses, so why don't you spend a little time on your resume and apply for this Wow program [Work Orientation Workshop] at the Native Friendship Centre. So, I went to work and that really inspired me even more because it was a real job with a real paycheck, and that summer I learned a lot about how to deal with things, you know non-confrontational ways of dealing with violence...*

The relationship that developed between Marty and the Native Counsellor had mentoring qualities that influenced Marty into remaining committed to both his culture and his education. Van Gyn and Ricks (1997) identified characteristics of different mentoring relationships in their study on proteges' perceptions of the mentoring relationship. One type that emerged from their research is a transactional relationship where the focus is on the development of problem-solving skills through addressing

dilemmas. Here the mentoring relationship with the Native Counsellor seemed to have these traits since their interactions often involved resolving the issues that interfered with Marty's attendance. Together they found solutions for Marty to stay connected to the school while pursuing his cultural interests.

The study by Van Gyn and Ricks (1997) also revealed that a number of proteges perceived their parents as being influential mentors, and this also seemed true for Marty. He consistently described the teachings and encouragement from his Grandmother as being significant to his accomplishments. Both his Grandmother and his mother supported him through some difficult times and they often reminded him of their expectations that he follow a path that was different from the "typical Indian." This support and encouragement inspired Marty as he matured and it contributed to a strong sense of responsibility and accountability to not only his family, but his community as well. He recognized the sacrifices that were made on his behalf which influenced him towards being responsible.

*They [Grandmother and mother] were always supporting me and always making sure that my school fees were paid because if your fees aren't paid then you're out of school or you can't take this course...and we'd get behind in our mortgage payments or bills because they used a lot of their money towards my education and fees...and it was kind of difficult and an uncomfortable feeling cause she put this money here so that I could be here and I kind of felt bad because a couple of course I did drop, but then I said hey I better stay cause at least I'm doing good in this course....My mom's forking over this money so I better show her something...I didn't want to let them down.*

Marty also had a relationship with one of his teachers that was characteristic of what Van Gyn and Ricks identified as transformational. Through school he learned that he was keenly interested in computers and the encouragement and guidance of his

computer teacher helped him develop a perception of himself as a professional. Her instruction and the development of a relationship with a teacher that was more personal in nature resulted in him investing a lot of energy into that particular course. He began to visualize a future for himself that included working with new technology and his teacher consistently reinforced this vision.

*I was kind of interested in computers and I like working with them, and my teacher was really supportive and she was really sensitized to First Nations issues. She was more like on a personal level, more of a human being I guess and at the beginning of the semester she had everyone write down their goals for the future...and she really liked what I had to say. She was enthusiastic and helped me out with my goals and pushed me a little bit and gave me positive feedback. It made me do more...it made me want to do better. It was like wow, somebody has faith in me, other than you know relatives, and she was like pushing me a little bit towards perfection, and I started meeting that...It restored my faith in some sense because positive criticism helps you to keep going and its something to look forward to for the next day...*

The encouragement from this teacher was perceived as genuine caring, and it meant a lot to have someone other than family providing that kind of personal support. Also, having a non-native individual be so encouraging gave him faith in his abilities and inspired him to do well. It represented an acceptance from the “white” community that reaffirmed his desire to live successfully in both worlds. The evidence was clear that there were people who wanted him to succeed and they were willing to assist him along the way.

### **Sandy**

#### **Family History and Elementary School Experiences**

Sandy is a 21 year old East Indian man who is the youngest of two boys in his family. His parents immigrated to Canada when his older brother was just a baby and

Sandy was born a few years later. Sandy's mother was only fourteen years of age when her parents arranged for her to marry Sandy's father. She had her first child at the age of fifteen and Sandy when she was eighteen. Immigrating to Canada was a difficult process because the family was separated for a long period of time while Sandy's father found work and affordable housing for his parents and his wife and son to live. It was a long time before the family was reunited in Canada and the adjustment to living in a new and strange culture was very stressful. His parents immigrated with his paternal grandfather and his aunt and they all lived together for the first year. Sandy described his grandfather's alcoholism as having a significant effect on the deterioration of the relationships in his family which resulted in his parents eventually finding their own apartment. His father found employment "*working on the farms*" and his mother "*cleaned hotels*" in order to support their family.

In elementary school Sandy remembers moving around a lot as the family sought affordable housing. They lived in a number of different apartments and basement suites before his parents were able to afford to buy a house. When he was young he remembers being his father's favourite. This feeling of being special was uncomfortable for Sandy because his father had an explicit dislike for his older brother.

*My Dad hated my brother for some reason. He liked me a lot but he didn't like my brother. He had a grudge against him from the first day he was born. He used to tell everybody that he liked me, but he didn't like my brother, I don't know why.*

As Sandy's brother got older the tensions and level of violence in the family increased and there were a number of occasions where the police were called to the house to intervene in domestic disputes.

*When I was little I was quite sensitive and I liked to see everyone happy, I didn't like to see fighting and I'd try to get in there and break it up and say don't fight. My brother loved my mom and he was always worried about my mom, that my dad would kill her or something like that. He worried so much that he got an ulcer at 16...*

Sandy's father became an alcoholic and frequently became violent with both his wife and his oldest son. Sandy remembers his mother as not really knowing what to do but take the abuse because she was young and new to the country. However, she gradually became stronger and when Sandy was in Grade 7 she had decided that she couldn't take the abuse anymore. Sandy remembers the moment when her strength became evident.

*She finally got stronger after a while. I remember one time driving in the car and my dad hit her and she hit him back. She said, 'that's it, I'm not taking this anymore.' My brother and I were just awesome, it was so good to see her fighting back.*

During this time Sandy spent a lot of time at home because he was afraid for his mother and his brother. He worried for their safety and he stayed at home in an attempt to keep things from going wrong. He knew his father would never hurt him and he always hoped that somehow he'd be able to have an influence over his father's abusive behaviour. He never worried for his own safety because *"nothing really happened to me because my dad really liked me, but how can you just lay back and be the favourite?"*

In the latter part of Grade 6 his parents separated. It was a confusing time and Sandy really wasn't aware of what was happening.

*My mom went to work and then this guy came to the door and gave [my dad] a piece of paper and told my dad that he had to leave. My dad didn't know how to read English, so he left... And my brother told all the teachers that if my dad came*

*to the school they were to call the cops, and if my dad came I wasn't really allowed to see him.*

Sandy's mother feared that Sandy would be kidnapped by his father and he was given strict instructions not to even talk to his father should he happen to see him. The family was separated for a few months and then his parents attempted reconciliation. When Sandy's father first moved back into the household the level of violence decreased temporarily. However, within a short period of time the family had returned to the pattern of violent domestic disputes that required police intervention. Within six months his parents were separated again, and his mother filed for divorce.

