DISENGAGEMENT FROM AND REINTEGRATION TO SCHOOL:

A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

By

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Disengagement From and Reintegration To School: A Narrative Inquiry

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Abstract

This study utilized a narrative inquiry design to examine the process of disengagement from and reintegration to school among five former at-risk students, with an emphasis on participants’ perspectives on and interpretations of this process. In-depth, unstructured interviews provided the data for the resulting narrative accounts. Five individual narratives of disengagement and reintegration were produced. A cross case thematic / temporal analysis of these narratives suggested the existence of three movements which characterized the process of disengagement and reintegration to school: Early problems and the search for belonging; The middle years and the struggle to survive; and From at-risk to risk taker: agency, relationships and the road to graduation. Disengagement and reintegration, for these participants, resembled a roller coaster ride. Participants reported a growing disenchantment with various aspects of their early life and an escalating series of problems across numerous domains. This was followed by a middle period characterized by a series of disengaging experiences and continued attempts to reengage. A critical period defined by an increasing intensity of both personal difficulties and in-depth self examination served as the catalyst for the final movement during which participants reintegrated to school and achieved secondary school graduation. A framework for understanding reintegration based on the development of agency and the primacy of caring relationships is presented in conjunction with implications for education and educational leadership.
Dedication

For Kiera. May the wonder and joy of learning be forever yours.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Educators are increasingly concerned about the adverse personal, economic and societal consequences of early school leaving, or dropping out. The costs to the individual and society are well documented, including increased demands for social services, increased crime, reduced community participation, poorer quality of life, compromised mental and physical well being, higher levels of unemployment, and lower income (Clark, 1997; Gilbert, Barr, Clark, Blue & Sunter, 1993; Rumberger, 1987).

Estimates of the magnitude of dropping out vary, in large part a result of inconsistencies in the definition and measurement of early school leaving (Rumberger, 1987). In an effort to ascertain the incidence in Canada, Statistics Canada conducted the 1991 School Leavers Survey (Gilbert et al., 1993). Results indicated that 18 percent of 20 year olds were school leavers, defined as individuals who had not graduated from and were not attending school, while 63 percent were graduates. Among aboriginal students, the school leaver rate ballooned to 40 percent, while only 30 percent were graduates. Notably, 40 percent of those who dropped out were age 16 or less, and 32 percent had only Grade 9 education or less. For these students,

...the overall picture which emerges... is one of cumulative disadvantage. Leavers appear to benefit less from their family backgrounds, school experiences, academic performance, part-time jobs, and social behaviours. Having left school, they are at a further disadvantage regarding employment, income, and life opportunities (p. 2).

Concern with the magnitude and consequences of dropping out has led to an extensive body of research. Early studies examined a limited number of factors and attempted to
develop simple causal models, promoting an individual deficit framework linking school dropout to deficiencies in individuals and families (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986). In general, research from this perspective has focused on the influence of status, personal and familial factors, and has failed to consider the effects of institutional and societal factors on individuals, families, and schools. Much of this literature characterizes school dropouts as a homogeneous group, despite increasing evidence that there is no “typical” dropout (Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 2000; Kelly, 1993; Rumberger, 1987; Wehlage et al., 1989). The individual deficit framework has not been articulated in a single theory of disengagement. Rather it constitutes an influential frame through which researchers, educators and policy makers have defined and responded to early school leaving. Its importance lies in the implications of its simple, causal attribution: individual and family failure leads to school dropout; schools can do little to prevent it.

Cognizant of the limitations inherent in this response, educators and researchers recognized the need to move beyond the simple identification of characteristics to a more comprehensive view of the interrelationships among individual, family, school and social factors and their combined influence on the “process” of withdrawal over time (Rumberger, 1987). Rumberger encouraged researchers to consider school processes, as opposed to simply status factors, suggesting that dropping out “might better be viewed as a process of disengagement from school…that culminates in the final act of leaving” (p. 111). Similarly, Natriello, McDill, and Pallas (1990) argued for a broader view of educational risk, encompassing a consideration of the three domains (school, family and community) in which students may experience disadvantage. As a result, much of the
research in the last decade has moved beyond the descriptive to an examination of multiple factors and their interrelationships, leading to the development of several theoretical approaches (Fine, 1991; Finn, 1989; Kelly, 1993; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko & Fernandez, 1989) that describe dropping out as a process of disengagement over the school career. Further, critical ethnographers (Fine, 1986; 1991; Kelly, 1993) have drawn attention to the societal barriers to achievement and attainment through the reproduction and reinforcement of social stratification within schools.

While a growing body of literature has begun to elucidate this process of disengagement, the process of reintegration to school remains relatively unexamined. Existing research continues to focus on those students who disengage and drop out, to the exclusion of those who disengage but then successfully reintegrate and graduate from high school. This omission may perpetuate the notion that dropping out is inevitable once a student has disengaged. In response, Catterall (1998) suggests a broader research focus, encompassing an exploration of the stories of students who have turned themselves around.

This broader research focus, from individual dropout profiles to the processes of disengagement and reintegration, necessitates a methodology that understands student disengagement from a process perspective and allows for exploration of the meaning of experiences from the perspective of the individual. Although numerous quantitative studies have generated an extensive list of characteristics associated with the individual dropout, few studies have utilized a framework that affords one this opportunity to examine experience in context, allowing for a richer understanding of the processes of disengagement and reintegration. Polkinghorne (1988) suggests that "the study of
behavior needs to include an exploration of the meaning systems that form human experience” (p.1). Yet, in our attempts to understand our students through research, more often than not we choose a methodology that is incapable of rendering experience meaningful. As we reduce individuals to exemplars of predetermined categories or theoretical notions we lose our ability to understand, for understanding requires recognition of the diversity and uniqueness of the individual. If we attempt to study our students and ourselves from a distance, assuming an unnatural, passionless stance, we negate the relational quality of learning and teaching and disregard the voice of the individual.

Sefa Dei (1996) has criticized research on disengagement for this failure to focus on lived experience. He suggests that student narratives, by situating student experience within a social context, may provide alternate perspectives on this process. Witherall and Noddings (1991) attest to the power of stories as a research tool, allowing us to glimpse, if only for a moment, the lives as lived by real human beings struggling to manage real problems. Indeed, stories banish the indifference often generated by samples, treatments, and faceless subjects. They invite us to speculate on what might be changed and with what effect. And, of course, they remind us of our persistent fallibility. Most important, they invite us to remember that we are in the business of teaching, learning, and researching to improve the human condition. Telling and listening to stories can be a powerful sign of regard – and caring – for one another (p. 280).

As such, the current study utilized a narrative inquiry design (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to examine disengagement and reintegration to school among former at-risk students, with an emphasis on participants’ perspectives on, and interpretations of, this process. In so doing, I hoped to provide access to student voices from both alternate and traditional secondary school settings, build upon previous literature in the field of
disengagement, and elaborate on the process involved in reintegration to school. It is my hope that through narrative means, a greater understanding of the lives of these students might be attained and that this improved understanding may encourage reflection and inform our practice.
Chapter 2
Literature Review

The literature on dropping out is extensive. Over the last two decades myriad articles, books, and reviews have examined the characteristics of children who leave school prior to graduation. However, the almost exclusive focus of much of this literature on the status characteristics of dropouts has promoted an individual deficit framework linking school dropout to deficiencies in individuals and families (Ekstrom et al., 1986), thereby ignoring the influence of institutional and societal factors in the lives of children. This, in turn, has perpetuated the erroneous belief that school dropouts form a homogenous group, despite growing evidence of their heterogeneity (Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, and Tremblay, 2000; Kelly, 1993; Rumberger, 1987; Wehlage et al., 1989). Wehlage et al. assert that dropouts have been characterized as “deviants”, unable or unwilling to succeed due to their personal limitations and suggest that diversity “is often buried in the quantitative data and stereotypes typically used to describe this population” (p. 58). They, and other process theorists (Fine, 1986; 1991; Finn, 1989; Kelly, 1993), have developed alternate theories of disengagement that present dropping out as multi-faceted in nature, resulting from the interaction of numerous individual, familial, social and educational variables, over time, that differ for each individual. For process theorists, dropping out is not an isolated event in the life of a child, but the end result of a gradual process of disengagement or alienation from school. The following will review and critique the assumptions, evidence for, and implications of the individual deficit model and three theoretical frameworks of disengagement developed in response: participation-
identification (Finn, 1989), school membership and engagement (Wehlage et al., 1989) and critical theory (Fine, 1991; Kelly, 1993).

**Theories of Disengagement**

**Individual Deficit Model**

Three clusters of characteristics are generally associated with dropping out from the individual deficit perspective: demographic, individual, and family factors. The following will summarize research on these characteristics and examine the impact on policy when characteristics are interpreted to support an individual deficit model.

Most studies have found significant relationships between demographic characteristics, such as socio-economic status (SES) and ethnicity, and dropout rates (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Cairns, Cairns & Neckerman, 1989; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Rumberger, 1987; 1995; 2000). Individual factors associated with dropping out include attitudes and values, school experiences, and personal factors such as pregnancy, marriage, and employment status (Gilbert et al., 1993; Rumberger, 1987; Sunter, 1993). The literature points to the importance of the individual’s experiences at school including poor academic achievement, suspensions and retentions, lack of participation in extracurricular activities, and behaviours such as absenteeism, truancy and classroom discipline problems (Ekstrom et al., 1986; Gilbert et al., 1993; Roderick, 1993; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Attitudes, including poor educational aspirations, low self-esteem, and external locus of control are also associated with dropping out (Eckstrom et al., 1986; Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992; Rumberger, 1995; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986).

Finally, family structure and context influence educational attainment. Support has been found for the importance of parental education, family structure, family processes
(including involvement and support, expectations, supervision and rules, communication about education, parental values, and educational resources in the home), and family adversity (Alexander et al., 1997; Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Ekstrom, et al., 1986; Ensminger & Slucarcick, 1992; Hanson & Ginsburg, 1988; Rumberger, 1995; Teachman, Paasch & Carver, 1996, 1997).

The individual deficit approach to dropout research is illustrated in Ekstrom et al.'s (1986) influential study of educational attainment, the first to identify a wide range of influences and develop a model of dropout behaviour. The final path model identified demographic variables (family intactness, SES, sex, and race/ethnicity), behaviour problems (including truancy, suspensions, and disciplinary problems), school performance (low grades), external locus of control, and family educational support as related to dropout behaviour. Although the authors note that 33 percent of dropouts cited “not liking school” and “poor grades” as the primary reasons for leaving, and that many students claimed a general level of dissatisfaction with both school and social relationships, they do not include institutional variables in their analysis. Nor do they address the possibility that the school may, through its practices and policies, influence the disengagement of students, or the eventual decision to drop out.

The implications of an individual deficit framework of dropping out can be devastating for educational policy and practice. C. E. Finn (1987) uses it to argue that a strategy of school reform “is apt to be the costliest and least reliable” (p. 14) means for addressing the dropout problem, given its roots in the individual and family. Although students who drop out frequently cite school-related reasons for leaving (Gilbert et al., 1993), Finn asserts “school-related does not mean that they are school caused....To the
degree that dropping out is caused by factors beyond the school's control, the symptom is not likely to be eradicated by school-based remedies” (p.16). Finn warns of a slowing of the excellence movement through reduced emphasis on testing, more diverse curriculum, looser discipline, and reallocation of resources to special services for at-risk youth.

This concern for the “excellence” movement is also reflected in Canadian public policy. Critical theorists (Dehli, 1996; Anisef & Andres, 1996) suggest that Canadian educational policy reflects an individual deficit framework and promotes an officially sanctioned social reality through reference to expert knowledge. Dehli's examination of Canadian policy documents reveals a renewed “hegemonic educational discourse, in which economic rationalism is privileged as the framework for debate, and where corporate interests and property rights comprise the ‘new’ consensus” (p. 25). This discourse is one of continued emphasis on individual and family failure and an industrial, economic view of education. Policy makers advance an official public interpretation of social problems and proposed solutions which in turn influence public perceptions. The result is a narrowing of the agenda for educational debate, and a one-sided notion of educational problems, such as dropping out, that lead to simplistic and damaging solutions. Anisef and Andres concur, criticizing the Stay-in-School Initiative and the School Leavers Survey for reinforcing notions of individual deficit.

A number of researchers and educators have challenged the assumptions of the deficit model (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Fine, 1986, 1991; Kelly, 1993, 1996; McNeil, 1997; Rumberger, 1987, 1995; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000; Tidwell, 1988; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986; Wehlage et al., 1989), in recognition of a growing understanding that “children
integrate their experiences across the multiple contexts that frame their development" (Alexander et al., 1997). Taking as their starting point the actual reasons students give for dropping out (Gilbert et al., 1993, note that school-related factors were cited as the most important reasons for dropping out by 40 and 41 percent of male and female leavers in Canada, respectively), these researchers examine the potential impact of the school environment. Fine (1991) suggests that student behaviour might be reframed as a reaction to or expression of dissatisfaction and frustration with institutional arrangements that neglect their culture, needs and aspirations. Similarly, McNeal (1997) and Kelly (1993) note that certain school attributes may serve to "push out" students. Kelly encourages a focus on school factors such as tracking and suspension that stigmatize, discourage and exclude. Finally, Bryk and Thum (1989) suggest that dropping out is a gradual process of alienation from school life, beginning in elementary school, and influenced by the structure and weak normative environments of secondary schools. Theoretical support for this position is found in the alienation work of Newmann (1981) who suggests that "developments in school organization over the past 25 years, such as larger school size, increasing specialization of staff, and diversification of curriculum, have contributed to a heightening of student alienation" (p. 355).

Empirical support for the influence of school structures and processes on disengagement has flourished. Researchers have documented the impact of school context (perceived teacher interest / staff commitment, effectiveness and fairness of discipline, social climate), school structures (pupil / teacher ratio, social milieu), and norms (academic press), (Bryk & Thum, 1989; McNeal, 1997; Pittman & Haughwout, 1987; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986).
Particular attention has been paid to the deleterious effects of school practices, including tracking and grade retention. Students assigned to special education and remedial tracks are more likely to drop out of school (Alexander et al., 1997). Oakes (1992) cites few achievement benefits and a negative impact on school attainment due to the incumbent limitations on access to school opportunities and resources. She suggests that placements reinforce race and social class stratification, citing disproportionate numbers of minority and low-income students assigned to low-track classes.

The association between retention in grade and dropping out has been well documented (Alexander et al., 1997; Cairns et al., 1989; Fine, 1991; Roderick, 1993; 1994; Roderick & Camburn, 1999; Rumberger, 1995), but has historically been viewed as the result of individual factors. School effects research suggests that institutional factors may shape student outcomes independent of academic performance and background (Roderick, 1993; 1994). Roderick suggests that the impact and stigma of being overage for grade may explain a large proportion of the effects of grade retention. Her work also points to the cumulative impact of school failure.

The individual deficit model also presents a simplistic view of social and familial factors, focusing primarily on demographic and structural characteristics, thereby ignoring children’s’ access to educational experiences and quality of relationships within the family, school and community. Such a focus encourages a narrowed conception of risk and a conscribed view of familial and social influences in the lives of children. This narrowed perspective may lead us to fix our gaze on a limited number of youth, those we deem at-risk for their likeness to the demographic characteristics cited in the literature,
and ignore others who do not fit traditional definitions of risk, but who are also likely to disengage. Downie (1994) notes that,

... while youth of low SES appear to be at significantly greater risk of leaving school, many do complete school. Conversely, many youth who would not be viewed as of low SES status do not remain in school. Not all students who leave school prior to graduation come from minority or poor families, or single-parent households. (p. 31)

He notes that “arguments in support of a more inclusive view of risk are based on the belief that many youth, not of low SES status, are now experiencing decaying family, social, and economic conditions” (p. 32). Similarly, Natriello, et al. (1990) understand education as “a process that takes place both inside and outside of schools” (p. 12) and argue for a broader view of educational risk, encompassing a consideration of the three domains in which students may experience disadvantage,

Our definition of the educationally disadvantaged allows for variation in the disadvantaged population. Some students will have suffered from a lack of appropriate formal educational experiences, others will have suffered from a lack of intellectual experiences in the family, and still others will have suffered from a lack of educational experiences in the community. These three types of deficiencies may all manifest themselves in the same way on standard measures of academic achievement, but realizing the several possible sources of the deficiencies will sensitize us as we move to identify the size and location of the educationally disadvantaged population. (p. 13)

Coleman (1987, 1988) introduced the concept of social capital as a way to conceptualize the impact of families and communities on educational outcomes. Social capital, “the norms, the social networks, and the relationships between adults and children that are of value for the child’s growing up” (1987, p. 36), facilitates access to and transmission of human capital. Social capital “is not held by individuals, but exists in the relationships among individuals and is defined by the actions it facilitates” (Muller, 2001). According to Coleman, and subsequent research by Astone and McLanahan (1991), Furstenburg and Hughes (1995) and Teachman, Paasch and Carver (1996; 1997),
the extent of family and community social capital available to the child is far more predictive of school completion than measures of family structure alone. Thus, it is not simply the number of adults in a household that matters, but the quality of relationships within the family and the stability of social networks without.

Subsequent studies (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Muller, 2001) have utilized the concept of social capital to explain the compensatory role of caring and supportive teacher relationships for students at-risk of dropping out. Croninger and Lee note the “decline in the effectiveness of the social institutions that young people rely on for support and guidance” (p. 549), including families, religious associations, community groups and educational organizations. Yet schools are an “essential source of social capital for adolescents” (p. 549), particularly those struggling with economic or personal hardship.

We argue that one explanation for why some students complete high school rather than others is that they have more resources to draw upon based on their network of relationships with adults (p. 550). Their results indicate that the social capital generated through teacher–student contact, including student–teacher relations (students’ belief that teachers are interested in them, value what they say, care about them and their success, respect them, recognize their effort, and are good at teaching) and student-teacher talks outside the classroom, reduces the risk of dropping out by nearly half. Although social capital generated through positive teacher – student relationships was found to increase the likelihood of school completion for all students, academically at-risk students were more likely to benefit from such relationships, and also benefited from more informal interactions outside of the classroom.

When adolescents trust their teachers and informally receive guidance from teachers, they are more likely to persist through graduation. Although teacher-based forms of
social capital are generally beneficial for all students, those who benefit most are students most at-risk of dropping out of high school. This is especially true for socially at-risk students who enter high school with low educational expectations and a history of school-related problems. These results confirm the fundamental proposition that we put forth at the beginning of this paper – teachers are an especially important source of social capital for adolescents at-risk of educational failure” (pp. 568 - 569)

Also utilizing a social capital framework, Muller (2001) explored the effects of student perceptions of teacher caring on math effort and achievement. She found that for those students at-risk for dropping out, perceptions of teacher caring (including interest, expectations for success, listening, praise for effort and care) had a significant effect on mathematics effort and achievement. Such effects were weaker, albeit significant, for those not deemed at-risk. As such, she concludes that “for students who are judged by their teachers as at-risk of dropping out . . . the value for math achievement of having teachers who care is substantial and mitigates against the negative effect of having been judged as at-risk” (p.241). Indeed, she suggests that among at-risk students, learning may be dependent upon the generation of social capital through perceptions of teacher caring.

