Low Academic Motivation for At-Risk Students: A Self-Study

by

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Abstract

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Abstract

Self-study research method allows for the reflection of one's practice for the purpose of understanding and often to facilitate change. This study of myself in relation to at risk students who struggle with low motivation embodies the qualitative research method, self-study, along with narrative inquiry and an arts-based method, creative writing, in order to reflect on my practice as an educator and bring a greater awareness to my work. This study sought to answer the following question: How does my story as a teacher of at risk students within an inner city school facilitate a greater understanding of the possibility of achievement and success for at risk students who struggle with a lack of academic motivation?

Over the course of this study, I collected eight journal entries of my own reflections of my time with the classroom. I then organized this data into various themes and created short stories of my learning and experience. After analyzing both my data and my short stories, I was able to reflect on the various themes and lessons, reflect on my learning process, and on the meaning of this learning for myself as teacher and a professional.

The outcome of my study allowed me to facilitate a change in my practice that will lead to an increase of success for some of my students. My plan is to share my learning with my colleagues and hopefully facilitate a greater awareness of the struggles and successes of at risk students.

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Frontispiece: The Creation

A Rocky Start

The day before semester two starts, our class lists appear in our staffroom boxes. I always look forward to reading over my lists. It's sort of like peaking at a Christmas present on Christmas Eve. There is this feeling of a fresh start and the excitement of new ideas and new learning.

As I walk through the halls and climb the three stories to my classroom, I scan over my lists. I am pleased with my two lists for English 12 and English 10 Challenge. They seem well balanced and include some kids that I already know. My class list for English 10 is massive (over 30 students) and I can already see that at least six of the names are students with learning designations and three are students with behaviour designations. I stop in the middle of the hallway and read over it again. Could this be a mistake? How can a class of this composition be allowed? I immediately feel overwhelmed and exhausted. Frustration builds as I think over the two weeks of lesson plans that I have put into this course that will now have to be reworked and reorganized. With teaching four out of four classes, I wonder when I will find the time.

The next day I stand in front of a busy, noisy, chaotic class. I give the course outline and stop every 30 seconds or so to address behaviour and enforce classroom management. I am overwhelmed and alone.

After class, I sit at my desk and stare out into the bright afternoon. I know that the best thing would be to ask for support. I fear looking like a less competent teacher and being perceived as a complainer. I feel like a bad teacher. I decided to tough it out.

The first three days of semester two go by in a blur. I receive a steady flow of emails from various counsellors and resources teachers about individual students and their individual learning programs. I spend time after school and during the evening working through strategies for many of my students. I attempt to track down the kids that are already not attending and I try to accomplish my own assessments. I feel like I'm swimming upstream and I am running out of options. At the end of day three, I swallow my pride and ask for help.

I sit across from my principal in his office. The door is closed; a sure sign of a serious conversation. The blind over his window is open though and I can see various students coming and going from the office. A secretary laughs. I feel anxious and try to focus. I know it's important to steer the conversation towards the needs of my students and not on the fact that I am totally overwhelmed. As I talk, I realize that I do have my principal's support. Feeling brave, I begin to question why a class like this even exists. I tell him that it is too much for one teacher. He assigns me an Educational Assistant. I feel a small sense of relief coupled with a sense of shame. Why do I need 'an assistant'? Then we both realize a crucial piece of information that changes the dynamic of my teaching.

We realize that most of my students have come out of English 9 Adapted and should have been placed in English 9, not English 10. I stare at my principal and wait for his decision. He looks at me and asks if I would recommend that class be split into two. I jump at the opportunity for a smaller class. Immediately I feel relief and a sense of potential. As I leave his office, I realize that the question of why these students are not in the proper level of English has not been addressed. I also realize that I no longer require

an Education Assistant. I ponder this for a moment, shrug my shoulders and head back up to my classroom.

A Balancing Act

The bell rings to end lunch and I head up from the crowded staffroom to my classroom. I am, of course, the first one to arrive. I write the agenda in purple pen on the white board. I smile at the colour. Perhaps using a 'cheerful' colour will bode well for the lesson of the day. Today we are building paragraphs.

My students slowly shuffle in. Some are carrying drinks in plastic containers, bright and frozen liquid. They talk loudly about their lunchtime adventures. I catch pieces of sentences that I don't really want to hear, swear words that I ignore. I remind a few kids that they will need supplies today (and everyday). They complain and head back to their lockers to get their books, paper, and pens. I stand outside the door while the hall grows quiet and my classroom gets louder. I smile at a colleague who nods knowingly as he passes by. I sigh and close the door, calling attention to the front of the class.

We get underway. I explain the process of paragraph building and get several students to contribute ideas around what a paragraph looks like. No one uses hands as most prefer to shout out the answers. Pride at getting the ideas right is more important than insisting that they follow the rules. I keep the lesson light and easy and most students are actively engaged. I tell them that the activity today involves cutting, pasting, and gluing parts of a paragraph together on fresh sheet of white paper. This idea goes over well as they collect their craft supplies from my own collection. I quickly throw them into groups and the work begins. As I circle the classroom, one of my students asks to use

the washroom. She disappears. I mentally kick myself. I should know better than to expect this student to participate in group work.

As the block rolls forward, the classroom buzzes. Students continue to build their paragraphs and chat about their social lives. One student asks to go get his lunch from his locker. He returns several minutes later with a bag of chips and a pop from the vending machine. I shake my head at him. He smiles sheepishly and rejoins his group, offering to share his chips with others. I notice that most groups have divided tasks up amongst themselves to cut down on the amount of individual work. I allow this process to unfold. As they are working, I hesitate to be too picky about the actual form of the learning. I keep my eye on the door hoping to see my missing student return.

The end of the block arrives and I let me students know they can pack up. They load their backpacks and I tell them that there is no homework for today. They seem pleased. One student admits that he never does homework. His classmates seem happy about this news and contribute their own ideas around homework. Cell phones start to come out and the bell rings. My missing student slips quietly through the door, grabs her books, and slips out.

I stare at the door and try to process what I have witnessed from this particular student. I feel a bit deflated and defeated. The lesson had gone well, but not for everyone in my class. My next class piles into the classroom with loud chatter. I am immediately surrounded by a new group of students who ask about their homework from last night and the possibilities of extensions. My own thoughts are quickly forgotten. I smile and begin to address the questions.

A Hallway Moment

The bell to begin the day has gone and I stand in the corner between two hallways with one of my colleagues. We can see the rain outside and the hallway is in partial shadow. Students' footprints have left damp patches on the floor and many that pass us are in desperate need of a towel and dry shirt. One student in particular shows us how wet his jeans are. They are too big already and with the added weight of the damp denim, he seems to swim inside them. He seems pleased by his new found fashion and heads cheerfully down the hall calling out to his buddy ahead. Both of our vice-principals pass by and say hello. I assume they have just come out of a meeting. One of their walkie-talkies crackles and comes to life with a voice as they move away.

This is a typical morning start for us. We act as a teacher presence in the hall as students move to their lockers and slowly drift to their classes. As my colleague and I chat, we smile and say hello to students who pass, addressing them by their names and asking them how they are. We also encourage faster movement from our kids with a reminder to "get to class on time". We wave to other teachers down the hall who are also standing 'on alert' and monitoring the hallway activity.

One of my students slowly comes down the hall. I smile and wave and ask what class is first this morning. The answer is a shrug and a lack of eye contact. I tell this student that I hope the day is a good one and to come see me if they have any questions about English work. The student nods and moves on. The hallway grows quiet as the last of the late comers disappears into a classroom. I wave 'bye' to my colleague and head into my own classroom. It's full and noisy. I smile as I come through the door. "Good morning. Let's get started"!