The house was sold and the family moved again to a new apartment. Sandy transferred to a different school where he began to notice the racist comments being directed towards him. He recalls having friends who made him feel comfortable in the school; however the racial comments were becoming more difficult to ignore.

*It was easy for me to make friends, but the racial slurs were difficult. [His last elementary school] that's where I experienced the most racism. I got beat up too, I wasn't really tough then. I was pretty weak. I didn't get beat up in Grade 7, even though there was lots of racism, because I had friends that would protect me.*

In all the elementary schools Sandy attended he was one of only a few East Indian students. As he got older he became aware of the "racial slurs" but didn't know how to handle them. Even though Sandy had friends in Grade 7, in junior high Sandy decided not to go to the school in his catchment area with his friends because he was "*such a geek*" and he wouldn't have "*fit in*" at that school. Instead he went to the junior/senior high school where his brother was a student. He remembered feeling safe with his older

brother in the school. The family lived quite a distance away from this school and Sandy had to travel by two different buses to get there.

The transition into junior high was not a smooth one. It was difficult for Sandy to get to school on time and he was still experiencing a lot of stress at home. His father had left the family and had no contact with either of his sons. Sandy and his older brother were often worried that their father would seek revenge against their mother for initiating the divorce. Once they became a single parent household Sandy's older brother started challenging his mother's rules, which resulted in frequent conflict.

*Going home and having [them] fighting all the time...I just wanted peace and quiet and happy all the time, I didn't want any fighting or nothing...I couldn't take it. So I just kinda stopped going to school and would go and play basketball, I didn't want to be there. I just didn't care.*

In Grades 8 and 9 Sandy failed a few courses which he made up the following semesters. The thought of quitting school never really occurred to him at this point because he didn't want to disappoint his mother. She was having a difficult time parenting his older brother and he didn't want to cause her any more grief. He was invested in being the "good" son and he received a lot of acknowledgment for fulfilling this role. However, it was difficult for him to be in school because he didn't get along with the teachers. He admitted that he often talked back to them and as a result he sometimes got sent home. He didn't enjoy any aspect of the course work, which affected his enthusiasm and motivation for participating in his classes.

*They would just give me a hard time, like they would always think that I was lying, like maybe if I was sick they would always challenge me and call me a liar.... It's not like I wasn't doing my homework and didn't come to class because I came to class regularly, but my work wasn't A material. I did more like C*

*work...just get it done and get it over with. All I cared about was getting that passing mark.*

School was not a comfortable environment for Sandy, and he found the course work to be quite difficult. However, what he did enjoy was playing basketball. He fantasized about being a basketball star and playing in the NBA. He was on the basketball team in Grade 8 which increased his motivation for being at school. In Grade 9 he left the basketball team because some of his peers told him he wasn't a very good player. He was determined to improve his playing skills and spent a lot of time that year practicing on his own. He remembers this being a particularly difficult year because he didn't have that incentive to attend school.

### **Feeling comfortable with Membership in a Unique Group**

**“We had our own coloured group...we had some East Indian guys, some Spanish guys and all different cultures and we stuck together you know, it was like our group...”**

When Sandy was in Grade 9 a few friends from elementary school who were also East Indian, transferred to his school. This was significant to Sandy because although he had “white” friends who were part of the popular group, he really wanted to have someone from his own culture who could understand his experiences. He was still encountering racist remarks from other students, such as being called a “Paki,” and he was confused as to how to respond. He felt silenced, angry and frustrated by these experiences. Sandy and his other East Indian friends formed a small group, which became open to students from other cultures as well. This group gave Sandy strength and encouragement to challenge the racist remarks that he encountered. Having close friends

from his own culture was the support that he needed to help him cope with the challenges of being a minority student in that school.

*It was hard [being in school]. There was no one to talk to in your language and joke around. My best friend came when I was in Grade 9 and we used to talk to each other, and then another guy came and we had our own group. We became pretty tight, like I talked to everybody but there was the occasional racist slur...and I just thought I'm not going to be nice to them. So every time someone would call me a Paki, I would say something. Like I knew them, and I still talked to them and stuff, but our group was East Indian. Our group was coloured. We had some East Indian guys, some Spanish guys and all different cultures and we stuck together you know...and it just all got to me you know, cause of the abuse from when I was in elementary school.... I wasn't silent, and it made me feel better you know, talking back to them. It shut them up.*

In essence, Sandy felt great comfort in being part of this group. It gave him something to belong to without feeling like an outsider. Although he had white friends, he always felt different and he was continuously faced with racism, which his white friends could not understand. The group gave him a place to discuss his experiences with a sense that he would be understood. This understanding gave Sandy the confidence to challenge the comments and slurs that he found offensive and hurtful.

### **Feeling Valued through Relationships**

**“The coach, he really cared. And being on the team felt like family.”**

Sandy had returned to basketball by Grade 10 and remembers being totally committed to the sport. It was his only incentive to attend school because students weren't allowed to be on the team unless they maintained at least a C average. Being on the basketball team and maintaining passing grades was a challenge, but one worth pursuing because the rewards were great. Sandy felt accepted and valued by his coach and his team members, which inspired him to fulfill the expectations of his teachers as

well. He started doing well in some of his courses and was noticed by some teachers. He was happy to be acknowledged but admitted that he really only cared about playing basketball. *“I wasn’t really into school, I wasn’t giving it 100%. I just wanted to be a basketball star. School didn’t really matter because I didn’t want to go to university or college or nothing like that.”*

Being on the team was like being a member of a close family. The relationship that developed with the coach seemed to have parenting aspects to it because Sandy felt unconditionally cared for. The coach frequently had team members over to his house and developed personal relationships with a number of them. Sandy’s commitment to the team was becoming stronger as the year progressed but he remembers wanting to quit in Grade 11 because the pressure to balance the coach’s expectations as well as maintaining his courses became too much.

*Grade 11 was my hardest year I think cause there was school, there was work...there was the pressure of basketball, intense pressure with basketball. You would go there on your own time and just run and practice. The games. The trips, It just took a toll on me; it was just so hard. I wanted to quit just to take the pressure off, but I stuck with it....It’s a love for the coach...to keep playing cause I respected him and that’s why I stayed, for the coach. He really cared. He used to say ‘I like you a lot’ and I wasn’t eating and he got me on the lunch program and he’d ask how I was sleeping and stuff...*

Sandy felt overwhelmed with his responsibilities at that time in his life, but as he reflected upon the relationship with his coach he realized that being pushed to balance work, school and basketball was a valuable learning experience. He also realized that he wouldn’t have done it without the caring and support that he received from his coach.