In summary, the individual deficit model is limited by a construction of dropping out as an individual decision, independent of school effects, and a characterization of dropouts as a homogeneous group. Indeed, a growing body of literature points to the impact of institutional factors. These studies agree that school experiences and institutional factors interact with individual factors to influence the likelihood of dropping out. This does not negate the utility of studies that consider individual and familial factors. However, their utility is diminished when considered apart from their societal and institutional context. More important is our ability to consider the role of the school and larger community in ameliorating these factors. For example, research on
parent involvement (Coleman, 1998) and early intervention (Madden, Slavin, Karweit, Dolan, & Wasik, 1993; Temple, Reynolds & Miedel, 2000) has identified the importance of family–school connections for the success of students. Case study and phenomenological research (Loncaric, 1998; Okey & Cusick, 1995; Raddysh, 1992) have identified family experiences as critical to the process of disengagement. As such, one question for educators may be how schools (and of course the larger community) might facilitate positive home-school connections, given a clear understanding of parental apprehensions. An examination of school effects literature suggests that schools, through policies (suspension, retention, tracking) and practices (curriculum, teaching styles, relationships) indeed influence student outcomes. An individual perspective diverts attention from schools as a potential locus of change.

**Process Theories of Disengagement**

Most researchers now agree that dropping out is not an isolated event in the life of a child, but the end result of a gradual process of disengagement or alienation from school (Finn, 1989; Kelly, 1993; Newman, Wehlage and Lamborn, 1992; Rumberger, 1987; Wehlage et al., 1989). The following will first review the theoretical foundations of the “process” framework (Hirschi, 1969; Newman, 1981; Seeman, 1975), and then present and critique three prominent frameworks for understanding student disengagement: Finn’s participation – identification, Wehlage et al.’s school membership and engagement, and Fine’s (1986; 1991) and Kelly’s critical theory.

Process theories are framed by the work of social control and alienation theorists. Both Finn (1989) and Wehlage et al. (1989) build upon social control theory (Hirschi, 1969; Liska & Reed, 1985), which posits that ties, or bonds, to institutions inhibit the
expression of negative motivations. Institutional bonds are comprised of four elements: attachment, commitment, involvement and belief. Attachment is the outcome of one's social and emotional ties to other individuals, reflecting a concern for their opinions and expectations, characterized by reciprocity and resulting in behavioural attempts to meet these expectations (or not). Commitment reflects a “cost-benefit analysis” on the part of the individual. It is the “rational side of participation” (Wehlage et al., 1989, p.117) involving the decision to behave in acceptable ways in order to achieve one’s goals. Involvement refers to active engagement in the activities of the institution, which is encouraged by one’s belief in the legitimacy or efficacy of the institution. Wehlage et al. explain that an individual is “socially bonded to the extent that he or she is attached to adults and peers, committed to the norms of the school, involved in school activities and has belief in the legitimacy and efficacy of the institution” (p.117).

Theoretical support is also found in the alienation theories of Seeman (1975) and Newman (1981). Seeman defines alienation as a subjective, psychological state, and identifies six dimensions: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, cultural estrangement, self-estrangement, and social isolation. Finn (1989) has identified the concepts of social isolation and normlessness as most similar to the belonging and valuing aspects in his identification construct. Newman describes five essential features of student alienation from learning: detachment, isolation, fragmentation, disconnectedness and estrangement. In contrast to Seeman, he views alienation from both an objective structural perspective and a subjective, psychological perspective. While valuing individual perceptions as “critical”, Newman asserts that a reduction of alienation “requires altering structural aspects of labor and human relations in ways that
affect subjective states” (p. 549). In other words, it is necessary to attend to both the
school and societal context in addition to individual attitudes and emotions. Newman et
al. (1992) view school engagement as the opposite of alienation, and necessary to both
positive school outcomes and general quality of life. The reduction of alienation (and
subsequent increase in engagement) is accomplished through the promotion of
integration, individuality, and communality.

**Participation – Identification.** Finn (1989) proposes a developmental model of
school withdrawal that emphasizes the importance of student bonding with school. He
proposes that participation in and identification with school mediate school outcomes.
Participation and Identification constitute the psychological and behavioural components
of school engagement. Engagement is “the student’s psychological investment in and
effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills, or
crafts that academic work is intended to promote” (Newman et al., 1992, p.12).

Identification refers to an internalized sense of belonging (environmental fit) and a
valuing of school-relevant goals. Finn (1989) equates identification, in positive terms, to
affiliation, involvement, attachment, commitment, and bonding, and negatively to
alienation and withdrawal, and suggests that both aspects are consistently related to
problem behaviour and school outcomes in the literature.

Participation is the behavioural aspect of engagement, and a precursor to
identification. It is more amenable to intervention, and “the ability to manipulate
participation in school activities may provide a handle through which increased levels of
identification may become accessible” (Finn, 1989, p. 127). Through participation, the
student develops bonds to his or her environment. As these bonds strengthen, the
likelihood of problem behaviour and failure diminish. Finn asserts that most successful students engage in increasing levels of participation and describes four levels beginning in the early grades and proceeding through high school. Level I involves the mastery of basic attending behavior and work habits, including acknowledgement on the part of the student of the need to be present, prepared, and respond to directions or teacher questions. Level II requires greater investment on the part of the student, including initiating questions and dialogue, help seeking, and time engaged in classroom-related activities outside of regular school hours. Level III involves increasing participation in the school environment through extracurricular activities, and Level IV involves participation in school governance activities.

Together, these constructs comprise a model of school engagement or withdrawal described both positively (successful students) and negatively (unsuccessful students). Finn’s basic premise for both is that “participation in school activities is essential in order for positive outcomes, including the students’ sense of belonging and valuing school related goals, to be realized” (Finn, 1989, p. 129). The model, as written, assumes students begin school ready to participate, and provided they experience some degree of academic success (through effort and ability) and experience quality instruction, their participation will increase with greater maturity and autonomy, increasing their opportunities to meet with success. This promotes identification with school and further participation, demonstrating the “self-reinforcing nature of the cycle” (p. 130). In short, early participation, influenced by quality of instruction, influences performance outcomes, which influence identification with school and further participation.

Alternately, nonparticipation (withdrawal) increases the likelihood of unsuccessful school
outcome, impeding the student’s ability to identify with school. Lack of identification leads to further withdrawal, and the cycle continues, leading to the decision to drop out of school. In summary, disengagement is a process of increasing physical withdrawal from the school environment as a result of poor achievement and a lack of emotional ties to the school. Most important, for Finn, is the influence of classroom experience (environment and instruction) on children’s willingness to enter the cycle. As such, Finn concludes that intervention efforts should focus on increasing and maintaining participation levels.

While Finn (1989) notes the potential impact of family environment and parental support on children’s “predisposition” to participate he does not include this in his model. He speculates that lack of supportive parental behavior may predispose children to non-participation and nonidentification. As a result, he postulates that they “do not fully enter the cycle.” Such children may resist first-level participation, which begins the cycle of withdrawal. It is unclear why these factors do not find a place in the final model.

The empirical literature supports the need for belonging as a fundamental human motivation. In their review, Baumeister and Leary (1995) note the tendency for humans to form social attachments and resist their dissolution, and the effect of belonging on affect and cognition. Further, they cite evidence of the relationship between a lack of attachment and negative effects on health, adjustment and well being. They conclude, “the need to belong is a powerful, fundamental, and extremely pervasive motivation” (p. 497). Similarly, Resnick, Harris, and Blum (1993) found family and school connectedness functioned as powerful protective factors in the lives of youth. Their findings “underscore the importance of schools as a primary source of connectedness with adults, and with the broader community as perceived and experienced by the
adolescent" (p. S7). The most consistent evidence in support of both belonging and valuing of school comes from ethnographic and case study research on disengagement (Fine, 1991; Kelly, 1993; Loncaric, 1998; Raddysh, 1992). Raddysh notes the critical role of ‘belonging’ to the process of bonding with school, and this extends beyond acceptance with peers, to the school environment as a whole. “Belonging may be a function of interactions with teachers, peers, and parents resulting in a sense that the school’s beliefs, goals and values are aligned with the student’s….The greater the overlap, the greater the sense of identification for the student” (p. 113).

The work of Fine (1986, 1991) and Kelly (1993) affords one a richer understanding of the role of values in the process of identification with school. These studies capture, through a reliance on extensive observation and interview, the thoughts and feelings of students and other members of the educational institutions they studied. Fine (1991) explains that, for urban adolescents, membership is contingent upon a perceived match between the values of the school and of the home and community. In the case of disadvantaged urban youth, the middle class values of the school can be a source of alienation and disengagement. Further, these youth, in appraising the value of the academic credential, often see little connection between a high school diploma and employability. These works will be explored throughout the discussion of both Wehlage et al.’s (1989) model and in greater depth in the discussion of critical theory approaches to the understanding and study of disengagement.

The importance of a variety of participatory behaviours for school completion has also been demonstrated. Alexander et al.’s (1997) longitudinal study identified Level I and II participatory behaviours, including absences, classroom behaviour, and work habits, as
strong predictors of dropping out. Ekstrom et al. (1986) found that dropouts spent less time on homework (level II) and participated less in extracurricular activities (level III). Finn and Rock (1997) found significant differences between graduates and dropouts on teacher and self-reported effort, attendance, preparation and behaviour (Level 1). Similarly, Finn (1993) found large, significant differences between unsuccessful students and passing / successful students on all participation measures. These groups also differed on some measures of identification, including valuing of school outcomes (utility) and self-reported perceptions of peer acceptance. Finn concludes that an understanding of dropping out and educational risk necessitates examination of the engagement behaviours and behavioural risk factors that differentiate successful and unsuccessful students rather than the status risk characteristics of students.

Consistent support has not been found for Finn’s (1989) suggested “path” of influence from participation to achievement to identification. It is suggested that identification has an indirect relationship with dropout behaviour through its relationship to participation (Finn, 1993; Voelkl, 1997).

In summary, student participation and identification with school are likely rooted in early school success and perpetuated by students’ sense of social and academic integration within the school environment, which is influenced by myriad academic, social and school factors.

Finn’s theory is one of the first to suggest an examination of educational risk factors, including individual and school practices, as opposed to a reliance on status risk factors, in the study of disengagement. He presents disengagement as a process rooted in early school experiences. Initial behaviours (participation or non-participation) track and
cluster, "they have early and later forms that evolve as the youngster's autonomy increases. They become self-perpetuating and perhaps more difficult to alter in each subsequent grade" (Finn, 1993, p. 76). Indeed, Roderick (1993, 1994) and Roderick and Camburn (1999) have shown the cumulative effects of failure on students' school career, and Oakes (1992) has described the deleterious effects of tracking or remedial placements. Similarly, in a study of early predictors of dropping out, Alexander et al. (1997) conclude,

the beginning school transition...is a critical period for academic and personal development. Once children are in school, the "clean slate" fills rapidly: students' performance patterns and habits of conduct are established, their ideas about self and school begin to solidify, other persons form impressions of their competence and character. (p. 103)

The implications for intervention are clear: early attention to participatory behaviours, school adjustment, and achievement, classroom arrangements and pedagogical styles which encourage interaction, meaningful curriculum, a wide variety of extracurricular options, and student involvement in decision making and goal setting. Particularly important is Finn's support for early intervention to increase the likelihood of engagement in learning. Such intervention would ensure that students fully enter the developmental cycle as described. Evidence from early intervention projects such as Success for All (Madden et al., 1993) and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers (Temple, Reynolds, & Miedel, 2000) support this assertion. Indeed, the latter is the first large scale, longitudinal study to describe a significant association between early intervention and high school completion.

Further, through a focus on the influence of classroom environment, Finn redefines behaviour and withdrawal as a response, not a provocation, to numerous interacting
influences within the school environment. In so doing, he facilitates a shift away from an individual deficit model of school dropout.

However, despite this theoretical advance his work is deficient in numerous respects. His model fails to consider in depth the role of family, peer and teacher variables beyond family preparation and instructional quality. Further, Finn ignores a variety of important school processes and policies and structural limitations imposed by the larger political and social context. Finn also ignores the diversity of disengaged students and styles. Finally, his model fails to consider critical periods in the school career, beyond the beginning school transition.

Absent is a detailed consideration of relationships within and without the school that influence both achievement and school completion, as identified in the research on belonging (Resnick et al., 1993) and social capital (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Coleman, 1988; Teachman, Paasch & Carver 1996, 1997). The literature (Eckert, 1989; Fine, 1986; Kelly, 1993; Loncaric, 1998; Raddysh, 1992) identifies relational factors, characterized by negative perceptions of relationships with teachers, association with out-of-school friends, and conflicting peer relationships, as characteristic of disengaged students and dropouts. Further, the very definition of academic success may be defined within peer groups, enhancing or limiting its influence on identification and participation (Eckert, 1989; Fine, 1991; Kelly, 1993). For example, discussing the reengagement of at-risk youth in alternate settings, Kelly notes the "enormous influence of peers in shaping student responses to academic success...Rather than fearing success, students feared losing friends, who offered alternative definitions of success" (p. 211). Raddysh stresses the importance of family relationships in the lives of students. Dropouts in her study
described disengaged family relationships characterized by limited communication and conflict, while graduates noted the involvement of parents in the learning process, both at home and in school.

The family support that the graduates talked of is critical in differentiating the two groups, which would suggest that the process of bonding to school starts on day one of Kindergarten or before. The family's values permeate the interactions about learning and school that occur in the home each day, even before the child starts school. (p. 109)

Second, Finn's (1989) model does not explore a variety of school factors, with the exception of instructional environment and classroom arrangements, neglecting the potential influence of school structure, organization, culture and climate. Certainly classroom arrangements may reflect cultural factors, but they are not defined as such in his theory. The research reviewed previously points to the wide array of structural factors that influence the achievement and attainment of students. Finn's model presents a rather limited view of such factors, thereby limiting intervention.

Third, despite a theoretical grounding in alienation studies, Finn neglects to consider Newman's (1981) structural critique. Within the disengagement literature, this is echoed by critical theorists (Fine, 1991; Kelly, 1993) who assert that institutional, economic and social factors contribute to disengagement, and as such, any theory of disengagement or prevention must attend to their influence. Nor does he consider the effects of poverty, classism, sexism or racism on the ability of students to navigate through the system to graduation.

Finally, Finn's (1989) model assumes a relatively smooth developmental progression of engagement or disengagement. However, research has identified "critical periods" in school careers. In addition to the beginning school transition identified by Finn,
Roderick (1993) and Roderick and Camborn (1999) point to middle and high school transitions as equally, if not more, critical in the life of an adolescent. They note dramatic shifts in achievement, attendance and engagement during these periods, particularly among those with a history of early school failure and / or other risk factors.

In summary, despite reference to the theoretical underpinnings of belonging and valuing, Finn’s constructs are relatively constricted in scope. Belonging, according to Finn, does not develop within the context of relationships, but in isolation as a result of one’s appraisal of achievement outcomes. Finn neglects the attachment dimension of social control theory: the need for reciprocal, caring relationships. He also fails to attend to features of the student’s school, family and social environment that influence engagement. As such, he advocates a “limited reform” focusing primarily on practice. Far better would be a model which views belonging as an outgrowth of both successful relationships within and outside of the school environment, and high academic expectations for all, based on progressive curriculum and pedagogy, within a reformed institutional structure.

**School membership and engagement.** Wehlage et al. (1989) emphasize school membership as critical to educational engagement and positive academic outcomes. They present a theory of dropout prevention in which school membership and educational engagement interact and are viewed as intermediate goals leading to long term outcomes of academic achievement and personal and social development.

The concept of school membership is based on the importance of social bonding (Hirschi, 1969), in which a student is “attached, committed, involved and has belief in the norms, activities and people of an institution” (Wehlage et al. 1989, p. 117).
Impediments to school membership include adjustment following transitions, academic or learning difficulties, incongruence or lack of environmental fit (e.g. a lack of experience in mainstream culture or with middle class values), and isolation or lack of high quality interactions with adults. Key to overcoming such impediments, according to Wehlage et al. are high quality, reciprocal relationships between students and adults within the school community. Thus, membership is fostered when educators promote positive relationships, communicate genuine concern, and provide needed assistance. The authors note that membership is “particularly important for those students who have histories of school failure and who lack the support of strong homes and communities outside the school” (p. 133).

Wehlage et al. (1989) studied fourteen alternate secondary schools with effective dropout prevention programs. Their results demonstrate the diversity of experiences in the lives of students at-risk, as personal, social, family and school factors interact over time. As such, the success of an intervention is often the result of a match between strategy and student. In order to facilitate such matching, teachers must know their students well. This, of course, is an extremely difficult problem given traditional secondary school organization (Sizer, 1992).

Despite the diversity in student backgrounds, Wehlage et al. (1989) found common ground in the need for membership in the school community. They contend that schools have a responsibility to facilitate this membership through attention to the structural and functional characteristics that support or inhibit its development. Wehlage et al. suggest that there are fundamental differences in successful schools’ approaches to at-risk students. Not only are these schools organized differently, they exhibit a philosophical
stance of support for all, communicated to students through both formal and informal relationships with staff. This commitment is facilitated by enabling structures, including small size, one on one relations, autonomy, and flexibility.

The authors point also to the professional culture established by teachers, characterized by a set of shared beliefs and values about students: accountability for student success, an extended role for teachers (including informal counselling), persistence and tolerance, optimism about student potential, and staff “ownership”.

Successful programs encourage educational entrepreneurship, self-governance and professional collegiality. Thus, Wehlage et al. (1989) provide empirical and theoretical support for the view that a supportive school culture, generated and maintained by day-to-day practices and relationships, has a significant impact on that school’s effectiveness with at-risk students.

However, membership alone will lead neither to engagement nor successful academic, social and personal outcomes. Educational engagement is critical to success and is a prerequisite to the acquisition of essential knowledge and skills. Wehlage et al. (1989) lament that “students are frequently mere ‘spectators’ of their own education; they stand on the sidelines watching and waiting and expend very little mental effort in the process” (p. 176). In order to engage at-risk students it is necessary for students to experience learning as both extrinsically and intrinsically rewarding. Thus attention must be paid to curriculum and teaching in addition to relationships. Their research points to a common failure in the design and implementation of initiatives for at-risk students: an exclusive focus on relationships and subsequent neglect of curricular innovation and high achievement expectations. This lack of attention to achievement limits students’ access
to worthwhile career and personal opportunities. The most successful alternative schools studied provided for not only membership, but also intellectual and vocational needs.

Wehlage et al. (1989) define educational engagement as the "psychological investment required to comprehend and master knowledge and skills explicitly taught in school" (p. 177). Similar to Finn (1989), they note that engagement finds expression in the participatory behaviours of students in and out of the classroom, and conclude that engagement results from an interaction of students, teachers and curriculum. Promoting engagement requires "attention to student characteristics, the tasks students are asked to perform, the school environment in which the work takes place, and the external environment that influences the student and the school itself" (p. 179). They cite three common impediments to engagement: the absence of extrinsic rewards; a narrow conception of learning; and an addiction to coverage of a superficial curriculum.

First, students often sense little relationship between academic work and future employment. In other words, they see little connection between discrete academic skills and knowledge and the ability to meet their personal, valued goals. Second, there is little connection between the abstract, individualized and competitive nature of learning within schools and the socially shared learning process that occurs outside classrooms. In addition, the narrow conception of assessment in schools discourages the development of understanding and knowledge. Wehlage et al. suggest that in school learning needs to become a socially shared process in which students work together in a cooperative framework to produce socially valued outcomes. Most students are likely to feel ownership of the knowledge they are generating when it is characterized by these qualities. The intent is to increase the chance that students will find intrinsic rewards in their work, thereby enhancing student engagement (p. 183).
Finally, they deride the “obsession with coverage” (p. 184) and proliferation of a “shopping mall curriculum” (p. 184) for encouraging mindlessness through the acquisition of superficial knowledge, the consequences of which are devastating for learning. The solution is a treatment of topics in depth, “allowing for greater mastery of fewer ideas, ... greater complexity of understanding and more thoughtfulness about the topics investigated” (p. 185), a remedy supported by Sizer (1992). However, Sizer notes that this will not occur without a common understanding and acknowledgement of the goals of education, and a commitment to the cultural characteristics outlined above.