A Gift

This afternoon is a due date for my English 10 students. I anticipate the lack of assignments that will be completed and, before class starts, I begin to put together strategies. I know I have already told my students that there is no extension for this assignment. I also know that this will not matter. Many assignments still will not be finished on time.

During quiet work time, I meet with one of my students who has not completed the assignment. I ask if the due date was clear. I get a "yes" in response and a half smirk. I ask why the assignment was not completed. The answer: "because I didn't do it". I count to three in my head and respond with "yes, I understand that. But ***why*** *didn't you do it?" The answer is a shrug. I know that there are many possible answers for this, including not having a safe place to do school work, to having to work a part time job late into the night, to having to babysit siblings, to not understanding the assignment. A cell phone beeps signalling a text message. My student responds to the text, watching me out of the corner of an eye. I take this opportunity to think of an appropriate consequence. I realize that I want my student to do the assignment so I can assess a piece of writing. I need the assessment to be accurate. Clearly the threat of not having an extension has not resulted in the work being completed as I had hoped. I have an idea…*

"What do you think an appropriate consequence for not having your work done on time would be?" My student answers my question with a variety of answers ranging from "getting zero" to losing marks, to detention. I agree with detention and set this student up in study hall. The time at lunch tomorrow will be spent finishing the

assignment. The student agrees to this and a new due date is made. The cell phone goes off and I ask it to be left on my desk. It is.

The next day the lunch bell rings. On my way to the staffroom I casually stroll past study hall and see my student bent over the desk, writing madly. I see a glimmer of his success and my own. I smile and head to the staffroom to eat my peanut butter sandwich in the company of my colleagues.

Chapter One: The Commencement

Introduction

Within the field of education, the primary focus for teachers is often the task of facilitating successful learning for students. For many students, the concept of 'success' is varied, and as skilled professionals, teachers have a variety of teaching and learning strategies that they can draw upon in order to facilitate success for each individual student within their classroom.

However, the motivation to learn is often something that many students struggle with, especially those students who are at risk, or who are not anticipated to graduate from high school. If a student is not anticipated to graduate, or is at risk, it follows that this student has had very little success regarding their academic school work. Therefore, at risk students struggle with low academic motivation which further perpetuates the problem of being at risk. Further to this point, self-efficacy is the belief that one can succeed; however, "at risk students commonly display learned helplessness with regard to their school work" (Bos and Vaughn, 1998, as cited in MacMath, Roberts, Wallace, and Chi, 2009, p. 88). Again, this means that for many students who are at-risk, the struggle around academic motivation can cause a feeling of helplessness and an anticipation of failure. If one anticipates failure, the motivation to succeed would be drastically reduced. For the purposes of this study, student learning and success is defined as an increase in attendance, completion of assignments, and an increased involvement in class discussion. My focus of my study was not the cause of low motivations. Low motivation and at risk students are not single entities that exist disconnected from other factors and demographics. Anyon (2005) states that "education is an institute whose basic problems

are caused by, and whose basic problems reveal, the other crises in cities: poverty, joblessness and low wages, and racial and class segregation" (177). Clearly, none of the reasons for low motivation are stated as being the fault of teachers or students. Nonetheless, low academic motivation for at risk students is a struggle that is time consuming, frustrating, and can often leave both the educator and the students in a state of hopelessness. However, often the process of reflection can help one to understand the problem and begin to work towards a possible solution. By illuminating my personal experiences, the reflections from my own teaching process have helped me and, I hope, other educators understand how to begin to facilitate motivation for at risk students and break the cycle of failure. Using a qualitative research design and self-study research method, the purpose of this study is to report the stories of my own experiences and reflections as a teacher of at-risk youth who experience a lack of academic motivation within an inner city school.

Overview

This project consists of the previously read frontispiece and the following five chapters. In the frontispiece I present my own art work; my short stories. These stories were created out of my journal entries, which are, more specifically, my data collection. I will speak more to how they came to be in the fourth chapter of this project. My intention in presenting these creative pieces before the first chapter is to paint a picture of my daily reality as an educator and to foreshadow my own learning.

The first chapter focuses on an introduction to the subject of low academic motivation and at-risk students, my own background, the context in which the study took place, the researcher orientation, and the research question. The second chapter is centred

on a review of the literature in connection to motivation and students who are at risk. Chapter three is based on the methodology used including self-study, narrative inquiry and arts based research methods. Furthermore, it outlines the significance of the proposed research and the limitations and delimitations. Chapter four focuses on the method of data collection and what is revealed from within the data. It also presents some reflection on the methods used, including writing as a method of inquiry. The last chapter provides an analysis of the data collected in connection to the literature. Furthermore, it provides reflections on the learning process and a summary of recommendations around low academic motivation and student success.

Background

As a teacher within an inner city school, a lack of academic motivation for at risk students is an issue that I am faced with for every class I teach. My position as teacher who is white, educated, middle class, and female does need to be acknowledged as my understanding of those I teach and my own place in the classroom and within larger social structures, such as the public education system and the community, are seen through this lens of my experience and understanding. This matter becomes increasingly complicated as history for many of my students around colonization and intersecting elements of oppression exist within the larger context in which I work. Anxiety, anger, and frustration are prominent throughout the education system in part because of the history of oppression. Williams and Tanaka (2007) state “when an individual is embedded as a member of a dominant culture everything is designed to fit that cultural world. From this position of relative comfort, it is difficult to even notice that there are people who might have a different approach, or a different way of thinking than what is

familiarly known and believed" (¶ 11). I am well aware that as a white woman, I may unintentionally perpetuate patterns that exist within the education system that benefit the dominant culture. Iseke-Barnes (2006) quotes "who we are, how we act, what we think, and what stories we tell become more intelligible within an epistemological framework that begins by recognizing existing hegemonic histories (Mohanty, 1994, p.148, as cited by Iseke-Barnes, p.21). I am aware that even the label "at risk" may be problematic to some readers, and that a different lens might tell a different story. Nevertheless, when I refer to 'low motivation' and 'at risk youth', I recognize that the responsibility and causes of low motivation and exhibiting at risk behaviour does not just reside within the responsibility of myself, as a teacher, and my students, as learners. Rather, I acknowledge that many factors throughout our collective history have shaped and developed the struggles that exist for many of my students today.

Specifically, for this study, my belief is that at risk students struggle with low academic motivation and it is this low motivation that results in low levels of success. This low level of success perpetuates the classification of at risk, and the cycle continues from there. For the purpose of this self-study, a definition for at risk is ***the definite probability that a student will not complete high school; therefore, a student who is at risk is a student who most likely will not graduate.*** Student motivation includes motivation that is intrinsic or students' self-motivation.

I am aware that the course completion rate for students within the school I teach is lower than the district average. Furthermore, I am aware that on average the results from standardized tests, such as Provincial Exams, are also below district average. According to the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education website), for the January 2011

English 10 Provincial Exam results, my school averaged 68.53 percent, while the district average was 72.43 percent. Even though the average for the English 12 Provincial Exam is 6.84 percent above district average, my school still ranks a mark of 4.1 out of 10 according to the Fraser Institute's Report Card (Fraser Institute website, 2011).

While many educators understand that our province's Report Card is "arguably, an incomplete, superficial and misleading picture of the state of schools in just one of Canada's many provinces for which the Fraser Institute issues Report Cards...." (Weber, 2006, p. 6), it is still widely read and widely used as indicators of not just student success, but also teacher success. Furthermore, even though I am drawing on these statistics, I realize that these high-stakes standardized tests are de-motivating for the majority of students and as Amrein and Berliner state, "such tests actually decrease student motivation and increase the proportion of students who leave school early" (p. 32). Again, using these statistics is for the purpose of illuminating some of the struggles that educators face within an inner city school, not for the purpose of justifying standardized testing. However, the fact remains that our population, including some educators, still view these standardized tests as indicators of student success, and therefore, the statistics need to be revealed.