*It felt like someone cared. See I didn't have a Dad, like someone to put you in line. You know you have a dad that steps in and puts you in line right, I didn't have that because my mom couldn't do everything....and you need that...*

The basketball team also enhanced his sense of belonging since they went on numerous road trips and also did a lot of fundraising together. The bonds that were established became quite strong which resulted in a sense of responsibility to not only the coach but also the team. This bond is what motivated Sandy to continue with basketball in Grade 12 even though the coach had decided to quit coaching because it was interfering in his family responsibilities and he needed to just focus on teaching. The coach's decision to leave had a tremendous impact on Sandy and the rest of the team. He recalled the last game in Grade 11 with a lot of emotion. *"When the coach left basketball...our last game we were all bawling our eyes out and I never cried before but I was balling my eyes out and we all gave him hugs."*

Sandy was living alone with his mother at this time and he longed for a male role model. He had no contact with his father and infrequent contact with his older brother. The personal relationship with the coach kept him engaged to the school and contributed to him directing some of his energy towards his academic courses. This relationship had mentoring characteristics that were transformational (Van Gyn & Ricks, 1997). Sandy was encouraged to improve not only in basketball, but in his courses as well. *"He saw my potential...and I needed someone there to push me."* By his last year of high school Sandy had developed some occupational aspirations that were beyond playing basketball for the NBA. He had confidence in his academic abilities and began to consider pursuing a career in law enforcement.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **Discussion**

The experiences, perceptions and actions described in this study are a reflection of the three individuals who participated in this research. It was also evident that all three participants of this study were at risk of dropping out of high school. Phenomenology was used as a framework to understand the experiences of the participants and readers should not assume that they are similar to those of other at risk youth. The objective of this study was to develop an understanding of the individual experiences, not to seek generalizations. However, it is possible to seek the common variables among the individual stories as a way of searching for “that which might ring true for others” (Garfat, 1995, p. 189).

This final chapter will discuss my understanding of the experiences of the participants and how these experiences relate to the literature. The following themes will provide a framework for this discussion: (a) developing a sense of belonging in the school; (b) finding nurturance and mentoring relationships; (c) increasing confidence through accomplishments; (d) becoming responsible and being in control; (e) resisting negative influences.

#### **Developing a Sense of Belonging in the School**

When I began this study I was focused primarily on the high school years, namely Grades 11 and 12. However, through the interview process I quickly became aware of the need to look at the whole school experience, not just the last two years. An ecological perspective seemed necessary in order to understand how resilience developed in each of

the individuals in spite of the stressors and risk factors in their environments. I started each interview with a background in family history and elementary experiences in order to show how each participant was at risk of dropping out. But as I listened to their stories I found it difficult to discern between the influences of individual characteristics that developed over time and the environmental influences from the home, community and school. I believe that individual outcomes are best understood as interplay between the internal characteristics of the individual and the context of the social structures that inform their individual orientations and behavioural choices. The interactive nature of individual and situational variables is a framework for developing a better understanding of resilience and can be conceptualized as the “goodness-of-fit between the characteristics of the individual and the characteristics of their environment” (Richman & Bowen, 1997, p. 104). It is a dynamic concept that reflects on the ways in which the individual and the environment changes and evolves over time.

Heather was the only participant who had a good “person-environment fit” with the school. She perceived the school as a safe and secure place where most of her needs were met. She developed appropriate peer relationships, and engaged in many extracurricular activities. For Heather the school was a refuge where she could escape the abuse in her home environment; there was never a question in her mind as to whether or not she belonged. If anything, she felt more comfortable at school than she did at home. She also planned to further her education beyond high school once she had established some career interests.

For Sandy and Marty the experience of being in school was radically different. They felt hostility and a lack of acceptance from both peers and staff in their elementary schools. Moving around a lot during their early years made it difficult to establish close relationships. Racism was apparent underlying their discomfort, and it came in both overt and covert ways. Marty remembers numerous times in class when he had his hand up to ask for assistance or in response to a question being asked, but the teacher never asked him for the answer. As he grew older he noticed more and more the ways in which he was being discounted and ignored by teachers and students, resulting in his transfer to three different schools. Sandy also experienced racism, but wasn't aware of it until he reached Grade 6. It was when he was physically assaulted and consistently fearful of other students that he recognized that he wasn't being treated fairly.

It is interesting that both Sandy and Marty felt that they needed protection when they entered junior high school. Sandy chose to go to a school that was quite a distance from where he lived because his older brother was registered there and he could count on him for assistance. Marty also felt that he needed protection, and having cousins in the school gave him a feeling of safety and security. Their engagement with the school related more to who was there than what the school had to offer. As visible ethnic minorities they felt alienated from the general school population, and the racial slurs and taunts reinforced this distance.

Marty and Sandy became engaged in the school environment through their involvement with students who may have felt similarly disenfranchised. Marty developed friendships, almost exclusively, with other First Nations students; Sandy became part of a

group that he called “multicultural,” including East Indians and students from other minorities. The First Nations Counsellor had a room that became a designated place for First Nations students to meet informally. Sandy and his group established a table in the cafeteria and a bench outside the school as being their own. They stuck together because togetherness meant feeling like you belonged.

The need to be part of a group was of the utmost importance to both Marty and Sandy. This is distinctly different from Heather’s experience, in that she never questioned whether or not she belonged. She saw the school as offering her a chance to be with her friends and to be involved in a variety of extracurricular activities. As a member of the dominant culture and class, her membership in the school environment was never in doubt; while Marty and Sandy’s membership was tenuous for the first three years. Their sense of belonging was dependent on a small group that could change at any time. Many of Marty’s Native friends dropped out of school and lured him away for parts of Grades 9 and 10. During that time he only managed to pass a few courses. The interventions of the First Nations Counsellor were significant in terms of re-engaging Marty in the school environment. The Counsellor negotiated arrangements whereby Marty could continue as a part-time student and pursue employment through various youth programs. In terms of protective factors these interventions provided Marty with opportunities and options that appealed to his goal of wanting to become something more than the “*typical Indian*.” Sandy found in basketball a caring coach and a supportive team including comrades from the “*multicultural group*,” which enhanced his commitment to the school and to his courses.

The essence of these group experiences informs us of how gangs are established and flourish within either a school or a community. When the general message is that you are not wanted, then you either leave, or form an alliance with others who are also getting the same message. Marty and Sandy came together with others for the purpose of feeling safe and secure in what was an unwelcome and hostile environment. However, as they developed close adult relationships within the school, their abilities to adapt and function in the face of racism seemed to increase. These relationships were protective in that they contradicted the message of not being wanted.

### **Ethnic Identity**

The goal of this research was to examine the experiences of at risk high school students in terms of their academic success. However, the experiences of racism described by Marty and Sandy surprised me. I knew theoretically that racism existed within the school system but I had little to no understanding of the impact that it had on minority students. In light of this, ethnic identity became a subject that I couldn't ignore.