Wehlage et al. (1989) propose a theory of disengagement, and a theory of dropout prevention, based on school membership and engagement. They suggest that the “at-risk” student, embedded within a specific social–cultural context (e.g. low SES, conflicting family, community and school values), brings to school a host of personal resources and problems. There, he or she encounters a variety of engagement impediments (lack of extrinsic and intrinsic rewards) and membership impediments (adjustment, difficulty, incongruence and isolation). Over time the individual becomes increasingly disengaged from the institution both academically and socially. In contrast, when schools attend to the structural, functional and individual impediments to engagement and membership, and actively promote, through policies and day-to-day activities, a supportive professional culture, students become more involved in their academic work and bonded to the school. The result is improved achievement, personal and social development, and school completion. In summary, school membership serves as the foundation upon which educational engagement is built. Together, they serve as intermediate outcomes that work together to buffer personal and familial problems and
promote long term educational outcomes, including achievement, development, and graduation.

Empirical support for the importance of social integration is growing, as seen in the belonging literature reviewed previously. Dropouts report feeling rejected by peers and describe adversarial peer relationships (Ekstrom, et al., 1986; Ellenbogen & Chamberland, 1997; Kelly, 1993, Raddysh, 1992). They also report a lack of “fit” or integration with the institution and its values and a feeling of alienation (Fine, 1986; 1991; Kelly, 1993), resulting in an increasing association with out of school and disengaged peers (Eckert, 1989; Ellenbogen & Chamberland, 1997; Kaplan et al., 1997; Kelly, 1993; Raddysh, 1992).

However, a balance must be achieved which does not favour one construct to the exclusion of the other. Wehlage et al. (1989) note a disturbing tendency in less successful programs “to see at-risk youth as fundamentally uneducable with respect to the material that is truly necessary or relevant to further schooling” resulting in reduced expectations and a “symbolic kind of education” (p. 209). They warn that it is “the proclivity to label a proportion of students as incapable of mastering more challenging academic material that turns matching into tracking” (p. 209). Their research points to a common failure in the design and implementation of initiatives for at-risk students: an exclusive focus on relationships and subsequent neglect of curricular innovation and high achievement expectations. This lack of attention to achievement limits students’ access to worthwhile career and personal opportunities. Miller, Leinhardt, and Zigmond (1988) found a similar trend in a study of accommodation among learning disabled students. Educators’ focus on personal relationships and accommodation led to reduced academic
expectations and minimal engagement on the part of students. Fine (1986, 1991) and Kelly (1993) note that alternatives for at-risk youth suffer from an implicit belief in the ineducability of these students, leading to an almost exclusive focus on personal development and vocational skills and abandonment of academic curriculum. Social bonding without academic engagement can have disastrous consequences for at-risk youth.

Wehlage et al. (1989) conclude that educational policy must support the development of stronger alternatives for at-risk students, promote systemic school reforms, and move beyond school reform to establish a community partnership strategy of intervention, thus providing a community of support for youth. The provision of high quality alternatives for at-risk youth is supported by Kelly (1993), in recognition that the societal and school reforms required to render alternatives unnecessary are unlikely to be realized in full. Further, Wehlage et al. assert that it is “misguided to assume one form of schooling must be acceptable to all in the system” (p. 227). However, in order to fulfill their purpose as “safety nets”, and refrain from becoming “safety valves” for regular secondary schools, alternatives must be afforded an equivalent status to regular programs (Kelly, 1993). This entails a commitment to equivalent (or superior) resources, autonomy to pursue collaborative goals and educational innovation, and improved access to and coordination with community resources. To succeed, this will entail significant policy support and a new dialogue among key stakeholders regarding the “dilemma of difference” (Kelly, 1993). In short, the dilemma of difference asks how we might address the very real needs of individuals and marginalized groups, without stigmatizing them further. Kelly and other critical theorists assert that through challenging the meaning of and
reconceptualizing difference we might succeed in moving away from the stigma associated with group membership. Indeed, this is a great challenge, best accomplished through continued critical dialogue among all “active agents” (Sefa Dei, 1996). However, Kelly suggests that offering alternatives without system-wide reform may result in the continuation of a second best status likely to impede the success of marginalized students.

Second, systemic school reform is essential to reducing disengagement (Wehlage et al., 1989). This entails first a serious effort to reduce the incidence of “falling through the cracks” through the tracking of student progress from school entry through age eighteen, in order to ascertain cohort dropout rates, monitor the effects of retention and special placements, and examine the effects of school disciplinary practices. Although this appears self-evident, it is rarely practiced, and allows for continued policy from an individual deficit perspective. Further recommendations include decentralization or small school size and reduced teacher / student ratios (to facilitate relationships, promote autonomy and allow flexibility), the development of innovative and meaningful curriculum, new teaching and learning strategies, and meaningful assessment strategies. The above entails a significant shift in educational philosophy, including a commitment to depth and the abandonment of coverage, which in turn requires a reconsideration of traditional measures of accountability, such as standardized tests. Lastly, this entails a commitment to shared leadership and the establishment of a professional culture which empowers teachers to do what they are trained to do. Such a culture is supportive of collaboration, and requires the development of a shared vision of education.
Finally, Wehlage et al. (1989) support the formation of community partnerships aimed at serving at-risk youth, thereby establishing a broad commitment to and ownership of the problems of youth. This echoes the recommendations of numerous educators and researchers (Downie, 1994; Dupper, 1993; Fine, 1991; Kelly, 1993; Loncaric, 1998). Such a partnership can take many forms. At the most basic level, this involves the inclusion of family as an equal partner in education, extending to the inclusion of other agencies and service organizations that support youth.

Examples of reforms utilizing the principles above include Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools (Sizer, 1992) and the work of Deborah Meier in East Harlem (Meier, 1992). It is beyond the scope of this review to comment upon these efforts at length. Suffice it to say that through attention to both membership and academic engagement, many schools and districts have improved student outcomes despite debilitating community and societal impediments.

Wehlage et al.'s (1989) theory of disengagement and dropout prevention improves markedly upon both individual deficit approaches and Finn's (1989) participation-identification theory. While they agree with Finn on the need for a developmental perspective and a focus on engagement in learning, they place far greater emphasis on contextual factors that shape students' sense of membership in the school community, and expand upon the role of structural, philosophical and pedagogical barriers to academic engagement. As such, their constructs are more fully developed and supported both theoretically and empirically. Particularly important for school membership is a focus on attachment and reciprocity in relationships, factors overlooked by Finn. Indeed, Finn's is a far more technical view of belonging, focusing primarily on classroom
interactions, particularly between teacher and student, without the emotionality characteristic of Wehlage et al.'s school membership. However, as ethnographic and case study accounts of disengagement so vividly portray, human emotion plays a vital role in belonging.

In expanding upon school membership to include relational aspects, Wehlage et al. (1989) allow for an understanding of why disengaged adolescents seek company with like peers, often outside of school. Further, these relationships have great value in the lives of youth, for it is therein that identity is solidified and needs are supported. Indeed, Eckert (1989) notes that in our misguided, though well intentioned, attempts to influence peer group membership, we disregard the value of these relationships for youth.

In assuming reciprocity, Wehlage et al. (1989) avoid the bias of social control and participation – identification theories which imply that a lack of fit with mainstream values is somehow deviant. School membership does not require the student to “change” to fit in. Indeed, Wehlage et al. point to the need for schools to examine their belief systems and the extent to which these beliefs are expressed in a pedagogy and curriculum that maintains or exacerbates alienation on the part of some youth.

Through an emphasis on the diversity of at-risk youth, Wehlage et al. support a notion of multiple trajectories in the process of disengagement. Finn relied on a progressive increase in disengagement, beginning in the early elementary years. However, the school careers of at-risk youth may more closely resemble a roller coaster ride than a slide, and for some, it is the alienation experienced in the transition to secondary school that is the impetus for disengagement (Newman, 1981; Kelly, 1993; Roderick, 1993).
Finally, in attending to professional culture, membership becomes an inclusive concept that requires the active participation of both students and staff. Teachers, indeed, are members of the community, and their needs for membership and engagement must also be addressed.

Questions remain unanswered, however, with regard to school membership and academic integration. Tinto (1987) and Hymel, Comfort, Schonert-Reichl, and McDougall (1996) suggest the possibility of a compensatory relationship between these constructs. Wehlage et al. (1989) do not address this, beyond a focus on the need for balance. Further, the theory is limited by its failure to address wider societal barriers to engagement and institutional barriers to the professional culture they advocate. Critical theorists studying disengagement note that the struggle of youth, particularly urban minorities, to engage and succeed is hampered not only by a lack of "cultural fit" but by a structure of societal inequity that works to maintain unequal educational outcomes, despite the guise of equality of access and opportunity. These authors point to the silencing of critique among students, families and staff, the influence of economic interests in public, particularly educational policy, and a continued reliance on an individual deficit model within these policy documents. Further, institutional arrangements continue to favour hierarchical human relationships (LeCompte, 1996), and within such arrangements, certain groups are more privileged than others, thereby maintaining their dominance within curriculum and policy. Thus, critical theorists doubt the capacity of schools to facilitate meaningful change in the absence of attention to larger societal changes. The following will examine this approach applied to the study of disengagement.
**Critical Approaches to Disengagement.** The critical theory of disengagement asserts that social inequities are reproduced and reinforced in institutions such as schools, particularly those that serve disadvantaged youth. This framework has been promoted by critical ethnographers (Fine, 1991; Kelly, 1993) who criticize the traditional deficit model of dropping out for its failure to consider the impact of economic, social, and political forces upon disadvantaged groups. Fine (1996) asserts that “if we write on school failure or success abstracted from social and economic conditions, we collude in the self-blame that eventually riddles dropouts, and legitimate the fixed gaze that blames them for social and economic ills” (p. XV). She asks us to consider, “who is served by this seamless rhetoric of dropouts as losers?” (1991, p.5). The consequence of which, she posits, is to render invisible the structures, ideologies and practices that systematically silence and exile those youth, and their families, who would seek to challenge the hegemony of the “dominant discourse.”

Both Fine (1986; 1991) and Kelly (1993; 1996) agree with Wehlage et al (1989) that dropouts are a heterogeneous group. However, they extend Wehlage et al.’s analysis through their focus on structural characteristics, such as classism, racism and sexism, which they suggest perpetuate a discourse of equality of educational opportunity, access, and outcome, despite glaring evidence to the contrary.

In her study of urban, minority youth, Fine (1986) identifies four categories of students that “embody the range of circumstances under which students leave high school” (p. 397). Many leave with an “articulated critique of schooling and pedagogy and / or a negative appraisal of the relation of schooling to labor market success” (p. 396). For these students, mainstream school, with its entrenched middle class value
system, is irrelevant and fails to acknowledge their distinct experiences. There is little perceived relationship between schooling and future prospects; among urban, minority youth, a diploma in no way assures success.

A second group of students leaves school to attend to family, economic, and social obligations. Such family obligations may provide a sense of competence they were unable to find in school. Fine (1986) suggests that for pregnant teens already disadvantaged academically, socially and economically, “the drudgery of staying in school seems barely worth the hassle. The range of possibilities for these young women is, in fact, materially and psychologically quite limited. Having a baby at least offers a full-time job and a sense of purpose” (p. 405).

A third group of students battle internalized beliefs as to their inadequacy and leave due to the hopelessness and disengagement they experience over the course of their lives and schooling. For these students academic failure and retention in grade are particularly disruptive to educational and psychological well being.

Lastly, in agreement with Kelly (1993) and McNeal (1997), Fine (1986) identifies the “pushouts”, students who are routinely discharged due to absenteeism or failure to comply with school rules and routines. Fine comments on an “organizational commitment to ridding the school of its presumably ‘difficult students’ as soon as they can be released, and to not acknowledging this process” (1986, p. 403).

Fine (1991) disputes the historic ideology that equality of educational access will beget equality of outcome. Indeed, she notes the absurdity of the attempt to mandate educational outcomes through equal access legislation. Low income and minority students continue to be over-represented in remedial and special education classes, are
excluded (through suspension and expulsion) to a greater extent, are retained in grade (experience failure) more often, and drop out in higher numbers. The literature on school effects supports these assertions. The individual deficit model justifies such numbers as a result of individual failure and family pathology, ignoring institutional factors that have been shown to precipitate high dropout rates. Fine notes that such institutional features are “most typical of schools attended by low-income urban students” (p. 22), and that these students are the least likely to take advantage of “second chance options” (p. 22). Finally, she notes that the value of the high school diploma varies with the holder. Despite the differential outcomes a diploma may facilitate within demographic categories, most urban, minority adolescents are keenly aware that “it doesn’t turn an African American woman into a white man” (p. 23).

Through an analysis of silencing, Fine (1991) demonstrates how a middle class institution mutes social critique. Silencing takes many forms and can be found at every level of the institution, with one primary effect: the maintenance of structural inequality, or what Kelly (1993) has termed hidden hierarchies. The most explicit silencing is the active withdrawal of students for failure to comply with school rules and routines. Fine notes a bureaucratized process in which students’ basic legal rights are respected, but criticizes the evasiveness regarding realistic alternatives. Those alternatives suggested were often of lesser value (GED, proprietary schools, continuation schools) or perceived as such (Kelly, 1993), and Fine remarks upon the “ease with which most of these students were accorded educational outcomes likely to guarantee them poverty and unemployment” (p. 100). Kelly notes the use of continuation (alternative) schools as a “safety valve” for comprehensive schools, resulting in the silencing of critique and the
continued subordination of difference. Indeed, within these continuation schools, hidden hierarchies continued to influence achievement and attainment, resulting in high dropout rates. Given the lack of resources and respect afforded to these programs, they were unable to maintain their philosophy of different but equal. Within the continuation setting, different was indeed subordinate.

In Canada, the findings of Sefa Dei (1996) echo those of Fine. Sefa Dei sought to explore the impact of school practices noting that Black youth in Ontario are disproportionately represented in the lowest academic tracks and have higher dropout rates. In the process, he found an articulated critique of schooling in the stories of youth and an expression of agency in their decision to leave. These students’ critiques point to a school culture whose norms rest on “assimilationist assumptions” (p. 177). These youth did not see themselves in the curriculum nor in the classrooms they attended. They questioned their placement in lower tracks, and the schools’ failure to respond to personal problems. Indeed, both Fine (1991) and Sefa Dei comment on this separation between school and home, the implicit assumption that cultural identity and personal problems can be deposited at the school doors prior to entry. These youth also struggle to reconcile the achievement ideology of the school and society and their social reality. In short, alienation is pervasive, resulting in inner conflict and a sense of betrayal. Often conflict is enacted in their “rebellion”, which serves to alienate them further through exclusionary discipline. In the end, dropping out is an attempt to gain control over their experience. Sefa Dei is critical of conventional theories of school dropout, such as that articulated by Finn (1989) for their failure to examine the context of education. He concludes that
through student narratives we are afforded an alternate view on disengagement, and notes that

although students' explanations of dropping out may not fit neatly into theoretical boxes, it is clear that their “bodies” are deeply implicated in the processes of public schooling. Previous theoretical models of school dropouts have a reified notion of social reality. Students are presented as “disembodied”... For some... leaving the school system prematurely must be understood from the marginalized resistance viewpoint (p. 185).

Kelly’s (1993) study of patterns of disengagement among continuation school students provides further support for Fine’s thesis. Kelly found that students felt alienated from school life, lacked hope for the future and believed a high school diploma to be unrelated to future success. However, her work extends that of Fine, emphasizing gender disparities in the disengagement process. Kelly found differing patterns and timing of disengagement among males and females. Girls were less visible, slipping “in and out of the system more quietly... relatively free to drop out altogether, with fewer warning signs” (p. 94-95). In contrast, boys disengaged by “clowning” or fighting, often engaging in “acts of major confrontation that jeopardized their survival in school” (p. 95). Thus, boys were more prone to being “pushed out” of the system, whereas girls were more prone to “fade out”. Further, boys tended to disengage earlier, “While a significant group of boys had already disengaged by the end of elementary school, most girls described the transition to high school as particularly critical” (p. 126). Kelly also noted the role of peer subcultural affiliation in the reinforcement of difference (based on gender, ethnicity and social class) and the definition of success among adolescents.

Eckert (1989) has noted the reproduction of adult class systems in student subcultures and their consequences for education. In her ethnographic work she found that social categories of the larger society are reproduced in and characterized by oppositional teen
subcultures which belie significant differences in values and norms. Although viewed as personal choice on the part of students, Eckert describes a theory of cultural deprivation that allows schools to ignore the effects of tracking and other means of separation on the basis of class and ethnicity. She claims that, through the perpetuation of a particular cultural and social system, American education prepares youth for participation in a capitalist society.

Both Kelly (1993) and Eckert (1989) note the influence of student subcultures on participation and access to resources. For example, extracurricular activities, by virtue of their adult sponsorship, are dominated by mainstream students, with implications that extend beyond the school yard, “many of the opportunities that the community offers the adolescent are funneled through the school, and failure to conform to school expectations on one realm tends to put the individual in disfavor in other realms” (Eckert, 1989, p. 98).

Kelly (1993) concludes that as a result of hidden hierarchies, continuation schools are limited in their attempts to re-engage at-risk students, and many students continue to fade out. The stigma of the continuation school tends to reinforce the patterns of inequality and disengagement. Under-resourced and viewed disparagingly by the larger community, particularly the business community, they reinforce the subordinate roles of their clientele. She notes the discrepancy between their stated goal as a safety net and their implicit mandate as a safety valve for larger comprehensive schools, relieving them of their most difficult students. She, like Fine (1986, 1991), sees little value in offering options for students in the absence of major social reforms both within and outside of the school system.
In summary, disengagement cannot be divorced from the context in which it develops. Inequities within this context may perpetuate a dominant, but erroneous, discourse of equality. This discourse is protected by a variety of forms of institutional silencing and in the reproduction of social stratification within the school. Fine (1986) concludes that, among urban minority youth, dropping out is a mass experience not an individual phenomenon, and therefore must be considered within a societal context, "school-based reforms need to be developed in tandem with a package of economic and social reforms....Targeting schools as the site for social change and the hope for the next generation deflects attention and resources, critique and anger away from insidious economic and social inequities" (p. 407).

Critical theorists hold limited hope for the success of individualized, school based reforms in the absence of a commitment to equality of outcome at a societal level. Many children continue to live in poverty, women continue to earn less, and minorities (ethnic, gender, sexual) are caught in a "dilemma of difference" and its tendency to stigmatize by virtue of comparison to a recognized "norm".

The recommendations of critical theorists for school reform echo those of Wehlage et al. (1989) in calling for greater accountability and visibility through improved, systemic monitoring, strengthened and equal alternate programs, altered curriculum and pedagogy, smaller size, teacher empowerment, cultural change, and the active collaboration of social agencies to improve access to and delivery of services for at-risk youth, an ecological approach also recommended by Dupper (1993). However, they place greater emphasis on the creation of a democratic curriculum which reflects the lives of marginalized groups and provides a central place for social critique in the classroom (Fine, 1991;
Kelly, 1993). This critique might be extended to action, in which students and educators become activists. They support ongoing critical reflection and dialogue among educators with an honest focus on structural constraints (Fine, 1991), specific practical changes such as a commitment to the elimination of remedial placements, and a committed team approach to the amelioration of student learning deficits through creative alternatives to social promotion (Fine, 1991). Further, they suggest the empowerment of families and require that schools take an active role in building an atmosphere conducive to parent involvement, an inviting atmosphere and genuine place that goes far beyond the lip-service usually afforded them (Fine, 199; Okey and Cusick, 1995). Finally, they suggest that informed policy requires a clear understanding of the real issues and a clear statement of goals (Downie, 1994; Sefa Dei, 1996; Anisef & Andres, 1996). Anisef and Andres discuss the tendency for policy to precede a thorough needs assessment. If we are committed to real change, such practices must be abandoned. Finally, a critical approach to disengagement requires that we consider our knowledge hierarchy (Kelly, 1993). In short, do our methodologies reflect and empower student voice?