Over the past five years, I have found that my strategies for working with at risk students who struggle with a lack of motivation have varied and have resulted in varying levels of student success. In light of this context, I was interested in documenting and reflecting on my experience and my practice. Through this reflection, I came to a greater understanding of my own work as an educator and was able to find alternative ways of promoting success for at risk students. Not only has the information been important and

meaningful to my own practice, but I have also been able to assist my colleagues in meeting the needs of at risk students who struggle with low motivation.

In essence, this self-study created a difference in the understanding of my own teaching practice, as it gave insight into many at risk students who I taught, and continue to teach, and provided some insight into students' motivation. With reflection and an understanding of the needs of at risk students, I am able to better myself as an educator and will be able to pass along the reflections of my own practice to my colleagues. This information allowed, and continues to allow, for teachers to work more productively with students who suffer from low motivation and, therefore, increase student success within an inner city school. It has allowed for a greater understanding of the possibility of experiences of educators and learners within the classroom.

Context

As this study was a self-study presented in a narrative format, I present the information of my own story in order to seek deeper knowledge and understanding of my own practice. The focus of my study was my reflections on my own practice as I worked with students over the course of a term who were classified as at risk and who struggled with a lack of motivation. I journalled my reflections as I worked and I reflected on possible strategies to facilitate success for these students. Again, I presented this through a story of my experience.

Within this study, I presented articles on self-study and narrative inquiry in order to explain the background of my reflective process and the format of my presentation. I drew upon the work and studies that have been done recently on at risk students and at risk behaviour in order to reveal various aspects of environment that contribute to a

student becoming at risk and developing low motivation. I also reviewed literature that focused on motivation and struggles with motivation for youth and highlighted the connection between at risk behaviour and low motivation for students. The goal here was to reflect on the connection between these two factors and reveal how these factors may manifest themselves within a classroom.

Research Orientation

My choice of research design was qualitative, which "is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2009, p.4). The intention was to allow myself, as the researcher, to interpret the meaning of the information that was collected from my own observations and experiences as an educator. I did not plan to use any sort of research that would involve numbered data nor did I intend to survey my students or collect statistics or numerical evidence to be interpreted. Rather, using a qualitative approach allowed me to reflect on my experience using words.

Self-study was a way to reflect upon my own practice and allowed for a chance to share that reflection with other educators. Specifically, for my own self-study, I focussed my project on my own observations and experience in connection to low academic motivation for at risk youth; therefore, my project took the form of a narrative and I was able to 'story' my data and my learning.

Research Question

I will be highlight one pertinent question for my self-study: How does my story as a teacher of at risk students within an inner city school facilitate a greater understanding

of the possibility of achievement and success for at risk students who struggle with a lack of academic motivation?

Summary

In this chapter, I have introduced the terms ‘at risk’ and ‘low academic motivation’ and described how these terms are used within education and the public school system in Greater Victoria. I have provided some information on my background as a high school teacher and outlined how this study came to be a point of interest. The purpose of this study was to create a self-study in which I would be able to gather information on my own practice and use it to better myself as an educator. Further, in this section I highlight the hope that my colleagues and fellow educators would also be able to gather knowledge and gain a greater understanding of the struggles we face in facilitating learning for at risk students.

Furthermore, within this section, I have outlined where, when, and how this study took place and articulated my orientation as both the researcher and the subject of interest. I make the specific point that my purpose is to gain a greater understanding of myself and my own practice. At the end, I have included my research question for my self-study.

I will now present a review of the literature that supports the study of at risk students and low academic motivation. In particular, I will outline the connection between at risk students, low academic motivation, and those that attend inner city schools.

Chapter Two: The Frame

This chapter will discuss what the literature reveals in regards to at risk students who struggle with low academic motivation. Furthermore, this section will explore the literature that focuses on the connections between students who exhibit at risk behaviour and those that attend inner city schools, and outline the contributions made by this study.

Review of Literature

As defined by Johnson (1998) students are at risk "when certain risk factors are present, for example, low socioeconomic status, language and cultural difference, dysfunctional [sic] family situations, and residence in disadvantages communities" (p. 167). Johnson (1998) further stated that there are a wide variety of factors and negative outcomes (p.167) when one focuses on the realm of at risk students. Indeed, it is recognized that "in the current literature the term at risk appears to be a euphemism for students who exhibit a wide range of educational problems, including the failure to respond positively to the instruction offered on basic academic skills, the manifestation of unacceptable social behaviour in school, the inability to keep up with their classmates in academic subjects, and a limited repertoire of experiences that provide background for formal education (Howard & Anderson, 1978; Slavin 1989, as cited in Pierce, 1994). To narrow this definition, MacMath et al. (2009) defined at risk as "those students who are having difficulty achieving curriculum expectations and will be at risk of not completing their diploma requirements" (p.87). While I recognize that these definitions frame failure as residing in the students, rather than a shared responsibility for how the school system also fails these students, for the purpose of this paper, the definition of at risk is a

combination of these two reports in that many risk factors may be present that result in students' struggle to complete high school.

The previous quote from Johnson (1998) reveals a key aspect within this study. When one looks at the traits of students within inner city schools, the connection between being an inner city youth and being an at risk student becomes clear. It is clear that, "studies have documented that inner-city youth experience high levels of life stress, poverty, and exposure to violence" (Axelrod et al., 2004, p.514). When these factors are combined, they often result in low academic achievement or school dropout (Axelrod et al., 2004; Huang & Waxman, 1996). An additional study found that "the highest percentage of students at risk of failure is found in inner city schools, where the worst social and economic conditions exist" (Cuban, 1998; Hodgkinson, 1991; Peng, Wang, & Walberg, 1992, as cited in Huang & Waxman, 1996, p. 93). Indeed the link between risk factors, inner city schools, and at risk students is prevalent. It follows that low academic motivation results in lower achievement, which results in students being at risk. Furthermore, inner city youth who are at risk often exhibit low academic motivation and, therefore, fail to be in successful school – or, put differently, are 'failed' or not well served by the current school system. Again it must be noted that there is a risk of 'pigeon holing' students. Anyon states that "urban schools are at the center of the maelstrom of constant crises that beset low income neighbourhoods" (177). This crises is not the result of teacher who are not doing their job, nor is it the result of 'bad' students, but rather a cycle of low achievement and aspects that foster at risk behaviour that is present within communities and social structures. One teacher's reflections on this cycle of students' struggles is the focus of this study.

In regards to at risk, inner city youth, it is unfortunate that "community demographics and family conditions…cannot be greatly changed by educators…" (Comer, 1987, as cited in Huang & Waxman, 1996). However, there are many studies that focus on how to motivate at risk students and give specific guidelines to creating a classroom environment that supports at risk students (Pierce, 1994; MacMath et al., 2009) or that outline the form and format of homework and assignments that are most conducive to achievement and motivation of at risk youth (Darling-Hammond & Ifill-Lynch, 2006). Regardless of this information, the question that still needs an answer to is how this 'looks' in the day-to-day life of a teacher within an inner city school.

Specifically, the reality for many educators is that they have full classes of up to thirty students and sometimes more, and many of the students within one classroom have difficulty learning or adapting to a classroom setting. It is clear that the factors that facilitate a low motivation to succeed academically are compounded within an inner city school where many students have multiple risk factors. Again, I will make the point that the intersecting elements of oppression can be present for many of the students within a classroom. The point here is not to label or judge students, but rather to identify that for this study it is acknowledged that many students exhibit at risk behaviour due to a number of different experiences, histories, and situations, and that this behaviour impacts both their abilities to succeed in standard academic classrooms, and teachers' abilities to teach standard curricula.