Ethnic identity is defined as “the sum total of group member feeling about those values, symbols and common histories that identify them as a distinct group” (McMillan, 1998, p.2). The establishment of identity is a major developmental task for all adolescents and it is particularly complicated for those youth belonging to ethnic and minority groups. The values and beliefs of the dominant culture are routinely validated and reinforced, whereas minority groups seem to be ridiculed and dismissed in a negative manner. As a First Nations student Marty always felt disadvantaged. He knew that he had capabilities in reading and spelling but these skills were not recognized by the school

because of his frequent absences. When he entered junior high he was registered in a modified program along with a number of First Nation students. As he matured he realized that being in that program was another insult to him personally and his culture in general. After a few years he began to question why he and his First Nations friends were still in this program even though academically they were doing well.

The need to feel connected and accepted by their peers is of fundamental importance to most teenagers. For those from ethnic minorities it seems that they are constantly aware of ethnic differences that separate them from the dominant culture. This awareness seems to translate into a need to connect with others from the same culture. When Marty was in the early elementary grades he was immediately aware of being the only native student in the school. When he transferred to a school near the reserve there was great comfort in being with other First Nations students. When he got to high school he found that being with other native students was much more comforting than being with the general population.

Sandy searched for others who were “*just like him*” during his first few years of junior high. He switched homerooms a couple of times because he felt awkward and disconnected with the students in those groups. He described them as being different from himself and he didn’t feel that they shared anything in common. He would often sit away from the group feeling isolated and withdrawn.

For both Marty and Sandy being with others who were from the same ethnic group as themselves helped them come to terms with their ethnic membership and they began to see it as a significant part of their overall identity. Through participation in

cultural activities Marty developed a sense of pride in his culture which was later reinforced by some courses offered in the school. For example, he was happy to be able to develop his own designs in the Native Art class and to learn about the prominent issues of First Nations people in the Native Issues course. His ethnic identity was no longer being discounted, instead he and the other Native students were being recognized as a distinct group and worthy of attention. This recognition meant a great deal to him.

Sandy did not have the same cultural acknowledgements from the school; he did however find that talking with other East Indian students in their own language was comforting and a way of distinguishing himself as an East Indian person. He learned about the traditions and values of the culture from his mother and he adopted them as his own.

### **Meaningful Participation**

Heather, Marty and Sandy were all fully engaged with the school by Grade 11. Activities and programs available to them throughout junior high, in addition to close caring relationships, made them feel they were worthy and contributing members of the school community. This supports the literature, which has suggested that resilience is encouraged and developed when youth participate in meaningful ways within their different environments (Benard, 1998; Werner & Smith, 1982; Wehlage et al., 1989). Werner and Smith (1982) described this sense of participation and involvement as developing and enabling the social relationships that provide meaning for life and reason for caring.

Sandy received a lot of acknowledgement from staff and students for his participation on the basketball team. Heather played basketball and was a valuable member of the team. She also was consistently involved in extracurricular activities such as the Peer Helper Program. Marty became involved in new courses that were focused on First Nations issues which he found inspiring and meaningful in terms of being recognized as a Native person. Having culturally-relevant courses offered at the school was meaningful in that it acknowledged First Nations students as being distinct. It was also seen as a redress of past wrongs since First Nations issues had always been ignored or dismissed by the School Administration. As they progressed through adolescence all three developed skills and competencies that were reinforced by mentors. The combination resulted in a more favourable “goodness-of-fit” between themselves and the school environment, which promoted their continued development.

### **Finding Nurturance and Mentoring Relationships**

It was clearly evident that all three participants in this study were at risk of dropping out of high school. What was also apparent is that all three had been given a similar message early in their lives, a message that they were, in some way, special. Heather had a close relationship with her biological father and felt special in the eyes of her younger brother. Marty felt loved and nurtured by both his mother and grandmother. Sandy was favoured by his father and grandfather and he too had a close relationship with his mother. The psychological impact of feeling special seemed to contribute initially to the development of a positive self-concept. Although positive self-perceptions were assaulted by experiences of abuse and racism through elementary and junior high school,

by the time they reached Grade 11 each of these students had established a relationship with at least one significant adult who offered unqualified caring and support, high expectations concerning their abilities and respect for their contributions to the school community.

All three of the participants described significant relationships during their last two years of high school in which they felt a close connection with that person and expressed feelings of being accepted and supported. These relationships were mentoring relationships that contributed to the transformation of the participants from confused adolescents to responsible and independent young adults (Van Gyn & Ricks, 1997). These relationships also had interpersonal characteristics, which the participants experienced as genuine caring. For Heather and Sandy, these relationships had parental elements that pushed and challenged them in various ways. Sandy actually talked about his coach keeping him “*in line*” just like a father would; this was at a time when his own father had disappeared from his life. Heather frequently met with a counsellor who was more direct and who asked questions “*point blank*,” which she appreciated because it was difficult for her to disclose anything personal. Marty shared an interest in computers and technology with his teacher and he valued her expertise. She showed a genuine interest in his skill development and goals for the future, and he found her interest and encouragement inspiring and provoking. He started to view himself as a future professional with aspirations for working with new technologies. All of these relationships were hierarchical but none of the participants ever felt that the greater power of the other person was ever misused or abused.

The literature reviewed in Chapter Three has documented consistent findings that supportive relationships outside the family play a protective role in the development of resilience (Benard, 1998; de Rosenroll, Saunders & Carr, 1993; Richman & Bowen, 1997; Werner & Smith, 1982). Having mentors and positive role models may enhance developmental capabilities and empower young people to deal directly with the insensitivities of others. By the time they reached high school all three participants were openly expressing their displeasure with offensive remarks and behaviours. Sandy began to explicitly express his annoyance at being called a “Paki.” Marty openly challenged the stereotypes of teachers and Heather began to openly object to the verbal abuse and accusations from her stepfather. Their self-esteem and confidence had increased to the point where they no longer felt silenced or intimidated by the offensive behaviours of others.

### **Increasing Confidence through Accomplishments**

When children enter elementary school, teachers have expectations for them to perform in ways that are developmentally appropriate. These expectations become more ambitious as they move through the developmental life span, with certain competencies developing at particular points. In order for them to develop their skills and competencies they need demands from their environment that are matched with their abilities. Children who face demands that are beyond their capabilities are likely to feel self-doubt, frustration, hopelessness and despair, while those who face situations that fail to challenge them tend to become bored (Richman & Bowen, 1997). A developmental perspective focuses on the

timing, as well as the nature of the events in a child's life, in relation to their developmental maturity.