What is evident from the above discussion are the consequences of silencing. Without student voice we have only decontextualized "facts", such as failure begets failure. But to truly understand these "facts", one must ask why. Is an inherent limitation in the student to blame, or poor teaching, or ineffective policy? Perhaps it is the very ideology inherent in this policy? In the work of the ethnographers above, we witness students recoiling from the institution, as though sensing that the prevailing ideology excludes them. Unfortunately, as Fine (1991) points out, they may not fully recognize the source of discomfort, and any recognition may fade over time to be replaced by self-blame.
Summary

Three prominent theories of disengagement have emerged, developed in response to a debilitating individual deficit model, which view disengagement as a process over time, subject to a myriad of influences. They vary in their emphases on the range of influences and contexts of disengagement. As we move from Finn (1989) to Fine, (1991) we note the increasing sphere of influence, from the classroom and immediate school environment (Finn, 1989), to the school, family, peer group and community (Wehlage et al., 1989), and finally to society as a whole (Fine, 1991; Kelly, 1993). No single theory can truly account for the diversity of disengagement as lived by individual students. However, taken together, these theories provide a framework for understanding the process of disengagement over time and for promoting positive educational change. The reality is that many students are disengaged, although not all leave school prior to graduation, and not all are identifiable by traditional notions of at-riskness based on status characteristics.

Student Persistence and Reintegration to School

Despite the substantial body of literature addressing the issue of school dropouts and student disengagement, relatively few researchers have addressed the notion of persistence among those at-risk for dropping out, or reintegration among those who have previously disengaged from or dropped out of school. Exceptions include the previously reviewed work by Wehlage et al. (1989) on school membership and engagement, research on social capital (Coleman, 1987; 1988; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Muller, 2001), and studies by Altenbaugh, Engel and Martin (1995) and Knesting (1999). Wehlage et al. concluded that school membership and educational engagement interact and serve as
intermediary goals leading to the long term outcomes of academic achievement and personal/social development. Altenbaugh et al.'s ethnography of 100 "dropbacks" focused solely on those students enrolled in a Job Corps reentry program. The authors identified the crucial role of caring in the lives of at-risk students. They also identified the primarily economic survival motive for returning to school articulated by urban minority youth. Finally, Knesting, through her study of "at-risk" students who persisted in a traditional secondary school setting, developed a theory of persistence in which goal orientation, willingness to play the game and meaningful connections interact to reinforce at-risk students' abilities to remain in school.

Despite these promising beginnings, the notions of student persistence and reintegration to school remain poorly researched, and recommendations for student retention continue to be based primarily on the disengagement literature. Indeed, "dropout prevention" programs are often designed based on the risk characteristics outlined in research from an "individual deficit" perspective with limited results (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). The following will briefly review studies by Altenbaugh et al. (1995) and Knesting (1999) and present a rationale for the current study based on the implications and limitations of this research.

Altenbaugh et al. (1995) conducted in-depth interviews with 100 "dropbacks" enrolled in Pittsburgh's Job Corp's Program over an eight year period in order to determine why they left school and why they returned, and to reconstruct their subjective meanings of schooling. The authors attempted to address several weaknesses in the bulk of literature on student disengagement and dropping out, namely, the absence of student voice and the almost exclusive focus on those who drop out and subsequent lack of focus on those who
resume their schooling or "drop back". Their results offer support for both Wehlage et al.'s (1989) theory of school membership/engagement and also for the structural critiques (critical theory) outlined by Fine (1991) and Kelly (1993).

Similar to the literature reviewed previously, Altenbaugh et al. (1995) note the complexity of patterns of school leaving and distinguish numerous categories of school leavers, including dropouts, pushouts, fadeouts, and easeouts among their narrators. All participants described strained support systems,

Our informants, mostly female and overwhelmingly African American, also described distressed economic backgrounds . . . These narrators painted a picture of highly stressed families . . . The family, the most significant and fundamental social institution for our informants, generally appeared to be in crisis . . . At best, the family described by our students is a strained institution, unable to offer complete assistance; thus, while it may not cause a child to leave school, it also may not totally mitigate that experience . . . All of the social institutions that these narrators came into contact with fell short in some way . . . The school, the second most important social institution for these narrators, rarely addressed their vital educational and social needs. These factors had a cumulative effect (pp. 57-58).

Yet despite the admitted complexity of school leaving, participants overwhelmingly identified school related reasons for their departures and individual, economic reasons for their return,

In gross terms, why school leavers left and why they returned can be stated in deceptively simple ways: they left because school was boring and antagonistic and they returned very largely for economic reasons . . . Their return to an alternative educational program was stimulated by economic concerns, not intellectual curiosity . . . They were not concerned with questions of the meaning of life or their role in the larger society . . . More immediate concerns dominated their lives . . . once they left school, the question of supporting themselves became paramount . . . Students once fled school to go to work; now they abandon work to resume their schooling . . . At the end of the Twentieth Century, work no longer represents an alternative; schooling serves as the bridge to a job (pp. 132 – 135)

Altenbaugh et al. (1995) note the influence of the school physical setting and climate, the role of transitions to middle and secondary schools, the influence of youth culture and
social context, and the pivotal role of relationships in the lives of their participants.

School leavers were often overwhelmed by the sheer size of schools, perceived their schools as unsafe and unfriendly and viewed administrators and counsellors as "shadow" figures. Changes in school organization as participants moved from elementary to secondary were disastrous for these individuals, particularly as they reflected changes to educational practices and relationships. Altenbaugh et al. describe the role of "social contracts" with similar peers and discuss the reinforcing influence of youth culture in the lives of school leavers. Participants felt disconnected socially and found belonging with like-minded peers.

Most important, however, was the pivotal role of caring, or lack thereof, in the school experiences of participants, particularly within teacher–student relationships. Altenbaugh et al. (1995) provide an analysis of caring as a "basic ingredient in mitigating the incidence of school leaving" (p. 156). Caring and pedagogical skill were the primary criteria used by students to judge teachers and to determine their own levels of participation in classes. Caring, for participants, did not imply simple warmth or unqualified acceptance, but "clear and consistent support which focuses on student learning" (p. 184). Students responded to teachers who showed a personal interest and caring attitude (through their time and patience) and who held high expectations for their success. Students also responded to those teachers who demonstrated "creative pedagogy". Altenbaugh et al. conclude that a "major theme for school reform is how to create and sustain true learning communities" (p. 167) based on caring.

The fundamental role of caring in contemporary schooling has been addressed at length by Nel Noddings (1992). She suggests that "the structures of current schooling
work against care, and at the same time, the need for care is perhaps greater than ever” (p. 20). Noddings presents a theory of caring based on reciprocity and engrossment, and outlines a proposal for school reform based on centres of care and continuity.

Fundamental to successful teaching and learning is continuity in relations,

Good parenting or teaching starts with the construction of trusting relationships and works continually to build on the foundation of trust. Schools . . . pay too little attention to the need for continuity of place, people, purpose, and curriculum. Most fundamental, of course, is purpose. If our main purpose as educators were to encourage the development of caring in our students, we would begin to look more attentively at the need for continuity in place, people, and curriculum (p. xii).

Without continuity, student alienation and perceptions of lack of care abound, despite well meaning attempts by school personnel.

The single greatest complaint of students . . . is “They don’t care!” . . . They feel alienated from their schoolwork, separated from the adults who try to teach them, and adrift in a world perceived as baffling and hostile. At the same time, most teachers work very hard and express deep concern for their students. In an important sense, teachers do care, but they are unable to make the connections that would complete caring relations with their students . . . . No matter how hard teachers try to care, if the caring is not received by students, the claim “they don’t care” has some validity. It suggests strongly that something is very wrong (pp. 2 - 15).

Thus true reform is based on an understanding of caring as relational, requiring both continuity and reciprocity.

Phelan, Davidson and Thanh Cao’s (1992) study of supportive school environments and positive learning experiences also emphasizes the role of caring relationships for students’ academic success,

A recurring theme in students’ comments is the tremendous value they place on having teachers who care. The number of student references to “wanting caring teachers” is so great that we believe it speaks to the quiet desperation and loneliness of many adolescents in today’s society (p. 698).

However, the authors note differences in the definition of caring behaviour among high and low achieving students. While the former associate caring primarily with academic
assistance, the latter associate caring with both individual academic assistance and key personality traits, such as patience, humour, tolerance and listening ability, demonstrated by teachers and school staff. Similar to Altenbaugh et al. (1995), pedagogical skill was also key to successful teacher–student relationships and student perceptions of caring.

Both high and low achieving students prefer teachers who draw them into the learning process by holding discussions in which ideas are explored and thoughts, feelings, and opinions are shared. In addition to a preference for dynamic pedagogy, they favour teachers who are willing and able to assist them in understanding the material, who take the time to explain concepts and ideas carefully and thoroughly and who demonstrate a commitment to help them learn (p. 700).

Phelan et al. conclude that “caring teachers may be in a pivotal position to influence students who are teetering between involvement in school and withdrawal” (p. 699).

The research on social capital (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Muller, 2001) reviewed previously provides further support for the role of caring relationships in the lives of at-risk students. Indeed, social capital generated through teacher–student contact, including student–teacher relations (students’ belief that teachers are interested in them, value what they say, care about them and their success, respect them, recognize their effort, and are good at teaching) and student–teacher talks outside the classroom, was found to reduce the risk of dropping out by nearly half (Croninger & Lee, 2001) and significantly impact mathematics effort and achievement (Muller, 2001). Further, those students deemed academically at-risk were far more likely to benefit from such relationships, and Muller suggests that for such students, learning may be dependent upon the generation of social capital through perceptions of teacher caring.

Altenbaugh et al.’s (1995) work offers support for the role of both school membership and academic engagement in student disengagement and reintegration. It also extends previous work in its focus on the perspectives of “dropbacks,” illuminating the pivotal
role of economic reasons for returning to school among urban, minority youth. Despite these advances, however, their work continues to focus on the school experiences of students leading up to school leaving, and does not elaborate on the systems supporting persistence once students return, aside from a philosophical discussion of caring. While students may have returned for individual, economic reasons, their ability to remain or persist upon their return is not fully explored. As such, the process of reintegration and persistence remains unexamined in this work.

Knesting’s (1999) case study of Washington High School attempts to address this omission. Through interviews with both students (deemed at-risk for dropping out) and staff, and direct observation, she developed a grounded theory in which persistence is described as the result of three interactive factors: goal orientation, willingness to play the game and developing meaningful connections. Consistent across all participants in her study was a belief in the personal value of school persistence and the development of a goal orientation. Such goal orientation is comprised of four general objectives or desires: that a diploma will lead to a better life; financial independence; the desire to continue one’s education; and avoiding the negative consequences of dropping out. Yet goal orientation alone is unlikely to lead to success without accompanying behaviour change. Students’ willingness to play the game includes students’ abilities to change their behaviour in order to meet the demands of schooling, such as following school rules, taking personal responsibility for behaviour and “minding their own business,” or refusing to be defined solely as part of a student “clique.” Finally, the third, and perhaps most critical aspect of persistence, was the development and maintenance of meaningful relationships with adults in the school,
The students still needed help, and this help came from the meaningful connections they made with one or more teachers or administrators at the school. These connections encouraged the strengthening of students’ goal focus and behavior changes while also supporting them in their persistence towards the end of the year (p. 125).

Students identified five critical components of these relationships: student openness to receiving help; teachers’ abilities to communicate caring; teachers knowledge of students’ lives; teachers’ high expectations; and the provision of a “safe haven”.

Knesting emphasizes the role of people not programs for student persistence.

According to the students . . . support for persisting in school tended to come from a teacher or an administrator, not from a specific special program in the school . . . While programs . . . may have helped to connect these students with the adults with whom they developed a supportive relationship, the programs themselves were not enough to keep them in school. Students were not going to counseling for support, were not working with a mentor, were not in a special support program for potential dropouts. Rather, during and between classes, they were making significant connections with an adult at school (pp. 127-128).

Through elaborating the components of persistence, Knesting (1999) builds upon the work of Altenbaugh et al. (1995). She too found that meaningful connections between students and staff were critical to a student’s ability to succeed in school despite “risk”. She also confirms the role of individual factors noted by Altenbaugh et al., including students’ economic rationale for returning to or remaining in school. Yet the actual process of persistence remains elusive. Although Knesting is able to identify critical factors that may be necessary for student persistence, she is unable to describe the development of these factors in the lives of students. This limitation is possibly a result of a time limited methodology which did not allow for an exploration of student experience over time, but merely provided a snapshot of current functioning through brief interviews and observations.
Summary

Despite a proliferation of research and theory on student disengagement and dropping out, there remains a paucity of literature with regards to persistence among at-risk students and the reintegration of students who have previously dropped out. Wehlage et al.'s (1989) comprehensive research on successful alternate school programs and theory of school membership and engagement remains the most comprehensive work in this field. Both Altenbaugh et al. (1995) and Knesting (1999) provide support for Wehlage et al.'s emphasis on membership and engagement as critical to success among at-risk students. In addition, Altenbaugh et al., through an exclusive focus on “dropbacks”, were able to elaborate the crucial role of caring in the lives of students and on the primarily economic survival motive for returning to school among urban, minority youth. Yet, their work does not elaborate on the process by which returning students persist to graduation. Knesting provides a more thorough examination of the components of persistence through her development of a grounded theory in which persistence is viewed as the result of three interacting factors: student goal orientation, willingness to play the game and meaningful relationships. Yet the processes by which such factors develop and interact in the lives of students remain unexamined in her work.
Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the process of disengagement from and reintegration to school as experienced by successful at-risk students. Through narrative inquiry methodology (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), the early educational and social experiences of participants, and their perspectives as to their school engagement and success, were examined. Participants were former students deemed “at-risk” by school personnel at some point in their educational careers, due to academic, behavioural and/or emotional concerns. The literature indicates that such students are at a greater risk for disengagement and dropping out. However, participants recruited for this investigation continued on to complete secondary school and are currently engaged in post-secondary study or vocational pursuits.

Student disengagement has been studied extensively. However, existing research has focused on those students who drop out to the exclusion of those who manage to successfully re-engage and graduate. Further, few studies have utilized a framework that affords one the opportunity to examine experience in context, allowing for a richer understanding of the processes of disengagement and reintegration from the perspective of the student. As such, the current investigation utilized a narrative design and is interested in participants’ perspectives on and interpretations of the processes of disengagement and reintegration to school.

Narrative research will not lead to generalization or prescription. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) assert that “the contribution of a narrative inquiry is more often intended
to be the creation of a new sense of meaning and significance with respect to the research
topic than it is to yield a set of knowledge claims” (p. 42). What is hoped for is greater
understanding. Benson (1999) explains that the gathering and sharing of participants’
experiences and stories “will provide the opportunity for increased reflection among the
educational community. And from that reflection, I’m hopeful there will be a thoughtful
response” (p. 87).

Narrative, according to Clandinin and Connelly (1990), is both phenomenon and
method, “narrative names the structured quality of experience to be studied, and it names
the patterns of inquiry for its study” (p. 2). Individuals use narrative schemes to
understand their world and their experiences, and to ascribe meaning to these experiences
(Bruner, 1986; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1988). Life “is filled with
narrative fragments, enacted in storied moments of time and space, and reflected upon
and understood in terms of narrative unities and discontinuities” (Clandinin & Connelly,
2000, p.17). Polkinghorne explains that narrative meaning is a cognitive process for
organizing experience and discusses the centrality of narrative for individual identity and
purpose, and to the cultural transmission of shared beliefs and values. He distinguishes
two general frameworks for narrative inquiry, paradigmatic analysis of narratives and
narrative analysis. Paradigmatic analysis of narratives involves the collecting and
analyzing stories according to paradigmatic processes (e.g. identify particulars as
instances of general categories and locate common themes). What is lost in this process
is the unique, the particular. In contrast, for narrative analysis “the researcher’s task is to
configure the data elements into a story that unites and gives meaning to the data . . . The
analytic task requires the researcher to develop or discover a plot that displays the linkage
among the data elements as parts of an unfolding temporal development culminating in the denouement” (p. 15). The result of this integration is an emplotted narrative, a coherent whole. Narrative analysis incorporates notions of human purpose and context, and attends to the temporal dimension of human experience, “the power of a storied outcome is derived from its presentation of a distinctive individual, in a unique situation, dealing with issues in a personal manner; this power is contrasted with research findings which present l’homme moyen, the abstracted, statistically average person” (Gigerenzer et al., 1989, in Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 18).

I distinguish narrative inquiry through its predominant concern with the meaning and significance of the personal, as opposed to the generalizable and the categorical. This was my primary motivation for choosing narrative inquiry as a means to study lived experience.

**Procedures**

Connelly and Clandinin (1987) explain that narrative inquiry “is concerned with the personal histories of participants embedded within the social history of schools and schooling” (p.130) and suggest that its central construct is the notion of narrative unity, defined as “a continuum within a person’s experience which renders life experiences meaningful through the unity they achieve for the person” (p. 130). Narrative inquiry seeks to construct narrative unity through an exploration of lived experience and the development of a biographical, structured plot, with a beginning, middle and end.

The following will describe the procedures followed in this inquiry, including selection of participants, creation of field texts (data gathering) and creation of research
texts (analysis). The procedures utilized are based primarily on the framework outlined by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Connelly and Clandinin (1990).

**Selection of participants.** Participants were five former “at-risk” students, aged 18 to 35, who graduated from secondary school and were engaged in post-secondary study or vocational pursuits. Each participant had experienced significant school difficulties (academic, behavioural and/or emotional) which led to school and/or district level interventions and disciplinary measures, such as suspension, counselling, educational support, alternative programs and withdrawal. These students were considered by school staff to be at a high risk for dropping out (or had dropped out previously) prior to re-engaging in and completing secondary school.

Participant selection was based on purposeful, criterion-based recruitment. Each individual might be described as “an instance of a class” (Merriam, 1988), namely an example of a formerly at-risk student who successfully re-engaged in school life, graduated from high school and attended college/university or began a successful career. Participants were initially identified by school administrators, district counsellors and school counsellors. These staff members were provided with a description (both oral and written) of the intended research, but were not provided with detailed criteria for selection or a definition of “at-risk” students. Instead, they were asked to think of students who, in their opinion, were “on their way out” of the system, but who managed to “turn things around” and graduate. It was hoped that this would allow a broader definition of “at-risk” to emerge from the field, instead of one imposed by the researcher.

Initial contact with participants was made by the above staff member. Once an expression of interest and permission were obtained I contacted participants by phone,
provided a brief description of the study, and offered to mail written material, including a
description of the inquiry and recruitment notice. Follow-up phone calls were then made
to set a date / place for our first interview. Participants were invited to choose the setting
for all interviews (provided the setting was conducive to taping, relatively private and
safe). Interviews were conducted in my home, my office, at the University and in a
coffee shop.

At this initial meeting participants were again provided with detailed written and
verbal descriptions of the research project. Participants were ensured that their
participation was voluntary, and that they had the right to withdraw at any time
throughout the research process. Participants were informed that ownership of their
stories remained with them, and as such, they had the right to withdraw these stories at
any time. Confidentiality was ensured, as the researcher was the only person with access
to the identity of participants. Further, the intended use of data was explained, including
the extent of involvement by other researchers / students / supervisors in the review of
transcripts and final report. Participants were provided with a consent form outlining the
above. In discussing the purpose of the study, all participants expressed a keen interest in
the subject, and looked forward to telling their story. All expressed a desire that this
research might “help others,” or in some way improve the education system.