Furthermore, there are studies that show what students think about their classroom situation or their own learning (Knesting, 2008). This study focussed on students who were at risk for dropping out of school, but continued to persevere. Knesting (2008)

interviewed students with the intention of facilitating a “greater understanding of at risk students’ experience in a comprehensive high school and how these experiences influenced their decision to persist in school” (p. 4). However, there is a lack of understanding of how students who are at risk understand their *own* academic motivation (or perceived lack thereof) and how teachers are able to gain this knowledge and reflect on it in order to better facilitate success. Lastly, there is little documented in the way of self-study that ‘storys’ teachers’ experience who work with at risk youth within inner city schools who struggle with low academic motivation. As each educational situation is different and unique, each story of experience that is created reflects on the work of an educator and brings something different to educators understanding of their own work and their own practice. The intention behind this study was to reflect and record my own experience as I learned more about how I responded to what I perceived as at risk behaviour and low academic motivation within the school that I teach.

Significance and Contributions of the Proposed Research

Using the qualitative research method writing, self-study, and narrative inquiry, the purpose of this study was to report the stories my own experiences as a teacher of at risk youth who experience a lack of academic motivation within an inner city school. This study derived from my experiences as an English teacher, as I used my observations and reflections of my time teaching English 10 and English 12. The intention of this study was to gain a greater understanding of my efforts in response to the lack of academic motivation that exists for students who are at risk, by presenting the story of my work, and was to illuminate possible factors that may increase academic motivation for these students.

Within an inner city school, the academic success is low in comparison to other schools throughout the district. Educators understand that many factors play a part in low academic achievement, but a lack of motivation seems to be one of the largest hurdles to academic success. As a high school teacher, I continually struggle with the idea of the lack of motivation that potentially accompanies students who are at risk. Often, as an educator I am left feeling hopeless, helpless, and defeated by what I perceive to be students' lack of motivation and my own lack of success as one who is supposed to facilitate learning.

Furthermore, the goal of this research was to fill the gaps that are currently in the literature and to answer my research question. I aimed to reveal how at risk behaviour manifests itself within a classroom, and reflect on the way I understood students' choices and actions regarding success. Furthermore, my intention was to understand whether or not students who suffer from a lack of motivation could reveal a 'shift' in their behaviour and I 'storied' my experience as teacher of at risk students with low academic motivation in order to bring a greater awareness to my colleagues.

This self-study created a difference in the understanding of my own teaching practice, as it gave insight into a large body of students that I teach and provided some insight into my own leadership practice. With reflection and an understanding of the needs of at risk students, I am able to better myself as an educator and pass along the reflections of my own practice to my colleagues. This information should allow for teachers to work more productively with students who suffer from low motivation and, therefore, increase student success within an inner city school.

Limitations

Many educational theorists have critiqued the role of education in society or have exposed how the educational system disproportionately benefits some groups of people more than others. To name but a few, Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1990) demonstrated how dominant middle class norms and values (i.e. cultural capital) are infused into educational curricula, thereby creating a system in which people who already possess that cultural capital are at a clear advantage. bell hooks additionally discussed how education is complicit in reproducing a system of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks, 2003). Paulo Freire famously critiqued the 'banking' model of education—a model that continues to prevail in the Canadian public schooling system (Freire 2003) and Indigenous scholars such as Lorna Williams (Williams & Tanaka, 2007), among others, have pointed to the legacy of colonialism still evident in today's curriculum and the generations of harm done by the Canadian residential school system. All of these scholars call for fundamental, radical reforms—if not revolutionary changes—to the way the current educational system operates.

While these critiques are important in helping me to understand larger forces and ideas at play in the educational system in which I work, I admit they have provided me with little practical guidance. I was still left wondering, what might I do in my daily practice, within my sphere of influence as an educator (for better or for worse) responsible for teaching very specific curricula to students who do not appear to be interested in learning it? I have been raised to value education, and have always had a passion for learning, which is part of what inspired me to become a teacher. In my

professional role, I have been struggling with how to help my students develop—if not a love of learning, then at least a little joy and sense of connection derived from their interactions in my classroom. While I support some of the larger efforts for educational reform, and in the future may be in a position of greater influence over the nature of those reforms, the reality remains that it is my current job to help these kids—kids about whom I care deeply—to succeed within the system as it is right now.

Because I wanted to reflect more systematically on the various ways I responded to what I perceive as low motivation, I intentionally limited my study to an inquiry into myself and my own practices in the classroom. In terms of a research process, the limitation of this approach, of course, is that the data I generated was restricted to my own perspectives, interpretations, understandings, and perhaps even misunderstandings of my responses to classroom events – in short, I relied on data collected in my own journals. I did not clarify these reflections with students, colleagues, parents, or other members of the school community. Let me be clear that this is *not* because I do not believe in the importance of sharing these thoughts with others for the purpose of clarification and co-constructing new understandings, but simply because it was beyond the scope of this particular study, at this particular time. Moreover, students were not interviewed or asked their opinion about their own motivation and learning.

What I did to manage this limitation was to (a) continually probe my assumptions through a systematic analysis process described in Chapter 4 and (b) run drafts of my analysis past my project supervisor as an outside sounding board.

My intention was not to generalize the learning of all students, in all times, and in all schools. Rather, my intention was to focus on the reflections of myself as an educator

of a few students who were at risk and who experienced what I perceived to be a lack of academic motivation. To this end, I believe I am successful. My own reflections on my own practice brought a greater awareness and understanding of at risk students within an inner city school. My intention is also to share my study with my colleagues in the hope that they too will be able to gain some greater understanding and knowledge of some of the students that they teach.

Summary

Within this chapter, I have outlined a review of the literature that focussed on studies that have been done in connection to students who exhibit at risk behaviour and low academic motivation within the context of inner city schools. I have also commented on the gaps that exist in the current literature and connected these to what I hope my study to reveal, or perhaps present, in the way of possibilities regarding teachers who work with at risk youth who struggle with low academic motivation. Lastly, the contributions and limitations of this study are outlined.

I will now turn to the methods of inquiry that were utilized for this study, in particular writing as an arts-based method of research, self-study, and narrative inquiry. The next chapter summarizes some of the challenges that exist in regards to arts-based methods.

Chapter Three: The Heart

Academic literature reveals various aspects in regard to professional reflection as a way to gain information and better one's practice. The intention for Chapter Three is to highlight writing as an arts-based method of research and the literature that accompanies this form of data collection. Furthermore, this chapter will illuminate the ideas behind how educators use reflection in order to better understand an aspect like low motivation and the method of self-study and narrative inquiry.

Methodology: Self-Study with Writing as a Method of Inquiry

This qualitative study was designed as a self-study—in other words, a study of myself as the subject of inquiry. The idea of self study is informed by and related to several methodological concepts and traditions, including reflexivity, self-reflective practice, auto-ethnography, and narrative inquiry, as I discuss below. Before moving into a discussion of the concepts that informed my methodology, however, I will first give an overview of the ***method*** I employed to inquire into my own practice: writing.

Writing as an Arts-Based Method of Inquiry

St. Pierre (2005) stated that "writing *is* thinking, writing *is* analysis, writing *is* indeed a seductive and tangled *method* of discovery" (p.96). As writing can also be an art, it can become an arts-based method of inquiry. The process of reflection and of using writing as an arts-based method of inquiry is one that is full of potential and the possibility of creating meaning, and bringing people together in a learning community. Even though, this was not the aim of my particular study, it is my aim as an educator. As an educator, I too need to reflect on my teaching and discover questions that I have,

patterns that I notice, and hopefully, through this, I will have some insights into my practice that will allow me to better myself in the classroom. For this study, I have taken my data and created short stories that embody my learning. Much like the previous quote from St.Pierre (2005), I have used creative writing as a method of discovery. My intention was that my final project and the reflection of my own practice would bring a greater awareness to my own learning and that my learning would facilitate another piece of understanding in the learning community that is a part of education.