The tasks associated with adolescence have been well documented by such developmental theorists as Freud, Erickson and Piaget. The key feature of this stage is independence. It is a time when youth develop their individuality and at the same time develop their group loyalties. They become consciously aware of injustices and are consumed with fairness. It is a confusing time as they vacillate between the desire to be children while simultaneously wanting to be acknowledged as young adults, capable of taking on certain responsibilities.

All three of the participants in this study entered junior high school feeling accomplished in some area of their lives. Heather was good at basketball and she also felt competent in taking care of her younger brother. Sandy played basketball in elementary school and considered himself a good player. Playing basketball was the only thing that he enjoyed about school. Marty knew that he had strong abilities in Reading and Writing when he entered junior high since he had tested above grade level in these areas. These competencies developed further through high school as Heather and Sandy continued with basketball and Marty developed a keen interest in computers. Early experiences of being competent and skillful contributed to a self-esteem that enabled them to exercise a measure of control over their thoughts, emotions and actions. All three consistently made statements that showed evidence of their ability to realistically assess their environment and then plan their actions accordingly. They recognized fully that it was their efforts that resulted in their success and their lack of effort that resulted in failure. Whenever they

failed a course, it was attributed to lack of attendance or non-completion of assignments; when they did well it was because of their hard work. Bandura (1986) has described individuals with these characteristics as self-efficacious. They recognize their own powers and influence over their successes and their failures.

A by-product of self-efficacy is optimism. Seligman (1997) identified explanatory style or thinking about causes, as a key element to optimism. Optimistic individuals believe that bad events are temporary in nature, whereas good events have permanent causes relating to personal traits and abilities. They also view bad events as specific in nature and good events with a more global perspective. This type of explanatory style results in being accountable and taking realistic responsibility for improving a bad situation

These characteristics are found in all three interviews conducted for this study. Heather described her course failures as the result of poor attendance, “*I failed math, but I think that was a lack of going to class.*” However, she explained how sometimes the teacher made it uncomfortable for her to be in class. The situation was temporary in nature because she knew that she could repeat the course the following semester with a different teacher. When it came to her successes, Heather had more permanent explanations like being a hard worker, especially when it came to interesting projects..

This was also true for Marty. He too described the bad events in his life as being temporary, “*I was fired [from my job] because I wasn't competent because I chose to be by showing up late, I wanted to be fired.*” This statement reveals a behavioural self-blame that is temporary in nature. When it came to school Marty recognized that his

course failures were the result of poor attendance and the influence of his friends who were out of school. His successes were attributed to his persistence and perseverance, “*I was only in one course, but I kept persevering in Grade 11 English.*” Throughout high school he learned from others, planned alternative strategies when required, and regulated his own behaviour in order to achieve his overall goals.

Sandy’s successes were related primarily to playing basketball. He was on a winning team and he traveled to tournaments all over the Pacific Northwest. He consistently gave permanent responses for his successes as a player, such as being a dedicated member of the team and working hard at improving his skills. When he was doing poorly in his courses he described the reasons as being poor attendance, due to basketball tournaments and not doing the work. He readily admitted that he had no desire to be a “*good student*”, he just “*wanted to get done.*” Most of his motivation and enthusiasm was directed towards the basketball coach and the team; there was little left over for his academics. However, he recognized what he needed to do in order to continue playing basketball, and graduate from high school at the same time; he organized his life accordingly.

### **Becoming Responsible and Being in Control**

Becoming responsible was something that seemed easy for Heather but more challenging for Marty and Sandy. Being the oldest female in her family Heather had accommodated her parents by taking care of her younger brother and also managing various household responsibilities. Hence, she took on the business of being in school with the same level of commitment and responsibility. She always did her homework and

if she was absent from class for whatever reason she would let the teacher know. Her parents expected her to be mature which facilitated the development of responsible behaviours.

Marty and Sandy had older siblings, who in some way looked after them, and so it was more challenging for them to develop themselves as responsible individuals. Marty remembers a period during his early adolescence when he didn't care about anyone but himself. He described himself as selfish and ungrateful towards individuals who tried to help him. Sandy described a similar period where he would repeatedly talk back to teachers and be sent home by the school administration for his inappropriate behaviour.

As they got older all three participants described a greater sense of self confidence and competence that encouraged them to challenge teachers whom they perceived as being unfair and to balance their personal needs with the expectations from teachers. They felt empowered and more in control over the direction they were going in their lives. They developed aspirations for future careers and being in school was viewed as a choice. All three had part-time jobs and quitting school was a viable option for each of them. However, they matured to the point where staying in school became important in relation to their future goals and they were motivated to getting through all their course requirements. Marty illustrated this point in the following quote. *“It took me that long to mature and progress to where I was suppose to be, and to start getting on with my life. I felt that autonomous feeling and I made them [teachers] aware of where I was coming from.”*

Each of the participants appeared to have a high degree of self efficacy which was enhanced by their relationships in the school. Bandura (1986) first introduced the concept of self-efficacy as a theory of personal and collective agency that operates in concert with other sociocognitive factors. The interplay between the self and the environment regulates a sense of well being and goal attainment. He found that students' self-efficacy beliefs were directly correlated with other motivation constructs and with students' academic performances and achievements. Self efficacy beliefs are "beliefs in one's capability to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations" (Pajares, 1998, p.8), and they are acquired through authentic mastery experiences and verbal persuasions from significant others.

All three described the last two years of high school as their best years. They had adapted to the school environment and their self-esteem had increased with each successful project or assignment. The expectations from the school seemed to change as the participants matured. They established more mature relationships with teachers and administrators. Attending a school that had Grades 8 through 12 gave them an opportunity to be role models for the younger students and to distinguish themselves as young adults. Heather described herself as having an elevated status during the last few years. She had been on the basketball team for three years and she felt "*like a bit of a celebrity.*" She remembered feeling a certain level of comfort with knowing all the teachers because the school environment was now "*predictable.*" Marty and Sandy expressed the same feelings in their final years. They knew the school and most of the staff well and there was comfort in that predictability. They were also acknowledged for

their participation in various events; for Marty it was Vision Quest and for Sandy it was being on the basketball team.

### **Resisting Negative Influences**

Alan Wade (1995) has explored the concept of resistance and defines it as “any mental or behavioural act through which a person attempts to expose, withstand, repel, stop, prevent, abstain from, strive against, impeded, refuse to comply with, or oppose any form of violence or oppression (including any type of disrespect), or condition that makes such acts possible” (p.3). It is through this process of resisting that individuals begin to experience themselves as stronger and more capable of responding effectively to difficulties. Within this context, numerous acts of resistance can be found in the experiences described by the participants.