Data collection and analysis. Data collection and analysis in narrative research are
not discrete activities, but occur simultaneously. It is impossible for a researcher to
observe or listen without thought. Thus analysis begins immediately and continues
throughout and beyond the data gathering process. The overall goal is to discover and
construct meaningful accounts as we move from field notes to field text, and eventually
to a final research text (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As such, it is essential that our data analysis techniques and creation of texts remain respectful to the voices of participants and that the stories, as told, remain in the forefront. The challenge is to construct a meaningful narrative account of experience from the variety of field texts developed. Polkinghorne (1995) suggests that the problem for the researcher as he / she begins to write “is to construct a display of the complex, interwoven character of human experience as it unfolds through time and as it stands out at any present moment through recollection and imagination” (p. 18). Clandinin and Connelly comment on the “back and forthing” characteristic of this stage, as one moves between field, field texts and research texts. Similarly, Merriam (1988) refers to this initial stage of analysis as “holding a conversation with the data” (p. 131).

Field texts were created primarily through in-depth, open-ended interviews with participants. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) caution that researcher questions influence how participants shape and express their responses. They suggest a continued focus on relational qualities of the interaction and process, and discourage information gathering. Similarly, Mishler (1986), criticizing positivist approaches to the research interview which attempt to reduce participant dialogue to minute codes and predetermined categories, notes that when not inhibited by extensive questioning or researcher limits, participants will most often frame responses as stories, and elaborate extensively on personal meaning. Participants did this naturally, supporting Polkinghorne’s (1988; 1995) notion of narrative as a cognitive process used by individuals to understand and make sense of their world.
The interview process was guided by an initial list of issues to explore, including memories of elementary and secondary school, significant or critical events and experiences, family (history, relationships and stories), school and peer relationships, general perspectives on reasons for disengagement and reintegration, and personal wisdom, goals and values. At all times the individual's story remained paramount and participants were encouraged to elaborate on and discuss whatever they felt to be important for their stories (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990).

Establishing rapport was a priority in order to facilitate a comfortable, conversational tone conducive to storytelling, and as such, I began each interview with a personal history, including my reasons for pursuing this research. Participants were invited to construct a timeline of their experiences as a starting point for our conversation. Some found this a useful exercise for framing their experience. Others rejected it as unnatural or too difficult, preferring to move directly to the telling of their stories. Again, participants were encouraged to do what was most comfortable for them. Several participants were natural storytellers and needed little encouragement to begin. Others required some assistance, and these participants were asked to think back to their earliest memory of school. Their description of these memories and our conversations as to their meanings served as the starting point for their stories.

Throughout the interviews, I made use of generic counselling skills, such as paraphrasing, open questioning and empathic responding, to facilitate participant exploration of meaning and promote dialogue. Some participants required a more active stance on my part in order to engage. For example, Dierdre was a naturally quiet individual who had not, prior to our interviews, spent much time reflecting on her
experiences. As such, she required a great deal more support throughout the interview process. Jade, in contrast, was far more outgoing and a counselling veteran, well used to reflecting and ascribing meaning to her experiences. She required little prompting from me.

Subsequent interviews were scheduled until the participant and I felt we “had the story.” The total number of story interviews (including transcript review and discussion) varied by participant, ranging from two (John) to five (Ray). Interview length was mutually decided and varied by participant, ranging from one to three hours per session. Ray’s final interview took place over the phone due to his personal commitments.

Documents and artifacts provided by participants, such as school records, awards and journals, were utilized to contextualize the narrative account. The use of artifacts in the context of narrative inquiry “constitutes something that might be called an archaeology of memory and meaning” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 114). Such artifacts “trigger memories of important times, people, and events . . . around which we tell and retell stories” (p. 114). All participants were invited to bring such materials to the interviews, if they wished, the criterion being whatever they felt was important to their story. Only two participants chose to do so. Jade provided both school report cards and personal journals. The latter contained daily accounts, poetry and songs. Dierdre provided a folder of school report cards, administrative letters, and awards.

Upon completion of each interview, a brief contact summary was prepared, noting main ideas, emerging themes, and questions. These summaries served as a starting point for discussion in subsequent interviews. Most participants preferred to review these informally in person at subsequent interviews. Ray, however, was provided, at his
request, with a full transcript of the first two interviews and questions for reflection several months prior to his third interview. Ray invested a significant amount of time in working with his transcript, follow-up questions, and later with his reflective letter. He made extensive notes between sessions and personally edited his final story.

The temptation to move into a therapeutic role with participants was present at times, particularly with Dierdre and Ray. For these participants, the interview process led to self-discovery, which was at times quite painful. On these occasions I stopped the tape recorder to provide an opportunity to debrief. In Dierdre’s case the interview was ended for the day. It is my belief that despite my own attempts to prevent the interviews from resembling therapy, they were, for some participants, therapeutic. I doubt that such a process could be otherwise, given the emphasis placed on personal meaning.

After completion of the final interview, tapes were transformed into field texts through transcription and content immersion began. Tapes were played and transcripts read repeatedly, in order to familiarize myself with the emerging stories. Throughout this process, interpretive notes and questions were added to transcripts. A reflective letter, summarizing the participant’s story and initial, tentative themes was then prepared for each participant. This was given to them for their review and clarification, along with the full interview transcript. Most participants declined the full transcript due to its length. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) discuss the use of analytic interim texts, which attempt to ascertain and represent the meaning, social significance and purpose of the narratives. These texts are reflective and interpretive. The letters, addressed to participants, included a chronological narrative, interpretive comments and clarifying questions, and participants were asked to consider these prior to our final interview.
Follow-up discussions were then arranged (either in person or on the telephone) to review the letters and further clarify meaning. Two participants (Jade and Deirdre) agreed to meet in person for a final review session. Due to personal commitments, Ray, John and Alisha provided their final comments in a telephone discussion and/or via mail. Some participants provided written responses to the reflective letters and researcher questions, while others preferred to simply chat informally. These follow-up interviews formed additional field texts. The primary question guiding these participant review sessions was, “Does this story accurately represent the process of your disengagement and reintegration as you experienced it”? From this review, a final research text was prepared.

Final research texts may take many forms, incorporating description, narrative and argument. For this inquiry I chose to construct two “texts” or levels of analysis. The first was an interpretive, chronological account of the process of disengagement and reintegration for each participant, using their own words as much as possible to illustrate key points. This process was described in the description of data collection above. The second was a temporal/thematic account of the process of disengagement and reintegration to school. My initial attempts at thematic analysis led me to generate lists of categories and sub-categories, with instances or examples of each. However, although it was possible to find many common categories of experience across cases, it was impossible by simply listing categories to convey a sense of the process over time. Yet, attempting a purely temporal analysis proved equally frustrating, as disengagement and reintegration was not a linear, developmental process for all students. Nor were these processes mutually exclusive. Disengagement and reintegration for the participants in
this study resembled a roller coaster ride. My solution was to combine a temporal and thematic analysis resulting in three movements (Loncaric, 1998) incorporating the processes of disengagement and reintegration. Within these movements numerous common themes were explored.

Upon completion of each individual story, a summary of the process of disengagement and reintegration was prepared. Each summary consisted of key events and experiences over time as well as themes and tentative meanings. Summaries were then individually reviewed and common groups of experiences, themes and meanings were identified. Once complete, these summaries were then compared for common themes and processes. The overall focus was not on categories but process over time and from this focus three movements were discernable. An initial description of these movements was prepared and then compared to individual narratives. The goal was to ensure a fit between individual narratives and the more generalized description of the process of disengagement and reintegration.

Credibility

Given the assumptions of narrative inquiry, many researchers question the appropriateness of traditional notions of validity and reliability for judging the credibility of this research (Lincoln, 1990; Mishler, 1990). This raises the concern with acceptable criteria of quality, indeed, “Will any old story suffice?” (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995). The answer is no, but one must be willing to challenge traditional notions and consider alternate means of assessing narrative inquiry. The dialogue concerning appropriate criteria is ongoing. Numerous terms have been suggested, including dependability and verisimilitude (Polkinghorne, 1988), trustworthiness (Lincoln, 1990; Mishler, 1990),
credibility and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lincoln, 1990), fidelity (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995), authenticity (Lincoln, 1990) and adequacy and plausibility (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

Narrative explanation is derived from the whole, on change from beginning to end, and thus in the well-done narrative, the reader achieves a sense of this whole (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988). Connelly and Clandinin warn narrative inquirers to avoid “the illusion of causality” (p. 7) in narrative accounts. Stories may inform our understanding, providing a form of “aha” in which we can comprehend the experience more fully, but they cannot provide a basis for asserting cause and effect. Good narratives are invitational, inviting others to comfortably join in the dialogue. This invitational quality extends to a notion of transferability and adequacy, in which readers may sense the applicability of the work to their lives and practice. This in turn relates to the notion of plausibility. Does the account “ring true”? (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 8). One is not only invited in and encouraged to find something of worth (personal, practical and empathic understanding), but is prompted to action. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest that narrative inquirers must continue to develop more appropriate criteria. However, most important is “wakefulness” on the part of the inquirer, through ongoing reflection, collaboration and thoughtfulness at all stages of the inquiry process.

How might an inquirer approximate wakefulness? An excellent start is to attend to the process of inquiry and writing as outlined above, with its concern for tentativeness, ongoing collaboration, attention to meaning and significance, and balance among the contextual, temporal, social and personal. A peer review process, involving an on-going
dialogue with response communities and review of the emerging stories, narrative threads and final narrative(s) adds to this process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In the end, however, it will be the power, persuasiveness and fidelity of a mutually constructed story that will attest to inquirer wakefulness.

Throughout the present inquiry, credibility was approximated using the following strategies: member checking, peer review and debriefing, and rich, thick description. Member checking was utilized throughout all stages of the inquiry. Initial transcripts, field texts, and research texts were given to participants for review and clarification. Participants were encouraged to clarify meaning, comment upon emerging narratives, and reject any material they felt to be unrepresentative or unnecessary to their stories. Peer review and debriefing involved an on-going dialogue with my supervisor, committee, cohort members, and an external reviewer who together served as my response community. Together we reviewed emerging stories and themes, and discussed issues such as potential bias, accurate reflection of participant accounts, the need to avoid generalization, and logic linking the transcripts and tapes to the final stories and interpretive accounts. Finally, rich, thick description was attempted for each narrative, including a detailed, chronological history, numerous vignettes, and interpretive summaries.

**Personal Narrative.** Given the highly personal, collaborative nature of narrative inquiry, the experiences and biases of the researcher influence the collection, analysis and presentation of data. It is impossible for the researcher to exclude such influence, and as such it is important to provide a personal history to assist the reader in determining
researcher bias and its potential impact upon the creation of field texts and the construction of final narratives.

My interest in student disengagement and reintegration arose from my experiences working with students, families, and school staff, first as a school counsellor (elementary and secondary) and later, a district resource counsellor. The former position involved working directly with teachers, students and families to solve individual students' academic and personal difficulties. Although most, if not all, educators are concerned with student disengagement, counsellors are often charged with the daunting task of "motivating" at-risk students to achieve or stay in school. Such requests are often made by school staff and reflect the deficit model with which we often inadvertently view our students. In short, the deficit model assumes that there is something wrong that must be fixed, and furthermore, that despite the complex personal experiences that encompass a life and contribute to disengagement these students can be persuaded to "change" in the course of a session with their school counsellor. I recognized the impossibility of such a task. Indeed, change is a process, and as a counsellor my task was, and is, to support this process. Yet disengaged students often posed a seemingly insurmountable challenge to my skills and available resources.

Early in my graduate program, I began to explore some of the literature in the field of disengagement. It became increasingly clear that much of it did not describe my students, nor did it reflect the many successes and failures, joys and frustrations that characterized their school and personal experiences. These students did not simply "disengage" or choose to drop out based on a momentary decision. Further, the students I worked with defied definition or labelling. They were not a homogenous group. They
came from a variety of backgrounds and were influenced by myriad experiences. I was also personally frustrated by the sense of predetermination in much of this “deficit” research. Although at times it seemed as though the success stories were few and far between, I was touched by those students who “made it”, seemingly against the odds.

As I was beginning to articulate my research question, I attended my school’s graduation ceremonies. There among the graduates was one such success story, Mark. Mark had been introduced to me as a grade ten student, withdrawn, exceedingly frustrated with academic work and viewed warily by staff as a potentially serious behaviour problem. Over two years, we worked and struggled together. Often this “work” simply involved providing Mark with a place to vent his frustrations and reflect on his future course of action. On other occasions I found myself advocating for him with school staff who were growing increasingly frustrated with his poor attendance, lack of motivation and seemingly threatening behaviour (unfortunately Mark’s sullen exterior often frightened staff). On many occasions Mark was ready to call it a day, but somehow he kept on going. I believed in him and I knew he had it in him to graduate. Furthermore, he wanted more than anything to succeed, despite his own misgivings about realizing success. To see him “walk the stage” was one of those truly satisfying moments in the life of an educator. Not because I felt responsible. Indeed, Mark had done the real work. But simply because it confirmed my belief in the resilience of the human spirit. I found myself again wondering about what really makes the difference for such students.

In the second year of my graduate program I took a position as District Resource Counsellor with my school district. This position was somewhat removed from direct counselling work with students, and involved working with school staff (particularly
administrators and counsellors) to solve school related behavioural issues. It also involved facilitating district suspension meetings for students with a history of school problems. In such a capacity, I came face to face with students (and parents) who had already experienced countless in-school interventions and disciplinary actions, and who were in many cases highly disengaged. I found myself growing increasingly frustrated with the futility of my attempts to “impose” a solution for these students within the confines of one or two meetings, and angered by a system which seemed to offer few meaningful alternatives for them. My earlier curiosity regarding the source or process of change for disengaged students was becoming more of an educational and professional imperative. The process I was engaged in, namely district suspensions, did not seem to work. But what did? As I thought again of Mark, I believed that the relationship we developed did make a difference, although this was perhaps only part of the picture. I also knew that change was gradual and often elusive. Reintegration to school, I believed, was, like disengagement, a process that occurred over time, subject to numerous influences.

Throughout this time, I was immersed in the disengagement literature, and found myself drawn to the work of process theorists. Authors such as Kelly (1993), Loncaric (1998) and Wehlage et al. (1989) seemed to capture more fully the experiences of the students with whom I worked. Yet I could not find in the literature a similar treatment of “reintegration”. Where were the success stories? The few studies I did find reinforced my intuitive belief in the vital role of caring relationships, but did not explore what I believed was a process of reintegration as lived by at-risk students. From my frustration with this omission, my final research question was born.
Summary

The purpose of my inquiry was to examine, through narrative methodology, the process of change, from disengagement to reintegration, as experienced by successful “at-risk” students. Narrative inquiry attempts to understand by looking back on events “to see pattern in their unfolding...explanation does not focus on how one event is predicted or deduced from another, but on how change from ‘beginning’ to ‘end’ takes place” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 117). Hatch and Wisniewski (1995) suggest that narrative can be distinguished from other forms of qualitative research through a focus on the individual, the personal nature of the research process, a practical orientation, and an emphasis on subjectivity.

Narrative attends to the meanings individuals ascribe to their experiences, over time and within various contexts. It gives voice to what makes us human: cognition, emotion, curiosity, imagination, purpose and action. Through a social, collaborative, and respectful inquiry process, narrative allows those rendered silent the opportunity to be heard. In so doing, it empowers them. Narrative is oriented to our need for research methods and products that respect and further our practice as educators. While it does not yield generalizable results, narrative encourages reflection and response. Its utility lies in the ability to render the experiences “of real people, in real situations, struggling with real problems” (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995, p. 127) meaningful. The stories we yield from such a process may then inform our practice as we encounter new experiences. Finally, narrative methods are subjective, acknowledging the intimate role of the researcher in the inquiry process and the existence of multiple constructions of reality.
Shabatay (1991) eloquently summarizes the role of story for teaching, helping and inquiry,

How do those of us in the helping professions discover the strangers among us? How can we develop sensitive, caring relationships with those who feel set apart? Stories allow us to break through barriers and to share in another’s experience; they warm us. Like a rap on the window, they call us to attention. Through literature and people’s stories we discover a variety of situations that make people feel less like strangers. We discover what strangers have to teach us. . . . What shines through . . . reveals . . . an “image of the human” . . . that wholeness of the human that is manifested in the story. (p. 137)

Story, if only for a moment, connects us to one another; as we linger together in our storied meeting place we are fully human, and as we part we are forever changed. What a marvelous goal for educational research.
Chapter 4

Jade

...I always wanted something for myself. I was smart enough to know...where would I go if I didn’t graduate...then there were certain teachers that kept me in school; people that stood out and wanted me there, and I had a reason to be there, because they cared and pushed me to it. There were certain people that stood out and sometimes I wanted to give up but I knew deep down inside that I didn’t want to give up. I always wanted to graduate, always...

In Jade I found the ideal interviewee. Self possessed, articulate and with a remarkable ability to reflect upon both her past and present, Jade required little prompting to share her story. As a result, we completed her interview and transcript review in only three sessions. Throughout these conversations, it was evident that, for Jade, the personal (family, social) took precedence over the educational. The difficulties and bitter disappointments at home, and her attempts to cope through social means (friends, drugs, etc.), are what resonated most as I reviewed our interviews. School was, for the most part, a backdrop in her life story. Initially a place of refuge, later little more than an annoyance, and only much later as a place to prove herself.

The above quote from our first conversation speaks to Jade’s inner strength and resilience. It also speaks to the value she placed on human relationships and the importance of these to her success, both educationally and personally. As I mused on the nature of these relationships for Jade, it was evident that each was characterized by a combination of caring, acceptance, high expectations and a refusal to give up. Jade identified one of these relationships as key to her success, that with her secondary school
counsellor. Within the safety and consistency of this relationship over the course of two years, Jade explored both her problems and her strengths. She was quick to point out that this exploration was not an easy process, indeed she described her current ability to cope with life’s ups and downs as the result of “two years of work” with her counsellor. Vital to her success was Jade’s willingness to be an active participant in both the relationship and the process of change.

The Early Years

Jade’s pre-school years were characterized by change and instability. She experienced three provincial moves prior to age five. With her parents’ divorce and mother’s remarriage, Jade’s early years were marked by an uncertainty which was beyond her ability to understand at such an early age. As both Jade and her older sister struggled to come to terms with their new step-siblings, from whom they experienced little warmth, Jade witnessed the beginning of her mother and step-father’s volatile relationship, and felt a shift in her relationship with her step-father.

My parents separated when I was two. I don’t personally really remember a lot of it. I used to get flashbacks of me crying on the couch with my mom and stuff like that, I was too young to remember it. But I do remember when I moved to... a year later with my mom and my sister in with my step dad. He had two kids and they moved in with us and they, the daughter didn’t really like me... I was really young, so I didn’t really know who he was. I didn’t know a difference between my real dad and him, it was really hard for me to understand... and then we moved to Ontario, and then my stepdad and my mom got married. After they got married my step dad completely changed... after they married, not even a year after that, they just fought, and they’ve been doing it ever since. He just completely changed, he turned into a complete control freak, he had to have all of the control over my sister and me.

Adjustment was made more difficult as Jade became less and less able to rely on her mother for support and guidance. She and her sister took on increasingly adult roles as her mother continued to struggle with an abusive relationship and her alcoholism. Home
became shameful and embarrassing and although Jade did her best to hold it all together, she never knew quite what to expect when she walked through the door.

My mom’s been an alcoholic for probably most of my life, she was always in bed for like three days, she was always sick...I didn’t know she was an alcoholic for a long time, until I started getting older, but after I realized it, I guess there is this one time that AA came to our house, and my sister and I were wondering who these strange people were in our house, and they were trying to help my mom. We used to see my parents drink a lot, and I do remember that after I started realizing that my mom has been an alcoholic for many years, ...they used to drink a lot and they used to fight a lot when I was young...and I guess maybe just remembering her stagger up the stairs, and slur her words, just the way she acted it wasn’t normal.