However, this method did have some challenges. As part of their own self-study, Korthagen, Lunenberg, and Zwart (2010) found that they were having to "find [their] way in unchartered territory" (p.1287), as self-study and auto-ethnography are still relatively new methods of inquiry. Moreover, they wondered "whether studying the practice of one person could be taken seriously" (p.1287). Indeed, this project was focussed solely on my own practice, information that I gathered was subjective, and the question of how to determine validity was raised, just as it is raised in all studies. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) state that "not only may one…write a fiction but one may also use the data to tell a deception as easily as the truth" (p.10). When one focuses on what can be described as the reflective process through writing, what one reflects upon or the conclusions that are made *are* unapologetically subjective, unlike other studies where the myth of scientific objectivity often continues to prevail. This does not mean that I have attempted to "tell a deception" here; it only suggests that I am aware of my own subjectivity as a researcher. Indeed, the art of writing as a method of inquiry became a venue for my own self-discovery. The essence of 'discovery' is that it is not a truth until it is, in fact, 'discovered' by the individual. Further to this point, Clover (2007) quotes

that “a perusal of studies…shows that predominantly, arts-based inquiry focuses on the researcher exploring ‘self’ or the personal through an aesthetic medium (Dunlop, as cited in Clover, 2007, p.85. This reveals that as an arts-based method of inquiry, the act of reflective writing is something that is focused on the self. For this study, the ‘aesthetic medium’ took the form of both non-fiction journaling and creative writing.

Furthermore, Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) stated that “the more different voices are honoured within our qualitative community, the stronger- and more interesting- the community will be” (p.959). There needs to be arts-based methods of inquiry presented within the realm of research if research is to move forward and be a part of insight and change. Ceglowski (1997) makes the point that “field notes refreshed [her] memory of particular detail, and stories brought [her] back to the emotional and physical memories associated with particular events” (p. 192-193). The aspect of emotion is important to discovering what the data reveals and arts-based inquiry allows for this aspect of research. Barndt (2007) makes the point that “the arts, when applied appropriately and facilitated sensitively, can involve participants as full human beings, touching minds AND hearts, healing the body/mind split inherent in Western scientific research methods” (p.359). To me, this means that in order for research to grow and continue to be meaningful, there needs to be a place where arts-based methods of inquiry can flourish. Further to this point, within the introduction to *The arts and social justice: re-crafting adult education and community cultural leadership*, Clover and Stalker (2007) state that their book “is grounded in the understanding that the arts matter in our lives, in adult education and learning and in bringing about social justice and transformation” (p. 1). The power of the arts and the ability for the arts to communicate

meaning and bring awareness to either one's own self or the awareness of a collective group make arts-based research a valuable method of inquiry.

Self-Study as a Research Methodology

Due to the nature of the research question (how does my story as a teacher of at risk students within an inner city school facilitate a greater understanding of the possibility of achievement and success for at risk students who struggle with a lack of academic motivation?) self-study is the methodology that was appropriate for this study. It is crucial to understand that this methodology played a major part in this study, and because of this, attention must be given to how self-study provides a means for understanding and change along with how it presents a challenge. Samaras (2010) stated that in "self study research, researchers initiate personal inquiries situated in their practice with attention to the play role as researcher inside that process" (p. 720). Indeed, self-study itself tends to be a complex method as the researcher is the participant. Teachers and educators must maintain their practice, while at the same time they must actively engage in a collection of data in the form of reflection – specifically, in my case, writing. Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) stated that "to study a practice is simultaneously to study self: a study of the self-in-relation to other" (p. 14). It was the awareness of the self in relation to others that built the ground work for my observations and reflections within the classroom.

Furthermore, Korthagen, Lunenberg, and Zwart (2010) stated that as a result of work that has been done in regards to reflection within practice, "reflection [has become] a buzzword in the field of education" (p.1281). As an educator, I am continuously reflecting on my practice and how my work has impacted the learning and success of

students and the practice of my colleagues. The method of self-study allows for reflection to become the focal point of understanding behaviour and adapting one's practice to that behaviour. Indeed, Samaras (2009) stated that self-study is a "way to gain practical wisdom for improving [her] practice while also contributing to the educational and scientific community" (p. 720). As an educator, I understand that unless I can actively and immediately apply information, suggestions, and strategies to my own experience and my own practice, the chance of me actually using information is quite slim. Therefore, the idea of reflecting on my own practice for the purpose of illuminating an issue that affects many educators and many students within inner city schools is practical, useful, and informative. Furthermore, the information that was gathered from my own observations and reflections helped to contribute "to the knowledge base of education and to the work and professional development of the practitioner" (Samaras, 2010, p.720). My own reflective practice bettered my understanding of myself as an educator and I was able to engage it what Korthagen, Lunenberg, and Zwart (2010) have called "rapid professional development" (p.1287). I was able to find meaning within my own reflection and readily apply it.

A challenge within self-study is that it is not widely used and therefore, it is not widely published. Indeed, the validity and the usefulness of self-study have been brought into question. Korthagen et al. (2010) stated that in regard to the method of self-study, "questions with reliability and generalization arose" (p.1287). It has been noted that as self-study is a study of the self, indeed an auto-ethnography, it runs the risk of "becoming idiosyncratic and narcissistic" (Korthagen et al., 2010, p.1281). This factor further brings into question the reliability and validity of this form of research. Having said this, for my

study, this did not prove to be true. Indeed, I am able to claim with full confidence that the results of my self-study are and continue to be valid and accurate to my experience. Further to this point, Korthagen et al. (2010) reflected on the fact that for the study done "teacher educators also experienced a friction between studying personal aspects of one's own practice and the idea of going public with the results" (1287). This means that self-study can be challenging in that as educators hold their practice close to their own identity, to draw attention to criticism or to open their own practice up to the public can be daunting.

Narrative Inquiry

The last method of inquiry for this study is narrative. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) stated that "the study of narrative…is the study of the ways humans experience the world" (p. 2). Indeed, as I focused on my own experience as an educator and my own understanding of my practice, it follows that in 'storying' my experience I was able to fully take account of my own knowledge and understanding. I was able to gain meaning from the act of storytelling and in telling the story of my students' struggle with low academic motivation.

The method of narrative inquiry should not only be seen as 'story writing'. Indeed, "lives are composed, recomposed, told, retold, and lived out in storied ways on storied landscapes" (Clandinin, Murphy, Huber & Orr, 2010, p. 83). If a study is to solely focus on one's experience, then it follows that a narrative inquiry is one methodology that allows for this authentic gathering of data. However, "for inquiry...the record of events in one's life...does not guarantee significance, meaning, and purpose" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990, p.9). Indeed, the meaning is derived from careful readings and analysis,

and what Clandinin and Connelly describe as “the restorying quality of narrative” (p. 9) must occur. In other words, as one studies the narrative, reflects, and creates insight based on what has been written, then meaning is made.

With regards to further challenges of both self-study and narrative, one needs to understand that the meaning of one’s story and the so-called ‘truth’ behind experience can be flawed – just as presenting a quote from an interview transcript as ‘the truth’ creates an imperfect picture of reality. As both the researcher and the participant, I relied on my understanding of student learning and success to guide my reflections and my subsequent meaning for myself and my own practice.

Overall Design

Over the course of a term, which was approximately two and a half months and will ran from February, 2011 to April, 2011, I reflected on the learning and the motivation to learn for at risk students within my English 10 and 12 classrooms. As an experienced English 12 teacher, I have a wide variety of knowledge to draw upon in order to identify those students that are at risk and who struggle with a lack of academic motivation. I focussed my reflections of my own practice in the realm of students who fit these aspects and further reflected on how this behaviour manifested itself in the classroom. My aim was not to focus on the learning of an entire class; rather, I focussed on two or three students within my own reflections.