Heather resisted the abuse from her stepfather in various ways. As she grew older, she became more openly defiant and more protective of her brother. *“I just took on the role of my brother’s protector and he [stepfather] just hated that.”* She deliberately refused to acknowledge her stepfather and found reasons to be away from home. In response to the violence in her home, Heather developed awareness at the importance of being treated with respect. She responded positively to teachers who showed an interest in her as a person and who were genuinely available for extra assistance. When certain teachers behaved in ways that she perceived as disrespectful, she would often skip their class. Openly challenging her basketball coach when he treated her unfairly and remaining on the team were additional acts of resistance.

Though much of her resistance was subtle and disguised, she usually did so in a manner that reduced the likelihood of further harm. She described one incident where the teacher informed her that he was aware of her family problems. She wasn't sure exactly how much he knew about her family, but she worried that he would perceive her as a "*poor little girl*." She was embarrassed at his disclosure and she didn't want him to perceive her as a victim. "*I just thought, I don't need this. I don't want to be here. I don't know if you're looking at me and going 'oh, that poor little girl.'* I didn't want people thinking about me like that." The only way for her to maintain her dignity and prevent the discomfort of feeling like a victim was to leave the class. She knew, full well, that she would have to repeat the course next term; this was more acceptable than remaining and feeling embarrassed and uncomfortable in the class.

Marty resisted the oppression and racism of the "*white community*" by actively seeking out the company and support of the native community. In school, he refused to accept the label of being a "*slow learner*" and initiated a transfer from the modified courses into the mainstream. He openly defied teachers who were "*insensitive*" to First Nations issues and refused to attend classes where he thought teachers were being unreasonable or disrespectful. His resistance also came in the form of developing cultural pride, which countered the pressures he felt from the "*white community*" to be "*like a white man*." At the same time, he also challenged members of the native community who criticized him for becoming a "*white man's Indian*." He refused to accept labels and instead remained focused on his personal goals and aspirations.

Marty gave many examples of subtle and explicit ways in which he refused to accept negative messages and influences. He remembers that, by Grade 10, he was still experiencing racism, *“but I was a little bit more rebellious and verbal. In Grade 10 it was like a pattern of racism, but I was more cool and calm about it, like ‘oh yeah, well fuck you – get out of my face’ sort of thing.”* Marty responded positively to those teachers who came across as *“human beings.”* He found relating to teachers on a personal level inspiring and motivating. When teachers presented themselves as uncaring or insincere, he made a conscious effort to stay away from them. The advantage of a large school is that students can pick and choose their teachers.

Sandy also experienced violence in his family. When his parents separated Sandy refused to have any contact with his father. He perceived him as being unstable and dangerous. Sandy became aware of racism and oppression in Grade 6 and 7 and he developed strategies for resisting that influence when in high school. He formed a group in which he could feel comfortable and became involved in sports. He openly defied racist comments of students and challenged their racist assumptions in various ways. He knew his teachers were frustrated with his lack of effort in his courses, but he was not willing to sacrifice basketball in order to do well. Teachers often suggested that he miss tournaments so that he could complete projects and assignments on time. However, playing basketball and being on the team meant far more to Sandy than getting high marks and satisfying his teachers. He knew that basketball was interfering with his studies but the rewards for being on the team far outweighed doing well in his courses.

Although Sandy admits that he wasn't a good academic student, he felt that he was still a good person. School just wasn't his thing. He resented the harassment from teachers and he refused to accept their perceptions of him being a "*bad kid*." However, there was an incident where the school Principal wanted to expel Sandy permanently from the school. Sandy had been caught with liquor in his locker. The school took this incident very seriously and viewed Sandy as a bad influence and beyond the control of the school. Sandy remembers feeling "*like I was a bad person in everyone's eyes*." He recognized that he exercised poor judgement and with the help of advocates like his coach and the Youth and Family Counsellor he was able to convince the Principal that he didn't deserve to be expelled permanently. He was expelled for five days. He knew that he was still a "*good person*" and for the remainder of the year he embarked on a quest to prove that he was not a "*bad person*." In a sense, he resisted the attempt by the school administration to label him from this one incident. Although Sandy had been in trouble with his teachers in his junior high years, he had not been sent to the office for over a year when this incident occurred. Yet, the school was only too quick to get rid of him. This situation illustrates how some students might feel that the school is trying to push them out. If the administration had blindly implemented policies in regards to this type of violation then Sandy would have been a dropout statistic. He claimed that he would not have continued with his education if he had been sent to another school.

### **What I Have Learned**

As I reviewed my research question and the data obtained from the interviews I realized that staying in school is a complicated process that changes and shifts over time.

This is not a phenomenon that can be viewed from a linear perspective. There were a number of protective factors that enhanced the development of resilience in the three participants.

Firstly, it is clear that close caring adult relationships had an impact on the ability of the participants to persevere in spite of tremendous challenges. However, the most meaningful relationships were with those individuals who recognized the talents and abilities of the participants and nurtured those skills through mastery experiences. The counsellors offered support but it was the teachers or the coaches who really enhanced their self-esteem and self efficacy.

As a Youth & Family Counsellor, I was always concerned for the self-esteem of my clients. I was convinced that in order to be effective I needed to promote positive feelings about themselves among my clients as a means for developing competencies. This research project has informed me that praise for doing nothing is meaningless. Heather described it best when she said that her counsellor was always telling her how great she was and she thought, "*he's a counsellor; he's suppose to do this. This is his job.*" His comments made her feel uncomfortable most of the time because it was hard to believe all the great things he was saying about her. However, she did start to believe his words once she had mastered experiences that provided solid evidence of her capabilities. She could accept praise for getting 100% on her biology project because there was tangible evidence that she was creative and intelligent.

This learning is supported by Seligman (1997) who viewed self esteem as a byproduct that is the result of mastering challenges, working successfully with others,

overcoming frustrations and boredom and winning. Hence, self esteem is more than just feeling good; it's a feeling that is intimately connected with doing well in the world. Teachers and counsellors alike need to recognize the hollow praises that are dispensed routinely in an attempt to help students feel good about themselves. Telling students they're great is easy compared with providing opportunities for them to develop their greatness. The literature revealed many studies that claimed low self-esteem and low feelings of self worth lead to school failures, drug abuse and other social ills. However, Seligman suggested that low self-esteem is a consequence of failing school or abusing drugs, not the cause. He professed that "bolstering the feeling side of self-esteem without breaking the shackles of hopelessness or passivity accomplishes nothing" (p. 34).

Another aspect of my learning is based on my assumption about the rigidity of the school system. I learned from this research that schools are not necessarily rigidly structured; there are many opportunities for teachers, counsellors and students to be creative and flexible in meeting various needs. The course requirements for graduating from the particular school in my study included a number of alternative courses that were appealing and interesting. The opportunity to participate in community events and receive course credit promoted a partnership between the educational system and the larger community, which seemed to promote the relevance of education in a larger economic context. Marty became keenly interested in law enforcement after participating in police camp; receiving credit for his involvement further motivated him to continue towards his goal of becoming a police officer.