My mom was very weak, she was very weak after she married my stepfather, he took all of her confidence, and just beat her down, so she had no self-esteem. He didn’t want her to have any friends. My sister and I were friends with lots of neighbors, we all played together, it was a really tight little cul-de-sac...but they were always fighting, and I always remember coming home and my mom would be sitting on the steps balling and all the women of the houses would be there, and I’d walk in and my step dad had completely trashed the kitchen, and I’d be trying to clean up and then go out and help my mom and it was just always one thing after another. I never wanted to go home, like even when I was little, I remember that ...and I was embarrassed to have my friends over, and my sister was embarrassed to have her friends over...all the kids would always hear my parents fighting, screaming and it was really embarrassing for us.

Her mother’s weakness contrasted starkly with Jade’s growing strength and she looked upon her mother’s abdication of strength with disdain.

Much of Jade’s early story is characterized by her continued attempts to make sense of the chaos: her mother’s alcoholism and her step-father’s abuse, and also her biological father’s place in her life,

I would only see my real father twice a year. I’d see him during Christmas for 2 weeks then summer holidays for 2 weeks. He used to always tell me that there was one Christmas that I wouldn’t stop crying. I think it was cause I was really confused, I would see him for a month out of the whole year and he would phone to see what I wanted for my birthday or what I wanted for Christmas, but he was really...he was on his own...I would get really confused, get really sad. I’d miss my mom.

The shining light of Jade’s early years was her sister, who provided the nurturing absent from her relationship with her mother.
She was my mom, she took care of me because my mom wasn’t there to...she made my lunch, she did all of that kind of stuff, she took me to school with her. You know it was funny, I was lucky she wasn’t jealous when I was born, she always loved me right from the start, which was really cool. She was my mom.

Elementary school was fondly remembered as a community, where Jade excelled in academics, sports and social life. I noticed a reflective, wistful, happy tone as she reminisced on these times.

I actually loved it, I loved it in Ontario. I liked school, I did really, really well in school in elementary, and I had straight A’s all the time. I did really well, I was really involved in sports, I loved track, and I loved running. That was my favorite cause my sister liked track, so I followed in her footsteps...school was good, it was really close and you knew everybody...I had tons of friends, I had three girlfriends that were my best friends, and I had a lot of close guy friends.

School and extracurricular sports were a welcome escape from the reality of home life.

I think that’s maybe why my sister and I got involved with a lot of sports, because it took up a lot of our time after school...probably we got into stuff like that because it kept us occupied...we used to train all the time...and we were always involved in everything...that was probably why...it got a lot of our aggravations out.

Jade had difficulty recalling specific teachers during these years, with the exception of Mr. X, her track coach, who “totally supported” both Jade and her sister. When asked what was special about this teacher, she commented that he “had a lot of belief in my sister and I”, and when she moved to B.C. they kept in touch by letter.

The move to B.C. was a painful transition, and Jade’s later elementary years were marred by the beginnings of peer conflict. However, she drew upon her considerable personal coping resources to survive.

It was really hard for me to leave Ontario, because it was the only home I ever had. I was always moving when I was younger...and I was there for 6 years. I was 9 or 10. I didn’t want to move, I hated my parents for making me move, I was really stubborn for the first little while, I didn’t want to make friends...It was a nice school, I made some good friends there, but in grade 5 or 6 I started having problems with older girls, who didn’t like me. They used to say they were going to beat me up when I was walking home. Sometimes they’d make me really nervous, but it was never to the
point where I wouldn't go to school...and a lot of the times, I think I told them off myself. I knew I was scared when I was walking and they were behind me but when I was at school I was like, screw off and leave me alone. They definitely intimidated me but I wasn't scared because of my sister, I'd just tell my sister. They were going to that high school next year, so they never ever did anything. That was the only thing that I didn't like about school. G was so much bigger than the city I was living in which was so small, and I never really had problems like that before.

Jade welcomed her next move to a smaller town in Grade 6, viewing it as an opportunity to start again. Unfortunately her home life became even more unstable when her parents lost their savings in a failed business venture and her sister left home, a devastating loss. The growing recognition of the failures of her family made it impossible for Jade to remain silent, and she began to challenge her step-father's abuse.

Things within my family started getting really bad, they just kept on getting worse and worse and worse. My sister was getting older and sneaking out of the house and she was always getting in trouble, and I was always covering for her and I missed her a lot because she wasn't around anymore. She always tells me she has a lot of regrets leaving me but I knew she had to do it. I knew my family life wasn't right, but once I started getting older I really started realizing a lot of things. I started sticking up for my family. My sister didn't stick up for herself, my mom didn't stick up for herself, and my mom didn't stick up for us, so I did. I stuck up for my family, for my mom and my sister, I was the one that said the stuff . . . Because I knew it was never going to stop...cause I knew he was going to keep doing it, he still is to this day. He's not going to change, he'll never ever change, and I guess I finally got to the age where I was brave enough and I understood a lot more I could comprehend and put two together. I could actually confront him and stick up for myself and have a reason for it. So I guess that's why, cause nobody else was doing it. My mom was always so pissed, or... her self-esteem was always so down, that, "Oh well, he can have the control" and I'd be like “No mom, he can’t do this”, and we would talk to her all the time about him, and she'd always be like “He'll change, he'll change” or “I'm going to leave him”, and she never ever would. There were always broken promises, always, and like I mean now I understand, cause she couldn't even take care of herself, like how was she supposed to take care of two kids? Like my step-dad...he did physically abuse us, but he didn't leave bruises or hit us in the face...like he used to grab us and throw us against walls and stuff like that, and he always threatened...he mentally abused us for years and put us down for years, like we would walk in the door and he would start right at us about something, oh you didn't do this or this, he'd always find something to get mad at us for. It took me a long time to actually stand up to him. Even when I did, I wouldn't say everything I wanted to. I'd keep my mouth shut to a certain extent because I was scared of what he was going to do to me. But, I couldn't stand it because it was so hard to watch what
he did to my family, it was so hard it drove me crazy... when he would yell at my sister, he’d start yelling at my mom, I’d just butt in and when I started talking back to him, it threw him, he was shocked, and then it was “you little brat, you this you that, don’t you ever speak to me like that”, and I’m like “Whatever, you have a problem with me, what am I doing?”

Jade recalled her mother as interested in her school life during her elementary years, as demonstrated by her attendance at parent-teacher conferences, her willingness to help with homework, and shared conversations about teachers and school life. This interest (or at least participation) waned as she entered secondary school, along with Jade’s participation in both academic and extra-curricular activities. In secondary school, parental interest was shown only through anger. As family time was by then non-existent, there was little opportunity to discuss school-related issues or concerns.

The Middle Years: Secondary School

The transition to secondary school marked a turning point in Jade’s academic and social life, as she became increasingly peer oriented, began to experiment with alcohol and drugs, and abandoned sports. She reflected upon how significant a transition this is for many adolescents:

Elementary school...I was into it and all my friends were into it. Then you get to high school and its completely different, you’re going through so many changes mentally and physically, trying to fit in, that kind of stuff on top of going to school. You’re just going through so many different changes and hormones and boys and sex and all that type of stuff. That’s what happens when you get into high school, its big changes for a lot of people...I know a lot of kids go through big changes in grade 8 and 9 depending upon what kind of crowd they get into...

Jade recalled the transition to secondary school as “overwhelming” and “mind boggling”, and recalled that on her first day “it took forever to decide what to wear”. She described the excitement in meeting so many new people and the exhilaration of her new found freedom, “I didn’t have a teacher watching me”. Jade began to skip classes with ease,
perhaps because of the anonymity afforded her by a large school and many classes, and perhaps also because of the control it allowed her. She wondered out loud how she “got away with it”. Her mother’s increasingly ineffectual parenting and inability to set boundaries provided the additional freedom necessary for her increasing experimentation with drugs, alcohol and rebellion. Relationships were forged with others who experienced similar familial struggles, and these provided a supportive experience and filled the void left by her sister’s departure from home.

The summer of grade 7 and grade 8, that’s when I tried pot. I started drinking and smoking and doing all that kind of stuff. I met one of my best friends, that is still one of my best friends today, and she had a really bad family life too, so her and I just kind of went on a rampage with each other… her mom was never home, her mom was always out partying, so we’d have to take care of her younger brother, and we’d have the house to ourselves, so that’s when we started experimenting and doing all of that stuff, and it was weird cause my mom never, she would get mad at me, but… I got away with a lot more stuff than my sister did ever, ever get away with… I went into high school and I made friends really quick… I started skipping school a lot, and I started smoking pot, I was a pothead in grades 8, 9 and 10… I did acid in the summer after grade 7, we used to hang out at the beach. I was never home, I never wanted to be there, and if I was I was being yelled at… When I was in grade 8 I started hanging out with guys that were 19, they were out of school, they could buy beer. And my best friend C, once we got into high school, we were best friends for a year, then she went away, she started messing up and never going to school… And I started hanging out with another friend, and we just partied every week-end, that was all we did… and then the end of grade 8 I moved out to Burnaby with my girlfriend C., I met up with her again and I moved out there, with her mom and her uncle… she never really had a good family life but I could accept it more than mine, and her mom always loved me. She wasn’t always there but I felt like she was more of a mom than mine I guess.

The next few years witnessed Jade moving in and out of her family home, drawn back by promises that things would be different, and an ever present sense of obligation to her mother, but driven away by more of the same.

I stayed home for a while. I would move away for a couple of months, it was never a very long period of time… she would always find her way of convincing me to come home. And then it would always be, “oh you can’t leave your mom”, there was always a huge guilt trip on me. I would always get, “What about your mom?” What about her? What about me?
Jade’s mother continued to struggle with parenting, becoming increasingly ineffectual, accepting, and even at times supporting, Jade’s own growing dependence on alcohol and drugs.

I didn’t have a curfew, my mom was always so drunk she didn’t care. In grade 11 maybe... it was more like she didn’t have a problem with me drinking because she had a drinking problem. Like she’d buy me beer, stuff like that. I think that’s how she could deal with it...because she deep down knew that she had a drinking problem, she didn’t find it so hard to deal with it with me, if she was okay with me drinking. She was the cool mom that knew I went out and partied. I mean she put up with a lot of shit from me, I didn’t come home until 2 or 4 in the morning when I was really young, but it was always like she wasn’t always really that there, she wouldn’t even realize it.

Jade suggested that if her mother had only set rules, “not let me go out so much...stay out all night”, things might have been different. However, Jade reflected that by grade eight she was beyond listening.

I had so much anger towards them, I didn’t care...when she tried to control me, I wouldn’t let her...maybe if she and I had had a good relationship, if I had respected her...

Without a strong relationship as a foundation, it was impossible for her mother to exert lasting influence.

School, for Jade, was peripheral; she attended enough to pass, but was increasingly disengaged from day-to-day school life, “A lot of my high school years were kind of blotchy, I remember bits and pieces”. She started skipping out early on in secondary school, perhaps encouraged by the school’s lack of effectual response to her behaviour; it was just easy to get away with it.

The school back then was a lot more slack...I skipped school quite a bit, but I guess they had so many more kids that skipped more than I did...I mean you’d always get the phone call home. Like every time you missed a class you’d get a call home, a recording, so I’d always have to catch that, or I’d come up with some excuse. I mean that definitely caused problems, my attendance was terrible. I don’t know how I got through that, I just bullshitted. My teachers, they all knew I had problems, like I used
problems all the time, like I’m going to my counsellor, or “I’m sorry I’ve been having problems”. I was just skipping because I didn’t care, umm, probably, in some way I was out looking for attention.

Jade ceased doing homework, which along with the skipping, led to a marked decline in grades. However, she was able to pass most courses, with the exception of science in grade 9, a course that became intolerable due to friction between Jade and her teacher. Generally, she was able to keep up despite the chaos of her life outside school, and she made some wise choices initially, forcing herself to attend the classes that she struggled in.

In grade 9 Jade enrolled in a First Nations program (open to all students), consisting of a support block in which to complete academic work and pursue cultural projects. She chose this class because “it was an easy course,” but found it to be highly rewarding. Jade recalled the teacher fondly, as a friend who seemed to understand what she was experiencing out of school, commenting that he was “incredible with kids.”

Relationships with teachers were important to Jade’s success, and she was more likely to attend classes when she felt personally cared for.

Teachers that I found really helpful were ones that actually cared about you, not just academically, you know, they would, if they see something was upsetting you they would talk to you about it, or ask if you wanted help...they had concern for you.

Jade struggled to define this quality:

I don’t know, some of them, they were just softer, you know, all around...they weren’t hard, you could sit there and talk to them if you needed them. That’s the type of teacher that I liked. I didn’t like the ones that screamed and yelled. I didn’t like that. Probably because of my family life...if I was having problems, they’d sit there and they’d help me, they wouldn’t just ignore it.
Critical Incident and Hitting Bottom

Despite her involvement in the First Nation's program, and obvious abilities, Jade began to spiral downward, fuelled by a growing drug addiction and personal crises. During her grade 10 year she was raped by an acquaintance, and later discovered she was pregnant. This pregnancy ended in miscarriage. Soon after she became involved with her current boyfriend, and her drug use escalated to addiction.

I was battling with a lot of things. In that time I had started doing coke...Bruno, my fiancée, him and I met when I was 16...we started doing drugs...first every weekend, then it went to every week, all the time...I never went to school, I would come to school and I'd still be awake from the night before and I'd go to one class and I could hardly make it through...I'd be just messed up...A while before that I was raped and I found out I was pregnant by the guy. I thought he was one of my friends. And all these things just started coming. And my family life was just getting too much. Being raped, being pregnant, not being able to go to my mom...dealing with all this was just so much, and then I started hanging out with Bruno and all his friends...I just started drinking all the time...

Drugs and alcohol provided an escape from the painful realities of life.

I was always partying on the week-ends, which normal kids do in high school, but I was just doing it to get away, I just found my way out that way...I didn't want to deal with it...I went through a big depression after that...

Jade's relationship with Bruno and his friends, who were out of school, provided a social safety net that was missing at school as peer difficulties escalated. "All my friends turned on me. High school was a living hell. They taunted me all the time...there was no getting away from it."

The Road to Graduation

For Jade the rape and pregnancy served as the critical incident that led to her seeking support from her school counsellor, someone recommended by a trusted friend. This began an important chapter in her life, and she struggled over the next two years to overcome her drug use and personal difficulties in order to make it to graduation. The
process was not a smooth one, as she continued to struggle with drugs and the day-to-day expectations of school life.

Counselling became an important part of this process.

I worked a lot with my counsellor through grade 11 and grade 12, she was like my guardian angel. Like if something happened, like I would come to school crying and she would just stop whatever she was doing, and I would come to see her and she would just settle me down. And she always did lots of funky spiritual things with me, like neat ways of trying to heal me. That’s what made me really interested and made me want to go to her.

Jade saw her counsellor for regular appointments, but also dropped in whenever things went awry. She spoke at length of this relationship and its meaning:

I was going through so much at that time anyway, she tried to just help me out with friendships and what they meant, and how to deal with my pain and hurt and my anger towards the other people, and she just kind of guided me through it. She never judged me, and that was a big thing for me. She never ever judged me for what I came there for. She’d never say, Jade, you messed up, she’d just sit there and we’d just talk about it and it was really good. With all those girls she’d just help me through it. A lot of the girls were really immature, and she felt that way about what they were doing to me, and she’d tell me her opinion, she’d give me her opinion and say don’t worry about them, don’t let them get to you, like this is your life and just stay away from them and do your thing. She didn’t tell me what to do she told me what she would do, and it would make me look at it that way too. It wasn’t somebody telling me well you should do this or that, it was just guiding me. She was just giving me choices like stepping stones, if I wanted to take them basically. That’s why I really liked her. She never ever judged me as a person and what I’ve gone through. I mean sometimes I would walk in there when I was in grade 12 and, when I was working for her, and still going through so much, and she’d just look at me and just hug me and be like, “It just never ends with you”! (laughing). I’d just look at her and just say “WHAT!, do I have a sign on my forehead saying just keep on coming at me or what?” It just never ended. There was always something going on. And we’d laugh about it too cause it was, it wasn’t funny but it was, one thing after another, it would stop and be like peace for a couple of days, and then I’d be back in there freaking out about something. It was good though, we had a really good relationship. She kept me in school.

The counsellor’s office became a sanctuary, where she could be herself, and sometimes, just laugh at herself. The nonjudgmental nature of the relationship was vital to its success.
Largely of her own volition, Jade joined a humanities coop program, hoping that it would help her continue the journey to "get back on track". This program, and her relationship with its coordinator, were important to her reintegration to the day-to-day realities of school life.

I took a humanities coop in grade 11, and I took it to try to straighten myself out. I was doing really badly in school, and I knew I had to change...the teacher that coordinated it, I got really close to. Her and I got really close and she helped me out a lot through grade 11 and 12. My attendance was a big concern going into it. I didn't do too badly. It definitely started getting me into a routine of going to school...It was weird, nobody told me to do it, it was just mentally at that time I was trying to straighten myself out.

Jade's relationship with the coordinator of this program was significant. This teacher's optimism and belief in Jade's abilities supported her as she continued to struggle with attendance.

I just felt some kind of energy between her and I. She was helping me out through my coop and stuff and she knew that I had family problems. She was always trying to help me. She didn't get mad at me if I screwed up. She never did that. But she never gave up on me. She would always just say, "I know you can do this". I would go and see her if I couldn't see Ms. H. At first I would go in to talk about my attendance. In your coop you get really close with the teachers, and I got really close with her. She really helped me out cause she knew that I wanted help, I think she could tell cause I was telling her, like I want to do better, she never said that I couldn't do it, she was really optimistic with me.

The coop also provided an opportunity to explore other interests, and through her work experience Jade was able to connect with her spiritual side.

I was always into kind of unique things. Like I studied Wica for a while. I always found interests in stuff like that, like I'm a really natural kind of person.

She also found a mentor in her placement supervisor.

He was really a good teacher for me, like more spiritual stuff, like he was definitely a teacher that way...He's like 60 years old and he's been through so many neat experiences. He used to work with kids and he helped me out quite a bit...and then I just did it on my own.
Finally, the organization of the coop was important. Academic work was condensed into a shorter time frame, therefore missing a class was far more serious. With only one teacher, whom Jade liked and respected, she was no longer anonymous and commented that she “didn’t want to disappoint her”.

Throughout this time Jade continued to struggle with drugs, attendance and her volatile relationship with Bruno. She experienced both a growing sense of self worth and turmoil over conflicting desires. Finally, in the summer prior to grade 12, both Jade and Bruno were able to stop using drugs. By this time he had moved out of town to live with his mother, which perhaps made it easier for Jade to focus on the changes she was trying to make in her life. Later, his return and their cohabitation in the latter part of grade 12 provided Jade with additional support, as he encouraged her to keep going.

I didn’t like it anymore, what I was doing with myself. It was like a big battle. After grade 11 I was still partying quite a bit, like in the summer, and my friends were so much older, so it was a battle for me. Like do I stay out and party, or do I go home and get some sleep and go to school. But then it kind of worked out good, because Bruno moved that summer, so when I went into grade 12, all I did was work after school and then I’d come home. I went to see Bruno every week-end...When he moved back he really wanted me to change. He really wanted to help me out.