My data collection took the form of reflection and the story of my own experience. I attempted to answer my research question and focussed the story of my experience and my reflection of my own practice within that question. My intention was to record my reflection of my understanding of students who were at risk and their lack of

academic motivation. Firstly, I provided detailed reflections on what I saw to be at risk students and how they manifested a lack of academic motivation. I included my interventions and interactions with these students and their learning. Secondly, I reflected on my experience as I navigated discussions with my students around their learning and achievement (this is an ongoing process that most teachers attempt as students engage in their learning and move forward toward success) and I reflected on my experience of students and whether I was able to facilitate increased academic motivation over the course of the semester. Lastly, I attempted to document and create a greater understanding of my work as teacher within the realm of learning and success for at risk students who demonstrate low academic motivation within an inner city school.

The focus of the development of my study was my own self and my understanding of my students' learning. As an educator, I engaged in typical activities, like discussing students learning with other educators and colleagues who work with the same students, but the discussion was not the focus of my study. The focus of my study is what I drew from the discussions to better my understanding and the knowledge that I was able to develop. Within this self-study, I was both the researcher and the participant. It is a reflection of my own experience as an educator.

The records that were kept are in the form of my own notes as they related to the specific research question. The notes took on the form of a journal as I documented my experience and as I reflected on my own practice. As journal entries, I documented the time and date of my experience over the course of the term. A story of my experience emerged from the journals and I focussed on the answer to my research question. I kept the records and reflections of my experience locked in a cabinet in order to ensure

privacy. The ‘data’ that was analyzed was the journal entries, but as this is a qualitative study, there was no numerical data to analyze. After I had gathered my data, I was able to move the learning into an expression of creativity. I was able to ‘story’ my learning in the form of creative writing. I came to a conclusion through my own reflections and found possible or probable answers to my own research question. I was aware that indeed there are no finite answers as education and learning is a continual process of discovery and my time is limited.

Summary

In this chapter, I have highlighted various forms of arts-based research methods, including writing, self-study, and narrative inquiry. The overall design of the study was outlined.

The next chapter will present the data that I have elicited through journals, and the process I underwent in the creation of short stories. The themes and lessons that emerged through a detailed reading process are revealed.

Chapter Four: The Revealing

The intention of this chapter is to present the data, which comes from eight journal entries of my own reflections. I present the learning that emerged from several different readings and the process of locating themes is detailed. Lastly, I highlight how my short stories came to be and list the themes and connections.

Lessons

Collection Process

Over the course of a semester, from February 2011 to April, 2011, I observed, reflected, and documented my time as I work with various students within English 10 and 12. The data collection included eight entries and was a total of nine pages. The dates ranged from February 7th, 2011 to April 20th, 2011. As I have already described, the focus of this observation was not my students, but rather my own understanding of the work I do as a teacher and my reflections on my own self and growth. Furthermore, I attempted to maintain my intention to write without constraints and without hindering my thinking in any way. I allowed myself to write within the moment of thought or observation. Having said this, I am also aware that often our interpretation of a moment or a situation can be created through our own positions and privileges within our society. Even if I am unaware of these at the time of observation, I acknowledge that my understanding of a situation can be created through my biases or my own preconceived notions. Therefore, as I have already discussed, these reflections are not representative of 'the' truth per se; rather they reveal 'a' truth, bound in a certain time and place, and one that has helped me to better understand my practice and might similarly be useful to other educators.

Readings

First Step: The Reading Process

I began the process by literally reading through my journals a number of times. At this time, I wasn't reading for any particular purpose, only to see what stood out for me. My intention was to see what themes began to emerge and if I could find ideas to eventually guide the process of sorting and analyzing the data. I adopted a 'casual read' in that I sat at home and read through each slowly and with the intention to not force any analysis. Through my first few reads, I noticed that there was quite a bit of negative emotion. I also noticed that there were several entries that focused on what I would call goals, intentions, or plans. Through the last few reads of my data, I noticed that I tended to list strategies that I believed would aid the learning of my students; however, as intended, I found that I reflected on my understanding of my own teaching more than my students' actual learning. I commented on what I believed to be 'roadblocks' in learning and how these situations hampered my own work to meet the needs of my students. I found that I concluded my last journal entry with a positive emotion, or what could be called a 'positive note'.

Second Step: Organizing

The next step I took was to read my data and, based on what I had noticed from my first few readings, I highlighted various themes and findings that emerged. I adopted a 'low tech' method of reading, using a yellow highlighter and blue pen for notes. I had printed off several copies of my journals in order to be able to read for several different themes and not get confused. In chapter six of "Sorting, Organizing, and Indexing Qualitative Data" (1996), Mason stated that data can be read literally, interpretively, and reflexively (p. 109). Indeed as I read for various themes, I recognize that these themes fit

into the different methods of reading. For example, as I read for a particular theme, it became clear that I was either literally seeing this theme within the language and the particular word choice, or I was actually interpreting this theme from what I had written. I allowed myself this freedom of interpretation as the data is my own journaling of my own reflections and learning process.

For my process, I used four copies of my data and labelled them with the following titles:

- Emotions/State of Feeling
- Tools/Strategies
- Change/Shift: Positive/Negative
- Strength

I then moved my data into an art form and created short stories out of my experience. I will now direct the reader back to the section titled: Frontispiece: The Creation. I politely recommend that the reader take the time now to re-read this section so that it is fresh in your mind for the discussion that follows. In light of this re-reading, I will now outline how these creative pieces took shape and became my method of inquiry. In order to fully flush out this process, it is necessary to provide insight into some of my writing history and the meaning it holds for me.

Third Step: The Art of Writing

I must acknowledge that writing runs in my family. My father is a published writer and has spent most of his later adult life enjoying his own research and the writing process. My younger sister is an aspiring writer and has successfully published a short story through an on-line journal and has been shortlisted for several writing contests. For

me, reading and writing have always been a part of my life. Even while in the womb, my mother read to me.

In grade three I wrote my first ‘novel’. It was about the adventures of a badger. I was very proud of this accomplishment and continued to write through summers and during ‘after school time’. As I became older, the world of academics took much of my creative writing time and I found that an eventual busy school schedule was not conducive to long hours exploring this art form. However, it was no surprise that when I realized that I wanted to be a teacher, I also realized that being an English teacher was the right fit. Every day that I am in the classroom, I work to inspire young minds to read and to write and to appreciate the art of literature.

For this study, even after I had undergone several readings and pulled out the themes and connections, I struggled with the format of how to present my data. My journals felt too personal to share and I was very aware of the private nature of such personal writing. I attempted to highlight certain sections, but these left me feeling as if something was missing. With the encouragement of my supervisor, I realized that I needed a way to include the ‘personal’ aspect without feeling as if my privacy had been breached. Short stories were the perfect way to communicate my reality as a teacher. They are creative, personal, and an accurate representation of my time as an educator. These fictional stories, created out of my journal entries, became an arts-based method of inquiry.

For the sake of organization, I will now present the themes and connections that were found within my short stories in bullet form.