Creative scheduling and course timetabling were components of this school that made it possible for Marty to attend as a part-time student for most of his junior high years. He started Grade 8 attending mornings only and then carried on with only one or two courses per term. The school never demanded that he stay registered in a full load (five courses) and upon reflection he viewed this accommodation as an indication that his membership in the school was valued. Initially he had a hard time believing that education was a worthy pursuit since it didn't seem to offer much in the way of a better life. Graduating from high school no longer guarantees a high paying job. Neither Marty nor Sandy had aspirations for going on to College or University, which diminished their commitment to the attainment of a high school diploma. However, by remaining in courses where he was passing, Marty was able to stay connected to the school in a limited capacity until he began to realize that graduating was a useful goal and one necessary for pursuing a career in law enforcement.

This was not the case for the Heather and Sandy who carried a full load each semester and routinely failed one or two courses that needed to be repeated the following term. Concentrating on only two subjects during one term is a new model for teaching called the Capernican system, which has been implemented in a few schools in the Victoria District. Students choose between one core subject (Math, Language Arts, Humanities) and one elective (Home Ec, Woodworking, etc.). They concentrate on just these two courses for ten weeks. According to some school administrators this model has been highly successful in terms of reducing failures and promoting knowledge and skills in each subject area ( D. Courville, personal communication, April 18, 1998). Heather,

Marty and Sandy were students who did not receive academic support from their parents. Homework assignments and preparation for tests were difficult tasks for them to accomplish on their own, particularly in junior high. If they had gone to a school that offered the Capernican system, course assignments and preparation for tests would have been done during class time. The consistent support from the teacher and the concentrated time allotted for learning the curriculum and completing homework tasks would seem to be protective factors for those students who are highly at risk of failing. In essence, the school would provide them with effective support and instruction without needing to move them into special programs where they are stigmatized. It would also prevent frequent failures, which diminish the student's self-esteem and subsequently their motivation.

This leads me to another aspect of my learning. The school in which I was employed had a number of special programs that were supposedly offered to students with special needs. When I first started in 1987 there were two streams: the regular and the modified. In addition there was the Learning Disabled Program and the Pre-employment Program for students who had been diagnosed as "educably mentally handicapped." The names of these programs have changed but in essence they still exist. The school was located on the border of two different reserves and I can recall a large number of First Nations students being automatically enrolled in the Pre-employment Program.

It would seem that this practice of putting native students in "special programs" is clearly racist and a way of perpetuating the myth that native youth are not committed to

an education. When they enter junior high, they're identified as poor learners or low functioning students from the elementary feeder schools, which then designates them as needing a special program with special assistance. I'm not proposing that these special programs have little value. However, I think we need to look at the process for referring youth into these programs and the demeaning aspect of graduating without a real diploma.

What I've learned from Marty is that being in a "special program" has very little to do with ability and is more closely related to stereotypes and quick fixes. The frequent absences during elementary school did leave Marty with a deficit in terms of his knowledge and skills, but this did not necessarily mean that he was incapable of handling the regular curriculum. The benefit of being in the Minimum Essentials Program for Grade 8 seemed to be the small group setting where the teacher could notice if he was having difficulties. This was important because Marty was not going to ask for help, having experienced rejection from his previous teachers. The atmosphere created in this learning environment enhanced Marty's motivation for being in school and contributed to a sense of optimism in terms of successfully completing the work. As an intervention this program worked well in terms of re-engaging Marty to the educational system. However, where the system failed was not recognizing his readiness to take on the regular curriculum. He initiated the switch into the regular stream with the help of the First Nations Counsellor once he became aware of the stigma attached to being in the ME program.

Students who are in modified programs quickly get the message that they are not capable, which in essence is interpreted as yet another failure. Because Marty knew from

elementary school that he was above grade level in reading and writing, he refused to adopt the label of low-functioning student. However, other students might not have the self-assurance to challenge this label and move on to more challenging work. It is more likely that they will develop feelings of low self-esteem that impede their abilities. For some students leaving school is an act of resistance and a way of escaping the labels that diminish their self worth and sense of competence.

Another assumption that has been challenged by this study has to do with the role of alternative schools. I started out believing that alternative programs were convenient avenues for regular schools to unburden themselves of students who were challenging in various ways. I now have a different view and see them as necessary placements for students who have not engaged with their high schools after a few years of being in that system. It took at least three years for all three participants to feel comfortable in their school and during that time they also developed confidence that this was a place where they could have their social, educational and psychological needs met. However, not every student is going to be so lucky and if students are still feeling a sense of isolation and alienation after a few years their chances of remaining until graduation becomes greatly reduced.

In light of this, it's important that students be given options besides dropping out. Philosophically alternative schools strive to be flexible and accommodating to the educational and emotional needs of all students. There is often a strong counselling and life skills component in addition to academics. What is disheartening is the stigma attached to these schools. An interview a few years ago with the Vice Principal of

Warehouse Alternative School revealed that most youth referred to this particular program as a “school for losers”. This perception was widespread, therefore being referred to such a program implied that one must be a loser (G. Pope, personal communication, Nov. 1995). This labeling process is further accentuated by the Ministry of Education which requires a designation form be filled out for each alternative student identifying them as either moderately or severely behaviourally disordered. It would be hard to feel good about being referred to such a program or actually attending.

However, this program was always full until this past June when it was restructured to service a younger age group, ages 13 and 14 years (Danard, 1998). I seriously question the wisdom of pulling young teens who are experiencing school problems out of their neighbourhood schools and into a program where they are immediately given the message that they are deviant or defective. It is clearly evident that the first two years of Junior high school were challenging years for the participants in this study. However, during that time they established mentoring relationships within the school and participated in activities that enhanced their coping skills and their commitment to completing their grade. Removing them at age 13 would have denied them the experience of developing the sense of belonging and the sense of optimism and confidence that came out of those struggles. These were formative years and the school created an environment that allowed them to grow up and develop into responsible and competent young adults.