Early in her grade 12 year Jade moved into her biological father’s home, however the transition from the freedom and lack of boundaries characteristic of her mother’s home, to the rules of her father’s, proved too difficult for her. It was too late for boundaries

I moved in with my dad, and things just didn’t work out. My life was so, I had so much freedom. He thought it was going to be a perfect little family, and it wasn’t... I had my freedom, all my life basically, I hadn’t had a lot of rules or anything. .. Finally we decided that it wasn’t going to work. I was really mature about it. I said I wanted to have a relationship with him, but if I can’t do it we are both going to have to accept that.
As she progressed through grade 12, Jade began to experience academic success and increased agency. The difficulties of her personal life were by now more manageable and her repertoire of coping skills continued to increase,

Cheryl just basically taught me how to deal with my problems and ground myself. She did so much work with me that I can deal with them on my own now...I’m going to be learning that for a long time...it’s hard but you just have to focus on it when the problems are arising...

For the first time she felt surrounded by positive forces and encouragement.

Bruno was really 101 percent behind me, he pushed me really hard, plus my dad, and me wanting to do it myself...it was kind of like I finally had all this encouragement, not just myself trying to push me, I had a lot of other people that were believing in me...I was surrounded by a positive energy, by positive things, and people believing in me...like my mom was always like that but there was always this cloud over it, there was always all the other shit that made that nothing, cause everything was always so much bigger.

Jade graduated on the honour roll with a 3.75 average and received a scholarship. Most importantly, she was finally able to accept her own strength, and abandon the limitations placed on her by others,

I guess I wanted to prove to myself, like I knew I could do better at school, but I just was never there. I knew I was smarter than the grades I was getting. I knew that I could do better and I could come to school more. That’s where I was really frustrated with myself, because I wanted it, but I didn’t want it bad enough, and then I finally did it. I think a bit of it was to prove to my parents, my real dad, and my step-dad, to prove to him that no matter what he did to me I could do it, and I wasn’t some loser kid. I had to prove it to myself before I could prove it to anybody else, and once I proved it to myself...

As we concluded our final interview, I asked Jade to reflect on high school in general, and what she felt was most important. She focused first on the teachers, and the significance of both teacher-student relationships and instructional quality.

When you go to high school...it depends on what type of teachers you have...some people you feel like you’re actually one on one with them...you know there’s a teacher that cares, sometimes it would be like, oh this is just another class. The more caring teachers I applied myself more...I guess also making the courses
interesting...basically it’s the teachers, the teachers and the way that they teach their classes.

The most difficult aspect of school, in her opinion, is peer pressure, and we wondered together how schools might respond to this. She noted that the freedom of grade eight, made possible by the number of different classes and teachers, and also the number of students, were perhaps more than she could handle.

That’s why co-op is so good. A lot of kids do a lot better after they go into co-op, the difference in my attendance was unbelievable...Some kids can deal with the freedom, they can be mature enough, others don’t care.

The challenge, we agreed, was to think of ways that school might be organized in order to reduce the impact of negative peer pressure and maximize the impact of teacher caring.
Chapter 5

Ray

The world breaks everyone. The survivors learn to live in the broken places...

I remember my first day . . . I remember it because my dad got my brother and I out of bed early that morning and took us out for breakfast before school, and I remember the sun coming up and playing in the playground. He wanted us to play a bit before we went in and he looked a little nervous actually. I remember that and then I remember him taking us . . . it’s a very special, very special memory you know. Yeah, I just had a sense I would remember that moment.

Ray’s first memory is rich in a nostalgia that belies both the importance of entering the world of school, a right of passage, and the sadness at leaving the innocence of early childhood, “our father was relinquishing us to the world . . . releasing control”. This was indeed a transition point, and he was keenly aware of this, albeit in a childlike way. The image also points to the significance of his relationship with his father, certainly the parent he was closest to, but in whose eyes he saw reflected a disappointment and in whose presence he experienced an unrequited desire for protection from the violence of the world and his home.

I recall feeling engaged and willing to learn in Kindergarten, but in grade 1 I began to feel different and isolated. I recall doing classroom tasks so that I could socialize . . . and feel accepted. At times I was genuinely interested in what was assigned, at others I just did classwork so that I could talk to others. Eventually when I sensed that real communication wasn’t happening, I felt less inclined to keep up with certain tasks. Somewhere in grade 2 or 3 I recall feeling futile about being isolated, there was a sense of permanence about it . . . I still have these feelings today.

Ray wrote the latter words prior to our final meeting, as he reflected on our interview transcripts and an extensive list of review questions. His words speak to many of the themes we discovered together as he painstakingly shared his story with me over our
many interviews, phone and e-mail conversations: his early sense of “difference” from others, his isolation and loneliness coupled with his attempts to connect with others, and the eventual withdrawal, or disengagement, when he became cognizant of the futility of his attempts.

The process of disengagement, as experienced by Ray, began early in his school career, when school failed to meet his expectations as a place of safety and his desperate needs for love and belonging, engendered in an abusive and emotionally isolating home life, went unfulfilled. For Ray, disengagement had little to do with academic ability. Although he struggled at times with mathematics, he was an avid reader, and took great pleasure in the process of learning. Yet education was always intimately connected to social and emotional needs, needs that were not, perhaps could not, be met. The sense of futility described above, and the violence experienced at the hands of parents, staff and students, led to an abandonment of learning in favour of physical and emotional survival. Abuse, emotional abandonment, bullying, exclusion, numerous school transitions and the premature assumption of adult responsibilities begat fear, anger, depression, powerlessness, loneliness, and a longing for real human connection. These, in turn, manifested themselves in a “survival” mentality, attention seeking behaviour and eventually, emotional and physical withdrawal from home and school.

Such was the path of disengagement, but what of his “re-engagement”, of his return to school and tenacity in the face of numerous practical and emotional hurdles? How, indeed, did he overcome such obstacles to success, and indeed, continue on to choose a career as a secondary school teacher? As I reviewed our work together, it became clear that the process of reintegration began long before Ray chose to drop out of school. It
began, perhaps, when his most basic needs were finally addressed, first in a counselling relationship, and later in his foster home, a safe haven where he was free to explore his identity and to try on new ways of being in and relating to the world. However, this exploration took precedence over any kind of scholastic achievement, indeed, perhaps precluded it, and as such, it was at this point that Ray decided to leave school. It was in the community, not home or school, that he found the initial source of his strength, through his relationships with his counsellor, foster family, and in his more informal, yet perhaps equally powerful connections with colleagues at work and at the local gym. He noted,

Even as a quasi-rebellious youth, I was always looking for qualities in . . . people in positions of authority to admire . . . I was looking for a parent to model my own image on . . . I yearned for that connection.

Such connections allowed him to develop a sense of confidence and esteem, and an ability to face and cope with adversity. When he returned to school, he did so with a greater sense of identity and acceptance of his own uniqueness.

Interestingly, Ray’s growing strength and individuality allowed him to achieve a greater sense of communality within the school community. Ray was now able to open himself up to the intellectual and social world of the school, and he described the rebirth of intellectual curiosity and wonder. Ray found further belonging and strength in a return to team sports. And so began the long, arduous journey to graduation. Along the way, Ray found support from numerous caring adults within the school: his basketball coach, school counsellor, youth worker, vice principal and several exemplary teachers. These individuals provided encouragement, humour, optimism, authenticity and expectations for his success. More importantly, they provided an opportunity for him to talk, not only
about problems, but also about his opinions. This opportunity, in turn, allowed him to achieve a greater sense of congruence and reconnect with a long lost passion: learning.

The Early Years

Ray was born in a small village in Scotland, the eldest of three boys. His father was a physician, and later a psychiatrist, whose career brought the family to Canada. His mother was a nurse who remained at home while the children were growing up. At the age of two Ray’s family moved to Canada. His father’s work kept him from home a great deal, leaving his mother to cope with the demands of a young family and new country. She was also struggling to cope with mental illness and alcoholism. This in turn left Ray in isolation.

I remember, my father, he was away quite a bit working... when he was interning... there would be days where we wouldn’t see him and my mother would be left to look after the children... I think my mother found it quite difficult to make the adjustment from being in Scotland where her family and friends were to being in Canada and looking after three children, figuring out a different culture. My dad... he was the one I had an easier relationship with... my mother wasn’t especially happy with her life, I don’t think... there wasn’t a lot of warmth from my mother... she struggled most of her life with manic depression. She’d been suicidal and when I was a child... she could be quite violent... it was quite terrifying. So, I actually moved out of the house when I was quite young just because it got too much to take.

Indeed, abuse was a regular feature of Ray’s early life.

When I was in elementary school, I encountered violence from three different angles... there was physical abuse in my home, there was abuse at the hands of other students and occasionally... you’d get the strap from principals. Basically, there was just this overwhelming sense that physical pain was not far around the corner. You had to really watch your step.

Although impacted by the physical abuse, it was the lack of emotional support at home that was most deeply felt, resulting in a sense of being shut out.

I always have this image of being in... grade five, six and seven and I would come home and I would come in the door and I remember walking up the stairs and I can still see her back... I can remember she wouldn’t turn to look at me until I was
almost in the kitchen... she’d be at the sink or the counter doing something. I think she was preparing herself for... the children coming back into her life... Like if you see a typical Hollywood portrayal of a mother greeting her child after school, this was the opposite of that... It’s not that we weren’t there, it’s that we weren’t wanted to be there... I don’t think my parents had a lot of emotional skill to let me into their space.

Ray was much closer to his father, yet he believed he could not “measure up.” In turn, his father failed to meet Ray’s expectations for protection from his mother or even from other children.

I recall one time in a public swimming pool, I remember getting bullied and pushed around by a couple of boys and... I happened to look over my shoulder and there was my father standing there watching this boy hit me and my father didn’t do anything he just stood there and watched and he was angry... and he looked at me and said, come on, hit him back and I was too scared to, and I was crying and my father looked like he was close to tears himself. I remember the boy laughing at me... that moment I think really solidified for me that... there was another world beyond the effect of my parents and that I was... I would need to fend for myself. I remember asking him after why he didn’t step in... and he said because I have to learn to stick up for myself... Intellectually I understood, but it broke my heart... That was a recurring theme throughout my childhood, learning how to stick up for myself... to defend myself.

Indeed, this sense of being alone in a cruel world, of having to fend for and defend himself, came up repeatedly in Ray’s story, along with a growing sense of his own “difference.” Ray also experienced a sense, early on, of powerlessness and self-blame, a result of facing the predictability of violence in every domain.

I developed a belief at a young age that there was something wrong with me... not intellectually or physically but just emotionally... I became aware that simply being around was enough to cause a sense of irritation in my mother, that almost nothing I could do was right, and as such I was criticized for her bad moods, I was required to take ownership for making sure she was in a stable mood... the feeling was one of... terror, helplessness, vulnerability, somehow it was my fault in that I’d made a mistake... there was the feeling that... life was... something that I could not control and that I could not affect and that I simply had to endure.

Ray’s solution was to withdraw, to retreat to a place of safety within himself. He found great solace in the world of books.
I realized I needed to keep part of myself for just myself, and that I had to be a
different person . . . I had to take on a different role . . . in my family. I remember a
corner of the house, a space between a bush and corner of the house, and I would go
there on a Saturday when the weather was nice and I would go there and read . . . it
was precious . . . when I went there I felt content, I escaped, I didn't feel a wariness.
In my family my experience was I had to watch it because I knew there could be
physical consequences, or just anger . . . so you learned to watch your step.

School was for Ray a place of both pleasure and pain. He enjoyed learning, recalling
the wonder of learning to read.

I remember that first time I figured out how to read a word . . . it was a wonderful
feeling . . . I had a pretty good teacher in grade one. She was a pretty happy person . . .
she helped me.

Yet he quickly recognized that this was a very different place, that he had experienced his
first real life transition. His primary difficulty in adjusting to this new environment was
social in nature, and his comments suggest that it was here, in the social realm, where
success and failure would soon be defined.

For me, it was a big change getting used to the routine . . . it was just so new . . . I
remember realizing how complicated it was going to be to make friends and figure out
the dynamics of . . . interacting with more than one or two people . . . I remember that
made a big impression on me . . . this was a whole different game, not just your
parents or your brothers or maybe one or two friends . . . I remember a sense of
comparison, a sense of competition, in order to show I could complete something or
do a task . . . I got the impression that more was expected of me in an independent
way.

Ray was made keenly aware of his difference from others through the early and
consistent bullying of classmates.

I remember I got teased quite a bit as a young child in elementary school . . . I think
just being labeled as different, or maybe not as tough as other kids you know. I was
quite sensitive . . . occasionally I got beaten up and things like that . . . I remember
going to school feeling scared, wondering what was going to happen that day . . . I
didn’t take the teasing well. Some people they could . . . it could slide off them like
water off a duck’s back and I think to some extent that’s a skill I’ve maybe developed
over time, but as a child it was torment.
Just as he found little protection at home, he recalled little help from adults at school.

Indeed, he experienced both sanctioned and unsanctioned abuse at the hands of school personnel.

I remember, I think getting in trouble for something . . . you know throwing a snowball at somebody or whatever, and getting the strap and peeing myself right there in the office.

Later, he described several episodes of violence at the hands of teachers in a private secondary school.

In his grade 5 year, Ray’s family moved to B.C. Despite the troubles he had experienced in Alberta, he was sad about the move and the disruption of the few safety nets he had established for himself, including scouts and hockey. He grieved the loss of his routines, which provided some sense of safety in an otherwise precarious existence. It was quickly evident that he had not escaped his past.

Very soon I fell into a pattern of being teased again, having difficulty fitting in . . . I think I had finally started to figure school out a little bit in Edmonton, and then . . . it was having to contend with figuring out a new school and who I was going to make friends with and I remember feeling frustrated . . . I think that the awkwardness and over sensitivity that I displayed were so evident with students so early on and that they found that as a weak point in my personality . . . I found that very frustrating. I remember feeling deeply saddened by that.

Despite the recurrent violence and resulting personal withdrawal, Ray saw value in education and experienced pleasure in learning. He excelled in reading and discovered a passion for geography, a subject that opened up another world for him.

Reading . . . I didn’t have any difficulty with it and it’s something that my family encouraged and I found a lot of enjoyment in . . . I enjoyed learning . . . Right from my childhood years up to my teenage years . . . I found value in going to school . . . Intimacy could be reached through the mind and ideas, not through the heart . . . I remember being fascinated with reading about different countries . . . I remember going nuts over the fjords in Norway. I remember the teacher, she was really enthusiastic about it, and she talked about these people in Norway, how they lived,
how they dressed, their music, certain beliefs, she told stories that they told, and then she had us do research and had us write a story as if we were living in Norway.

Ray noted that the teacher played a significant role in igniting his interest, through her enthusiasm and genuine approach to the world. Indeed, authenticity became a critical quality sought but rarely found in the adults of his world. In her, and in a number of similar teachers throughout his school career, Ray found perhaps kindred spirits, and recognized that there were other ways of relating to the world. Ray recalled how important it was to be recognized, to be acknowledged by teachers.

I remember in grade five, we had to draw a picture of our family at Christmas and I drew this elaborate picture and I remember the teacher putting it up and I felt wonderful when he did that... it was really special. It was of particular worth to me because I had just moved... I was trying to fit in and find friends and this was something I had tried really hard on... I hung onto that for years.

Much later, in his grade 12 year, an English teacher publicly acknowledged his writing, an event that proved a turning point in Ray's commitment to education.

Despite considerable intellectual ability, Ray struggled with math and organization, sources of frustration to his parents and teachers. Their reactions engendered a sense of shame and frustration.

I did have difficulty with math... I was worried about it... it was the one sticking point with me. I can remember one night my dad was determined I was going to learn some math problems, and he would review with me, and every time I got one wrong he would strike me across the back of the head. I remember being terrified and it went on for about an hour and I couldn't get it right and he found it so frustrating... In grade 6, I had Mrs. S and she had been teaching for quite a while... I wasn't a very organized student. She found that quite irritating... I don't think she had a belief that I was all that intelligent... I can recall a few condescending remarks from her that may have indicated that I wasn't a rocket scientist.

Ray recalled the futility of attempts by school staff to help him in math, and he perhaps disengaged from this subject in order to protect an increasingly fragile sense of self.
Emotionally I didn’t feel like I could connect to math, I felt a dullness, a lack of interest. I could see teachers trying to help but I didn’t feel like putting myself out . . . until I got to grade 11 algebra and I loved it . . . I had a great teacher. I mean there may have been a problem with ability, but I remember as far back as grade 3 and I remember teachers working with me, but I didn’t want to try.

Ray was involved in band and choir and these activities served as a diversion from the unhappiness of his life. He recalled with pleasure a choir trip to Prince George.

We went up there on a bus and that was a great experience . . . we traveled for several days and that was fun. We had a border family and it was a great experience you know, you’re having dinner with a different family . . . they lived in a trailer and I thought that was the greatest thing . . . yeah, they were nice people. They were a different type of people than my parents but they were kind, you know. They watched out for me . . . so you know, school was fun in that way and I liked participating and I enjoyed singing and I was in band as well, I played the drums and I liked that.

Indeed, participation in band provided one of the few approximations of acceptance that Ray experienced in his early school career.

I remember I was going to prove to the other drummers that I deserved to be there, and I did . . . I remember we were playing this one song and everybody was having difficulty and they sort of stopped playing, but I continued . . . I had a buddy, Glenn, and . . . he was Mr. Cool, you know. He had a good sense of humour and he befriended me. He’d let me hang out with him. He pointed out to me that he was impressed with the fact that I continued on and I never forgot that, you know . . . to me it meant that I had the potential to be accepted . . . by others and myself.

Ray also found a measure of satisfaction in his success as a runner.

I can remember, you know, doing "participation" and running and really excelling at that . . . I can remember . . . doing so much better than everybody else and I can remember them being jealous and making snide remarks about it but I still felt that I was good at something.

Indeed, physical strength, be it through running or later weight training, was to become increasingly important, and Ray often talked of being inspired by the movie Rocky, which for him epitomized “tenacity, self belief and sense of purpose . . . temerity.”

I remember in grade 7 watching the movie Rocky and finding an immense amount of inspiration from it . . . I’d buy the tape and I’d listen to the tape and pretend I was boxing . . . One of the things my father did, I remember he took us to see Rocky and
then he took us to the YMCA... my brother and I and he took us for runs and I was pumped you know... that was in grade seven and in grade eight I was the same... I did rugby and whatever, and then in grade nine I started to discover... not athletics in a sense of a team sport but I started to discover weight lifting and... well, there's probably several things that probably saved me as a teenager, but that was one of them. I got a lot of power from that.

Although he noted that he had few goals or dreams about the future, Ray inherited a belief in the importance of an education and grade 12 graduation from his family, and although their methods were more often punitive than supportive, his parents attempted to instill a desire to achieve scholastically.

They encouraged... well, demanded that I do my homework and would structure my time after school so that's what I did... they would ask, you know... monitor my brother and I doing our homework and they took my education quite seriously... I can always remember my father in later years saying it wasn't important to him if we went to university but that he wanted us to get our grade twelve.

In all, Ray's early years engendered a deep longing for belonging, for happiness, and for love.

When we first moved to Canada, we lived in... and we had a little house... and I remember looking at pictures of me there as a child eating cereal out of my little Beatrix Potter cereal bowl in my pajamas and... just looking like this really happy little boy and I remember looking at it... "who is this person?". Yet, I remember those pictures and I think what a beautiful child I was... innocence and real happiness in my face... I was surprised to see such happiness in my face... I was never a boy or a student who wanted to dominate... or show off... I just wanted to fit in, you know?

The happiness in the picture contrasts starkly with his memories of childhood. Indeed, throughout our interviews Ray was at times overwhelmed by the sadness of this time, and I inquired as to his experience of depression.

As a child, I definitely had depressive tendencies... I felt a real depth of need, and would often cry... there are some needs that no one can satisfy.
Despite his father’s expertise in mental health, Ray does not recall being diagnosed or treated for depression. Indeed, his first experience with a counsellor was not until he moved out in grade 9.