Themes and Connections

Emotions/State of Feeling

- exhaustion
- judgement
- fear
- embarrassment
- frustration
- progress
- guilt
- overworked
- overwhelmed
- relief
- sense of accomplishment
- recognition
- realization
- supported

Tools/Strategies

- revamping of class composition
- creation of an opportunity for greater connection
- creation of welcoming classroom
- maintaining a sense of belonging both within the school and within the classroom
- building of trust and relationship
- open communication with other support staff

- allowing for more than just marks to show success
- shifting of priorities around homework and use of class time
- maintaining open communication with counselors
- allowing time and space for students to make choices regarding their own success

Change/Shift

- a realization that my students have struggles with motivation and success that are beyond my experiences
- a positive shift in acknowledging that there are many layers and sources that contribute to lack of success and at risk behaviour
- an understanding that when a student faces a life-style that embodies at risk behaviour, when they arrive in my classroom, they still have the ability to be motivated and find success
- increase in support within the classroom in the form of a peer tutor results in a positive shift
- increase in student connectedness and achievement through utilizing the support of a peer tutor is a positive shift in motivation
- negative shift in motivation in connection to assessment and reporting
- negative shift in the relationship between me and my students
- shift in consequences and expectations resulted in a positive shift in student motivation
- shift in students' perception of the possibility of success facilitated the assignments being completed

Strength

- understanding of the professional opinion of teachers and their knowledge of student learning
- recognition of teachers' knowledge of students' needs
- recognition of the importance of connecting students to school and the classroom
- motivation to learn can be achieved through the forming of relationships, not what the report card dictates as success
- my own strength in understanding that 'the work' is not the only measure of success or motivation
- the ability to look at motivation through a positive light and recognize that success can be achieved in small steps
- the recognition that a lack of success at some point does not dictate a continued lack of success and motivation

The process of reading that was done would embody what Mason (1996) calls a "reflexive reading" (p. 109). My data solely focuses on my own interpretations and my own situation or placement in the situation. Moreover, as I saw myself "inevitably and inextricable implicated in the data generation" (Mason, 1996). Indeed, this process of journaling, the process of reading for themes and learning, and the process of writing short stories embody a self-study and arts-based method of research. Due to the nature of my research method, I am in fact, the subject of my own research.

Summary

This chapter presented the data collection process including the details of time and date. Furthermore, chapter four outlined the method of readings that were done and

looked specifically at a two-step process. Short stories, which were formed from my data, were provided, and a list of themes that emerged from the data were listed, and examples of each theme were given.

We will now move to Chapter Five, which will present an analysis of the data in connection to the literature on at risk students and low motivation. I will also provide some reflections on my own learning that was acquired through using an arts-based research method. Lastly, this chapter will conclude with a summary of recommendations around student learning and achievement.

Chapter Five: The Wind Down

This final chapter will link the themes generated through the two-step reading process to the literature on student learning and motivations. Furthermore, it will provide some methodological reflections on the process of using an arts-based inquiry. Lastly, this chapter will conclude with a summary of recommendations around student learning and achievement through possible answers to my research question.

Themes and Links

Reading One: Emotions/State of Feeling

Throughout each journal and short story, emotions in connection to a lack of motivation and students who were at risk were in abundance. For my students, those who showed a lack of motivation also showed links to being at risk, such low attendance and a lack of connection to school. Johnson (1998) stated that the factors that are prominent in inner city schools, such as low socioeconomic status and struggling families, "increase the probability that students will experience adverse outcomes such as pregnancy, incarceration, suicide, or dropping out of school" (p.167). The concern is that students who do not attend regularly, or who do not feel a connection to school, may eventually drop out. Throughout the data, words such as fear, guilt, and frustration were apparent. It must be noted that these were my own feelings in connection to students' behaviour, not emotions expressed by the students. The weight of what I perceive, because of my strong value of education, to be negative possibilities for my students left me, as their teacher, anxious and overwhelmed. Indeed, "one of our greatest challenges in education is addressing the large number of students who could be considered at risk of school

failure" (Huang & Waxman, 1996, p.94). For myself, I experienced negative emotions when faced with what I perceived to be at risk behaviour, such as a risk of dropping out of school, and low academic motivation.

When I witnessed students who struggled to complete assignments and who were barely passing class (both indicators of low motivation and being at risk), I noticed that these were also students who benefited from increased connection to their teachers, counsellors, and other support staff. When these connections increased, I noted emotions and states of feeling from myself such as relief and accomplishment. Once a greater sense of connection was achieved, my own practice elicited my own positive emotions rather than negative, and one could read this as a possible result of an increase in student motivation. Huang and Waxman (1996) maintain that "fostering or maintaining an effective classroom learning environment has been suggested as a means of enabling [students at risk for failure] to achieve in school" (p.98). I would think that an increase in connectedness for students can be looked at as an "effective classroom learning environment" (p.98).

Reading Two: Tools/Strategies

Similar to the previous readings, the tools and strategies that seemed to stand out in my data and my creative writing were those that I interpreted as facilitating an increase in student connectedness and the intentional effort to build relationships. For example, a restructuring of class composition in order to have a smaller class allowed students access to more one-on-one learning time with me. Also, providing alternatives to students for their assignment completion, such as restructuring due dates and facilitating chances for students to be involved in their learning process, including co-developing consequences

for missing deadlines, facilitated an increase in connectedness and motivation. I saw students attend more, and even complete assignments. In regards to her study, Knesting comments that “students’ behaviour often changes when they feel like a part of the community at school” (p.3).

It is key that the tools and strategies that were documented were well within my choice as an educator. Within the classroom, I have the ability to dictate how much effort is put into connecting with students. I have the ability to structure the learning environment to be one of warmth and welcome. It was a conscious choice that I made to put building relationships above marks. This was not an easy choice for me, as the average mark in a class is still viewed to be either the success or the failure of the teacher, but this was a choice that ultimately resulted in keeping students in my class and continuing to progress in their work. Furthermore, I found that the additional pressure of having my students achieve in order to reflect positively on my success as a teacher was not motivating for me. Through this understanding of negative reinforcement (if I did not teach my students well then I would not be viewed as a successful teacher), and the understanding that ‘success’ is viewed and understood in many different ways, I could understand that the threat of a low mark for my students would not be motivating. I was able to connect to my students’ lack of motivation and what the marks represented for their success.

Reading Three: Changes/Shifts: Positive/Negative

Many of my journal entries, along with pieces of my short stories, reflect on what I perceived to be a shift or change in my students’ motivation. However, as I made my

way through my third reading, I was ultimately looking for a shift or change in my own thinking, choices, and understanding.

One of my first entries lists many of the obstacles and challenges that exist for students within inner city schools and at risk youth. Pierce (1994) states that in regards to at risk learners, there are many underlying factors, such as "poverty, dysfunctional [sic] family life, lack of positive role model, poor medical care, and inadequate diet" (p. 38). Indeed, my own reflections of what I perceived to be reasons for lack of motivation can be linked to these factors. However, perhaps more importantly is the realization I had when I looked at what was really important in connection to facilitating my students' success. I did not wonder how to fix these problems or who to blame for my students' rough home life or what I perceived to be a lack of interest in or value placed on education. Instead I refocused my reflection and asked this: *How do I facilitate success for students who sometimes attend but still struggle with motivation?*

When I focussed my thinking, I was able to understand that there are many factors that contribute to low academic motivation that are beyond my control, understanding, and ability to 'fix'. What I learned was that if I was to attempt to meet the needs of my students within an inner city school, I would need to focus more on what was possible and less on what problems were out of my reach. This was a major shift if my understanding and directly impacted my teaching. I was able to provide greater connections for my students and implement other strategies, such as a peer tutor, into my classroom.

Reading Four: Strengths

For many of my journal entries and within my short stories, I noted that more often than not, 'strength' was something perceived to be a way to make a connection with students. In support of this, "one of the possible reasons for some students' staying until graduation is a sense of belonging to a school community" (as cited in Knesting, 2008, p.4). In one of my journals, I state, "*maybe forming a relationship with this student is success, even if the marks on paper don't reflect that."* My thinking was that the motivation to learn can be achieved through the forming of relationships. This sense of connectedness was a strength of mine as an educator and a strength of my students as learners. Indeed, one of my journal entries was the following: *"My goal is to keep her connected."* In my own narrative, in reference to the above quote, I bluntly state what I know to be the right goal in order to facilitate success for my student.