Removing youth from their peer group and their communities in the beginning stages of adolescence seems counter-productive. I find it hard to imagine the

circumstances that would warrant referring a 13 or 14 year old to such a program. I also wonder about the long term effects of being designated as moderately or severely behaviourally disordered. The implementation of this new program seems to be focused exclusively on deficits, dysfunctions and pathology. The resilience literature has suggested that educators and social service providers base their interventions on assessing individual, family and community strengths and use the information to integrate protective factors into existing environments which may prevent problems and ameliorate existing difficulties (Fraser & Galinsky, 1997). Removing young at risk adolescents from an environment where they may be able to adapt and develop coping strategies over time is a short-sighted solution to a complex problem and actually prevents them from being successful in the regular educational system.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This study was limited to the experience of three participants who all attended the same high school. It would be interesting to learn about the experiences of at risk youth who need to endure a transition from junior high to high school by moving to a school that offers only Grades 11 and 12. Is it possible for mentoring relationships to develop in two years? What protective factors are in place for those students who are difficult to engage? This question intrigues me because I recently met with a colleague who is a Vice Principal of one such high school and she was lamenting that some of the teachers in this school never bother to learn the names of their students. This led me to wonder how that might be interpreted be a student who is having a difficult time with the transition in addition to other stressors in his or her life.

Another intriguing question that arose from this project has to do with gender difference. Both male participants entered junior high school fearing for their personal safety. Is this fear, gender or race related? Were the feelings of needing protection a result of being from an ethnic minority, or is this something that most adolescent boys feel? There has been much research on adolescent female violence and I wonder if fear is now just an inherent part of being in junior high school? The question that then follows is; does this fear continue through high school? If so, what are the schools doing to promote a safe and secure learning environment?

## **Epilogue**

Following graduation Heather worked for a few years before entering a program at Camosun College. Everyone had told her this program was extremely difficult and that she would be better off finding something that was less challenging. She decided that she needed to find out for herself whether or not the program was too difficult and she went ahead with it. She graduated with the highest mark in her class. She now has a secure government job and she recently got married to a man that supports her in every way. She and her husband are planning a family in the near future.

Marty continued with his goal of becoming a law enforcement officer. He is currently enrolled at Camosun College, where he continues to challenge stereotypes. He is planning to attend Simon Fraser University next fall to pursue a degree in Criminology. He is politically active on the reserve and is planning to one day become Chief. He is dedicated to giving back to his community what he received and is committed to helping native youth find the balance between their culture, spiritual needs and education.

Sandy is still playing basketball. He has joined a league for East Indian players and he frequently travels to tournaments. He's been working full-time since graduating and is planning to take a few courses at Camosun College this fall. He is very interested in pursuing a career in law enforcement. He thinks it would be valuable to have more East Indian officers on the police force.

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## Appendix A

### Letter of Consent

<b>Title of Project:</b>	Against the Odds	
<b>Investigator:</b>	Michelle Koroll, Graduate Student	595-7662
	Dr. Frances Ricks, Supervisor	721-7989

#### **Description of Project:**

I \_\_\_\_\_ understand that I am participating in a research project conducted by Michelle Koroll for the completion of her Masters degree. This research project intends to identify the ways in which youth, who are severely at risk of dropping out of high school, manage to complete their course requirements and graduate with their peers. Through interviews I will be asked for some demographic information in addition to questions which will help the researcher understand the experiences of at risk youth in the regular school system, and what kind of support is needed in order for them to succeed. Interviews will be 90 minutes in duration and I may be asked to participate in two interviews, totaling 3 hours of my time. A debriefing session will follow the interviews to ensure that my emotional needs are addressed since the interview itself may reveal some painful experiences from my past. If I need further support I will have access to the home telephone number of the researcher. I can call her anytime to make an appointment to debrief the interview further, and/or be referred to an appropriate agency for additional counselling.

I understand that I can withdraw my involvement at any time and I can refuse to answer any questions I do not wish to answer. Further, I am assured that my identity will be protected and that my name will not appear on any documentation. The data collected from interviews will remain confidential; audiotaped interviews will be erased immediately after responses have been coded in written form. The transcribed interviews will be kept on a computer disk for a period of five years and will be stored in a locked filing cabinet until they are destroyed. If I decide to terminate my involvement before the project is completed I can stipulate as to whether or not the data collected to date may be used in the data analysis. I will have access to a copy of the thesis once it is completed and I will be invited to meet with the investigator to debrief the outcome of her study.

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Signature of Applicant

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Researcher

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

### Script for School-Based Youth and Family Counsellors

Hello \_\_\_\_\_ I'm calling to find out if you would be interested in participating in a project that I recently heard about from a colleague of mine. Her name is Michelle Koroll and she use to be a Youth and Family Counsellor at Shoreline Jr. Sec. School and S.J. Willis Altenative Program. Now she;s a student at the University of Victoria doing a Masters degree in the Faculty of Human and Social Development. She's doing a research project as part of her thesis on youth who were at risk of dropping out of high school, but managed to graduate in spite of difficulties and traumatic events that were occurring in their lives at that time. As your counsellor, I know it was a struggle for you to get through high school for various reasons and so I was wondering if you would be interested in participating in this study? You will be asked to participate in at least one, maybe two, interviews that are 90 minutes long. The interviews will focus on your experiences while you were in high school and how you were able to overcome the barriers that usually force student in similar positions to drop out of school.

If you are interested in participating would it be alright for Michelle to have your telephone number so she could call you and explain the project in more detail? If you decide to go ahead and meet with Michelle you are not obligated to participate and you can pull out of the project at any time. Also, you can refuse to answer any questions that cause you discomfort during the interview. If you participate, the interviews will be taped and transcribed onto computer disk. Your name will not be used in the thesis so your privacy will be protected. You will also have access to a copy of the thesis and Michelle will meet with you once the project is completed to discuss the outcome of her study. If during the interview you are reminded of painful events from the past then Michelle will meet with you for a debriefing session following the interview. She will also refer you to appropriate agencies if you require further support and counselling.

**Appendix C**  
**Interview Questions**

1. Tell me a bit about yourself, how many children in your family, what your parents do for a living etc.
2. What was school like for you in the Elementary Grades?
3. What was your life like while you were in high school? What would a typical day have looked like?
4. What do you remember as the hardest part?
5. Did you ever get to the point where you thought you might not make it? What did “not making it” mean to you at that time?
6. What do you think you needed at that period in your life? Was that need met? By whom, or what provided it for you? Was it enough?
7. What advice would you give to youth who are in a similar position now? What advice would you give school personnel?
8. What does graduating mean to you?

## VITA

Surname: Koroll      Given Names: Michelle Wendy

Place of Birth: Winnipeg, Manitoba      Date of Birth: October 7, 1957

### Educational Institutions Attended:

University of Victoria	1979 to 1982
University of Victoria	1993 to 1998

### Degrees Awarded:

B.A. (with Distinction)	University of Victoria	1982
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### Honours and Awards:

The Agnes Shahariw Memorial Scholarship	1995
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Title of Thesis: Against the odds: A phenomenological study that examines the academic success of at risk youth

Author

A solid black rectangular box redacting the author's signature.

(Signature)

MICHELLE KOROLL  
(Name in Block Letters)

Sept. 29, 1998  
(Date)