Further to this point, the data has revealed my understanding that student success can be viewed in more ways than just what appears on the report card. Students who are at risk can be under a great deal of stress and turmoil. As previously stated, "inner city youth experience high levels of life stress, poverty, and exposure to violence" (as cited in Axelrod et al., 2004, p. 514). My experience has been that these students bring this turmoil to class and, as a result, they often struggle to maintain their motivation. In connection to this, I made the following statement in a journal entry: "*I think in order to motivate some of my students through a time of great stress there is a need to focus on what success can still be achieved and not to dwell on the lack of success thus far."* I went on to recognize that this showed the ability to look at motivation through a positive light and recognize that success can be achieved in small steps. Also, this thought reveals the recognition that a lack of success at some point does not dictate a continued lack of

success and motivation. As an educator, my students needed structures and methods that supported this type of thinking. It was only through my own reflection process that I was able to see this clearly.

Reflections

The Process of Arts-Based Research

Richardson (2005) stated that "writing stories and personal narratives have increasingly become the structures through which I make sense of my world" (p. 996). Even though I understood this statement on a basic level, I did not comprehend how much journaling and creating short stories from these journals would impact my understanding of the work I do every day. In fact, in using writing and self-study as an arts-based method of inquiry, I was given the freedom to express myself; more precisely I was able to express my *true* self, and I was also able to collect, document, and reflect on specific data. Through my writing, I was able to discover distinct patterns within my students' learning and, in turn, my own teaching and knowledge.

It was unexpected how much the "reflexive reading" (Mason, 1996, pg. 109) would impact me. When I collected the journals and began the analysis process, I was not prepared to be so "linked in the data generation" (p. 109). Foolishly, I thought that I would be somehow 'detached' from the work that I was doing. I quickly realized how unprepared I was to face the limitations of my knowledge and understanding. When I began to see patterns emerging from my data and when I began the writing of my short stories, I experienced a great deal of discomfort at my limitations and the awareness that as a teacher, I am in the position to (re)create potentially damaging situations for those students who experience oppression within the public school system. My assumptions about what I believed to be low motivation and at risk behaviour did play a part in how

my journals were shaped. Because I did not censor myself, my journaling is a direct reflection of some of these assumptions. The creative stories that came from the journal entries are also shaped by my starting assumptions and the questions I asked of myself and my students as I moved through the learning process.

Samara (2009) reflected that she studies her practice "in order to improve it" (p. 720). Indeed, I firmly maintain that it was the choice of an arts-based method of inquiry, specifically creative writing, that allowed me to delve into emotions, strategies, changes, both positive and negative, and strengths, all of which can be daunting and fraught with anxiety. As previously mentioned in regards to using an arts-based method of inquiry, I believe that it was only through writing that I was able to accomplish what Barndt (2007) referred to as "touching minds AND hearts, healing the body/mind split inherent in Western scientific research methods" (p.359). What I mean by this is that even though I knew on a basic level that maintaining connections with students was a key factor in facilitating student success, I was completely unaware of how interwoven 'connectedness' and 'relationships' were in every strategy, emotion, change, and strength that occurred in my work and in my classroom each and every day, until I saw it in my own writings.

Relationships and Feminine Leadership

In regards to connectedness, my journal entries often reflected words like 'plan', 'goal' or 'intention'. Without realizing it, as I was writing, I was spending quite a bit of my time thinking about ways to implement connections and foster relationships with my students, particularly those that were at risk and who suffered from low academic motivation. Furthermore, incorporating a warm and welcoming classroom environment

that was still focussed on learning was also something that I found myself journaling about. Huang and Waxman (1996) make the point that for students within inner city schools, their school environment can "provide them with a sense of caring and community that may not be available elsewhere in their lives" (p.108). This sense of safety can promote academic motivation and success.

Forming relationships with my colleagues facilitated a team approach to facilitating success for at risk learners. The opportunity to have an Educational Assistant (EA) in my classroom and have an EA in study hall gave my students another adult with whom to form a relationship. In maintaining my own connection to these other educational leaders, we were able to collaborate on facilitating student success and creating goals for our students. Darling-Hammond and Ifill-Lynch (2006) stated that "to develop effective strategies to address the needs of struggling students, educators need opportunities to work together" (p.12). Indeed, part of my learning through this self-study was the deep understanding that educators need to work as a team in order to reach those students who are at risk.

Even though leadership in itself has been defined as "an essentially contested concept" (Grint, 2005), I maintain that for my own understanding of myself as an educational leader, a leader is one that facilitates positive change. In regards to leadership, Shapiro and Gross (2005) quote that "it is essential for educational leaders to move away from top-down, hierarchical model for making moral and other decisions and instead turn to a leadership style that emphasizes relationships and connections" (Becks, as cited in Shapiro & Gross, 2005, p.28). It was not that I previously employed a 'top-down, hierarchical approach', but rather there was a lack of *intentional* and meaningful

relationships. Through this self-study, I have been able to recognize a need to shift my leadership style to one that can be defined as feminine leadership.

I define feminine leadership to be one that holds collaboration and shared responsibility at its core. Indeed, feminine leadership is not built on a system of hierarchy. I approach this understanding with the knowledge that 'feminine leadership' is one that is problematic and the term itself is "misleading and risky in terms of gender equality and social development" (Due Billing and Alvesson, 2000, p. 144). However, Due Billing and Alvesson (2000) also state that "a positive feature [of feminine leadership] is that it challenges traditional notions of organization, hierarchy, management, and leadership" (p.151). Through my learning journals, I have found that there is data that supports this leadership shift within the classroom away from an approach that implements tough consequences and forced rules to one that embraces collaborative learning, shared intentions and ideas around structures and consequences, and embraces the forming of relationships and connections.

Recommendations and Conclusion

My research question asked: how does my story as a teacher of at risk students within an inner city school facilitate a greater understanding of the possibility of achievement and success for at risk students who struggle with a lack of academic motivation?

Through this self-study, I have discovered that there are many possibilities for facilitating success for at risk students and that most of these possibilities focus not on the students per se, but on the important work that educators do each day. There is great potential for educators to meet the learning needs of students who are at risk and struggle

with a lack of motivation. Having said that, this study took place over a very short period of time and only focused on my reflections as I worked with a few students. This does not mean that my recommendations will be suitable for all teachers, in all districts, in all times.

My understanding is that in order to meet the needs of students who experience low economic status, difficult or unsafe family situations, violence, and disadvantages in their communities, educators need to build a positive, safe, and connected learning community. For me, this meant fostering a classroom that was warm and welcoming and intentionally forming relationships with students that were built on trust and care. I was able to put the importance of making solid connections with students over the concern that they would score a high mark on their standardized test. I need to be clear that this did not mean that all work, assignments, and learning 'went out the window'. Rather this meant that building relationships was *a way* to increase student achievement and promote the finishing of assignments. In other words, I found that when I actively built connection with students, I noticed an increase in my students' assignment completion.

Furthermore, in connection to building relationships that embody trust and care, I realized that in order for my at risk students to have a greater chance of success, I would need to use a feminine leadership style. Feminine leadership is one that celebrates and encourages leaders who are compassionate, nurturing, and engaging. Indeed, the notions of shared responsibility, change, compassion, and care are ideas that I began to utilize in order to meet the needs of my students. I involved them in their own learning, facilitated a shared responsibility in the learning through the joint creation of goals and consequences for missing deadlines, and allowed them to see that I was invested in their

well being and their success. Furthermore, I drew upon my relationships with other educators to facilitate change for my students. It is my recommendation that traits of feminine leadership be considered when one is looking for leadership styles that will facilitate success for at risk students within inner city schools.

In conclusion, my self-study took me on a learning journey that I did not fully anticipate. I was humbled by my lack of knowledge and by the power that reflection and an arts-based method of inquiry can hold in supporting change and growth. My hope is that I will continue to utilize these strategies to build on my practice as an educator within an inner city school.

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