**The Middle Years: Moving to Secondary School**

I began to drift down a different path, not care about academics so much, and fight back in grade 6 or 7, fight back in terms of being bullied and things like that. Definitely in grade 8 and 9, I began to assert myself, it was sort of a do or die mentality. Definitely one of the things was of course, my illness. My pneumonia, really reinforced the survival instinct in me. I discovered I had an ease and a skill for resistance and disruption . . . I seemed to find some strength in opposition, in being defensive. Definitely in sports, I’ve always seemed to play better in defensive positions . . . I found that somehow I liked taking the opposing view on things. I started to question what I was being told in school and by my parents, sort of question authority a bit more. I felt more empowered, not that I was always coming from the right place. . . After being sick, I just had less tolerance for being picked on, bullied, both from kids and in terms of things that were happening at home.

Ray’s grade eight year was characterized by an increasing disengagement from school life. He began his secondary school career at an exclusive private school, chosen by his parents for its reputation for academic excellence. Throughout the course of this year Ray became increasingly reactive both emotionally and behaviourally, and engaged in a variety of what he termed “attention seeking” behaviours including crying, stealing, skipping, teasing and fighting. These behaviours, in turn, further alienated him from peers and school staff. The year was marked by a serious illness that left him physically vulnerable, exacerbating the feelings of “difference” with which he had long struggled. In response, he began to both withdraw and fight back in a desperate attempt to “survive” and gain some sense of control over his life. Indeed, safety became Ray’s primary concern. He believed he was labeled a problem child, and in the end was asked to leave the school. Ray did so willingly.
Ray described this school as a competitive boys’ school with an implicit acceptance of bullying.

It was a private school, all boys, with an old boys’ network, much more of a sink or swim mentality...there was an expectation there would be some bullying, it wasn’t stated, but it was communicated somehow...it was competitive, pretty rigid and high academic expectations, and I pretty much floundered... It was just awful... I remember the first two or three weeks, going in cautiously, wide eyed, trying to figure it all out... trying to fit in all over again... I could see other boys feeling vulnerable and looking for identity within a group, and I could see others resisting trying to fit in. Some boys survived by holding back, appearing almost invisible.

Such invisibility “seemed to me... worse than being bullied... a death of one’s public identity”. Ray recalled uncomfortable, conflictual relationships with some teachers.

Indeed, he was physically assaulted by two of them.

I actually remember being hit by a teacher in the classroom... I was moved to a different math class... and there was another teacher who actually physically grabbed me and shook me one night on a camping trip... I became much more wary of teachers, I knew that they could cross that line, I was more mindful of what I said.

He also recalled attempts by some teachers to be kind, to reach out. However, these attempts often backfired, representing to Ray his “conditional acceptance” in their eyes.

I can remember being picked on in an English class and leaving in tears... I got into an argument with one of the kids and started crying and the teacher... pulled me out in the hallway and spoke with me and I was crying... And I said I felt alone... I said I just want to fit in, I want to be accepted... he said yes, but you just have to stop trying so hard at it... He said to me you’re not alone, and we don’t hate you, just try not to be so noticed, try to lay back a bit, not make your presence known so much. He was trying to be kind... He was honest but he was kind with me... His tone was sympathetic, but in my head, what that said to me was there’s something about me that’s not acceptable, try and eliminate or change it.

Part way through the year Ray contracted a serious case of pneumonia. This illness had a profound effect both emotionally and physically.

I had a temperature of 107 and just about died... I was in hospital for a good part of a month... and lost 40 pounds, I went bald, I lost the ability to focus with my right eye... I was pretty messed up. So here I was in grade 8, on the verge of puberty, and I had to wear a toque for a while because I had patches of hair... I was physically quite
weak after that experience. I didn’t play rugby and was excused from PE. . . I was very self-conscious . . . and when you feel physically weak and brittle, you don’t feel like you can protect yourself as much, and I just didn’t have the strength. A couple of times I remember getting picked on and I just didn’t have the strength to fight back.

Ray described an ever present feeling of fear, and his response was withdrawal.

It seems like a lot of my experience in school has been one of being afraid . . . I became very aware of trying not to aggravate certain people, trying not to show vulnerability and weakness, and just not knowing how to do that sometimes . . . In the second half of the year, I remember skipping out, especially after my pneumonia. Sometimes I’d leave school half way through the day, go for walks around the neighbourhood, go to the mall.

Though he recalled some attempts by the school administration to address his skipping, including detentions and calling his parents, such consequences held little sway over the relief skipping afforded.

Just withdrawal, knowing I didn’t have to go home for a few hours, and knowing that I didn’t have to deal with other people . . . I didn’t mind my own company . . . Undoubtedly it affected my achievement. That’s the other side of the coin, when it becomes chronic like that, it’s more of a hindrance, but back then, I just did it because I wanted to, I didn’t really justify it . . . sometimes if you had a really bad time at home, or you’d been in a fight at school, nothing’s going to change our mind, you just need that break.

Ray also withdrew academically, despite his obvious abilities.

I was a c / c- student in grade 8 . . . I would have liked to have gotten better grades, but I didn’t have the ambition . . . I enjoyed reading, I read a lot at home for pleasure, I would read on the weekends and afternoons, at night, that was where I’d use my mind the most . . . but at school, occasionally something would grab me, but my biggest concern at school was feeling safe and feeling accepted . . . surviving.

Yet withdrawal was not Ray’s only response to the fear and isolation. As he recovered from his illness, he became increasingly disruptive.

Teasing others, distracting them in class . . . it was more sort of attention seeking teasing . . . sometimes I’d be crying in class, either because of something I felt but didn’t understand, or maybe something that happened to me. I would complain to the teacher about things. I was very neglectful of things like organization, and I have my suspicions that this was again a way to get attention . . . Occasionally I would steal from other students, just things like food from their lunches, never clothing or money.

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I think it might have been about trying to have some kind of power and ... Acknowledgement ... by certain teachers I did feel acknowledged, but I needed more, perhaps I wanted more than was due my share.

By the end of the year, he was asked to leave.

I think I was labeled as a problem child ... I just didn’t fit in ... I wasn’t measuring up in behavioural or academic terms ... I didn’t protest, I wanted out, and I more or less accepted it ... I was just happy it was over.

For his grade 9 year, Ray moved to a public school. Conflict marked this year, both at home and school, as his physical strength and anger increased. He discovered weight lifting, which afforded him a new sense of personal power. Although later this sport provided a sense of quiet confidence that he carried with him on his return to school, at this early stage, it simply provided the means to assert himself physically. Indeed, Ray discovered that there was a level of acceptability and personal satisfaction to be found in fighting.

I started to discover the ability to ... fight back. In grade 8, I started to fight back, but I had yet to discover my strength. But in grade 9 ... when I was being teased or bullied, I responded by fighting back, swearing and hitting. I also started to respond to some teachers and I would show my anger towards them if I didn’t like them, or maybe they had said something to me ... I think part of it was probably I felt that if I could do it I could be accepted ... teasing was a way of finding weakness in others, in terms of making myself comparably stronger ... I didn’t feel I could talk my way. I didn’t have the emotional development to reason with people. I remember a couple of fights and I remember feeling the support and admiration of people and that felt nice ... I remember beating up a kid ... what a powerful feeling ... he was picking on me in front of his buddies and I said okay, just you and me, and I remember you know all these kids watching and ... I always remember that feeling, you know, feeling vanquished ... venerated ... and I earned respect and that was vital to me.

Indeed, this new sense of power was intoxicating, and throughout this year Ray wore a "veil of toughness". Yet he acknowledged that this veil was ill fitting, an identity adopted in response to an ever present fear.

In grade 9 I had taken on this kind of facade of acting and looking tough and lifting weights, but when I went to a really rough school, and I got a taste for what really
rough kids were all about, I knew that I didn’t have the stomach for that, and not only
did I know that I couldn’t cut it in that world, but I knew it wasn’t what I wanted
either.

Ray found some sense of camaraderie, albeit superficial, with other outsiders. Still a
loner in many respects, he began to focus more exclusively on solitary pursuits. This
coincided with his move away from home.

I wasn’t really establishing any deep or intimate or lasting friendships. I would keep
my fingers in maybe two or three circles of acquaintances . . . I had no real close
friends . . . I remember hanging out with guys that . . . they were all kind of odd, you
know, off to the side of the classroom . . . and just hanging out with them, and they are
sort of looking down at me to make themselves feel better but they’ll still let me sit
with them, because when push comes to shove, they’re odd balls too, and I’m just you
know, I’m sitting there, taking any kind of attention I can get . . . I still felt very much
alone and I felt that I had to be alone . . . I recognized that I wouldn’t be able to sit
down and tell them what I’m thinking and feeling and have a receptive ear . . . so at
some point I think I decided I’ve got to get through this on my own. I’d lifted a bit of
weights, and I wanted to look tough and be tough . . . about two thirds of the way
through grade 9 I began focusing more on weights, just on my own, doing my own
thing away from school.

Ray continued to struggle in math and science, but managed to do enough to “get by”.

Yet he was simply going through the motions.

I was always one of these students, in grade 9 and 10 . . . who always just sort of
flirted with the edge of dropping out of school completely, and just kept a foot in.

He described his growing detachment as defensive in nature.

It was a form of defense . . . an attempt to have power over a situation by trying to
control how closely one is involved . . . My detachment originated in fear, I was too
scared to reveal my true nature.

He was comfortable drifting, yet perhaps because of his deep-seated need to belong to
something or someone, he was not yet ready to let go entirely. Indeed, throughout his
grade 9 and 10 years, he continued to participate in sports and in band.

I was doing band twice a week early in the morning and basketball twice a week in the
early evenings, so I was still involved. Again, academics were largely secondary . . . I
think I had a mind that was there, but I wasn’t ready to use it. I don’t know if I had
the skills yet to use it. Academics didn’t grab me, I didn’t see the importance . . . But I saw school as a break from home life. I mean, what else was I going to do?

Ray enjoyed English, and recalled fondly his teacher and studying *Julius Caesar*. The teacher’s personal style appealed to him, and he found in this class an opportunity to share his thoughts in a new way.

I remember he was a little outside the norm . . . he played in a rock band, which I thought was pretty cool . . . he brought some of his personality into the classroom and talked about his life, and he talked about things that he liked about our lives . . . he made it personal . . . during short stories, he asked us questions, what do you think about this person, did they do the right thing, how can you relate their experience to your life, and I enjoyed doing that . . . I liked writing stories, and I liked writing my opinions, and I liked speaking, I had opinions, and I liked speaking in public, so although I lacked confidence in myself in other ways, I felt very much compelled to speak about certain opinions.

**Reaching Out**

Throughout this year Ray’s relationship with his mother deteriorated and he was eventually asked to move out. His father rented an apartment for him, and would spend a few nights a week with Ray there. For a while Ray was excited about living on his own as it afforded him a “cool factor” with acquaintances. Yet, it was an austere and lonely existence with which he quickly tired. Showing remarkable resolve for a child of 14, Ray took it upon himself to find a way to repair his relationship with his family, engaging the help of a counsellor who would prove to be a force for change in his life.

I’d be there, there was just a table, a chair, a small hide-a-bed and a foamy and that was about it really . . . It was very lonely for me . . . I remember . . . saying to my dad, what do we do, I mean, where do we go with this . . . and I remember telling him, look, what about a counsellor, and he said if you want a counsellor you’re going to have to arrange it. So I went to social services on my own . . . I went there was interviewed and had a woman counsellor who was quite good, and then she referred me to another man, Ken, who I still talk with . . . he was a very influential person in my life.
Ray met with Ken for over a year, during which time he facilitated the transition to a foster home and to a new school. Working with him allowed Ray to broaden his sense of what was possible and begin to focus on the future, and also provided his first experience with a caring adult who was interested in his opinions.

Ken had a real way about him... helping people to see past anger. He helped me to slow down and to think. He would take me out for lunch once a week and we would talk about boxing, cause I was big into boxing... we’d sit and talk in the car and I just loved that. I just loved this person spending time with me... we would just talk you know about school, family, where I was going... he got me to start thinking outside the box a little bit you know... I would go on about the way things are and he would stop me and say, yeah, but if you had a magic wand... my answer was I’d like to be back with my family... it was a new experience for me, an adult asking me what I felt, what I wanted and... that was a real gift... I think what he did for me was get me to do some imagining of what a safe and happy environment would look like for me... I think everybody, even if they’ve go a lot working against them, still have an impulse to try and move towards a place of safety, and that’s what this counsellor started to do with me, was just ask me to imagine and to dig a little deeper.

Working with Ken also provided an opportunity to participate in a reciprocal, caring relationship, and he insisted that Ray accept equal responsibility for the maintenance of this relationship.

He let me know that the relationship wasn’t just about meeting basic fundamental needs, but there was more to it... it was more interactive and intimate than just simply sharing food... I knew that I was going to have to talk...this is something that I still face with myself today, sort of taking from people...and not giving back.

Early in the grade 10 year, Ray moved in with a foster family, changed schools and “changed my image”. His foster parents provided a “zone of safety”, ensuring the fulfillment of basic needs and the opportunity to explore his identity in a caring environment. They provided both physical and emotional safety. Ray noted the importance of the freedom they provided.

One of the big things for me was I could go and get something to eat anytime I wanted... it’s about love, about acceptance, about giving and fulfilling need, and I felt like a king... there was never any hostility, never any anger... it allowed me to spread out
a bit, you know when you're walking on eggshells, where you're in a situation where
you really have to watch your back, you can't really breathe, you can't spread your
wings, so that just gave me the freedom to do that.

Being with his foster parents allowed Ray to try on a new role, to experiment with self-
expression, and he became less interested in fitting in. Indeed, his new persona was a
"solitary" pursuit, an attempt at individuality.

When I was with them, I indulged in a fantasy side of myself. I got more into
weights, I listened to rock music which I hadn't been allowed to do . . . I dressed like a
tough guy, I took on a kind of fantasy role . . . I developed this whole image . . . It was
an important thing to do. It allowed me to develop confidence physically. I didn't
choose a social path. It was a solitary thing.

Interestingly, this period, while one of growth emotionally, was one of increasing
disengagement from school.

I did find that once I got into SJ, if anything I was even less engaged, I sort of
retreated into my shell a bit, and school became even less of a concern . . . it was a
very different environment so I didn't really keep in contact with many of my peers
from the old school, and I didn't really make any new friends, nothing of any deep
consequence . . . My head wasn't in it . . . I liked the social aspect but I was not there
academically at all. It was like moving through cement.

Although the process of change had indeed begun, and the support he was receiving was
making a positive impact in his life, it would simply take more time for things to "click",
indeed, Ray needed time to simply revel in his new found safety.

Yeah, I mean things sort of gestate for a while, right? It's not a case of one switch
going off and another going on, there's that in between period . . . Some words have
an amazing amount of power, but you just have to hear them over and over . . . for me
I was just out of this toxic home situation and it was just time for me to enjoy that
environment . . . I felt like I had just come through a big marathon, a labyrinth of tests,
and then sort of like as soon as you cross the finish line, just collapsing.

Ray managed to remain in school until the end of grade 10. Ken introduced him to the
school counsellor, Sherry, whom Ray described as "a very loving and positive and
practical person". She assisted him to navigate the rather stormy waters of school relationships.

I liked her, she was a neat person . . . she didn’t come down on me, she’s the kind of person that will ask you what you will do to be responsible for yourself. We would do role rehearsals, and I can remember practicing those with her, that helped . . . Magic wand and role rehearsal enabled me to anticipate my reactions to conflict situations and choose my way of dealing with problems.

Yet school was a continual struggle and the burden of his emotional life remained an impressive obstacle to achievement.

Definitely the issue of emotional separation from home, loneliness . . . loss of intimacy and abandonment . . . academics by and large just didn’t play a role in how I felt about myself . . . I didn’t see any relation between studying and happiness, it was a future distant notion and I needed an immediate source of confidence.

Through Sherry, Ray became involved in a rather informal work and learn program. He enjoyed the experience of hard, physical labour. Yet he continued to flounder academically. On Ray’s sixteenth birthday, his foster father and father suggested that he leave school and find a job. He felt an immense sense of relief.

It was as if a weight had been pulled off me . . . I needed to figure out who I was and where I was going . . . I wasn’t identifying with my peers, my life was very different from a lot of theirs . . . I identified more with adults . . . my foster father . . . was able to get me to look at my heart and realize that I was stagnating.

Ray took a full time job with a moving company and moved back in with his family, although he continued to live a somewhat separate existence, and eventually moved out again. Ray spent the next year working and living at the home of his employer, with whom he formed a close relationship.

My boss was a very stern person, but saw some good in me and he kind of treated me like a son. You know it’s just amazing how much the kind gestures of an adult can mean to a kid . . . love is in the details . . . I was a bit of a liability as an employee, but he kept me on . . . he was a role model.
He continued to work out at the gym, and found a camaraderie with the adults there that
he had never found in school. Several of these individuals served as "older brother
figures" providing both acceptance and guidance.

Here I was out of grade 10 and I was enjoying the company of grown men, you know,
I was conversing with them and I found that quite rewarding, and some of them
slowly encouraged me to return to high school.

This was a year of personal development that saw a growth in confidence and also a
growing realization that he wanted more out of life.

After a year of working, I sensed a need to go back . . . although I enjoyed the
company of adults I realized that . . . I was still a teenager . . . I knew that it was
important to get an education . . . I came to understand it when I quit and went and
worked . . . I quickly realized after a year that if you don't have your formal education
you are limited as to what you can do, and secondly, it's where your peer group is,
where you're going to form friendships.

Indeed, it was this latter need, to connect socially with peers, that prompted the return to
secondary school. Ray returned with only a vague sense of his academic goals, but with
a new confidence and an acceptance of himself. I wondered if this self-acceptance in turn
promoted his ability to finally achieve membership in a school community.

The Road to Graduation

I did eventually achieve membership in school . . . after I went back, I found
friendship, I joined a basketball team . . . I socialized more and I worked a little
harder. A little harder, but still my head wasn’t really in the academic realm . . . when
I was moving furniture, I knew I had to go back to school so I could get my
academics, but I also knew that I had to go back because I could be a part of who I
was, I had gained a confidence in myself, but I had to go back, I could show more of
who I was, and I was accepted . . . I had a confidence about myself . . . I remember
feeling, I’ve got my flaws, but I’ve got my strong points too. I didn’t feel
academically engaged yet, but I felt very curious. We’d had some pretty philosophical
discussions moving furniture, and I was able to hold meaningful conversations with
adults, and that gave me sense of confidence, so when I went back, I almost went back
in a way as an adult, having experienced things they hadn’t . . . I had acquired an adult
frame of reference.
Ray initially experienced a return of the fear that had so characterized his previous school experiences, yet he was now able to see past that fear in order to realize a budding desire to move forward.

I remember the first day I went back to grade 11, and I remember puking in the bathroom, I was so nervous, and I knew it was instinct... I didn’t share a lot in common with the kids... I knew that there was a bigger world out there... but I think I was starting to come out of my shell and I just wanted to... to be done... I think I’d gotten tired of going through those patterns and I was feeling inspired to... be honest with myself about where I was at in life, and it was time for me to grow up. I think I felt I was maturing and I... wanted to move on I guess. I wanted some closure.

His return to school did not mark the end of either personal or academic difficulties, but the beginning of a new phase in his life, one in which he faced these difficulties with greater maturity and a growing repertoire of coping skills, both self taught and modeled by positive adult role models, including his counsellor, former foster parents, gym comrades, work colleagues and teachers. Ray was again living on his own, having unsuccessfully attempted for the second time to return home, and he struggled with the reality of this situation and its impact on his life. Indeed, he continued to assume adult responsibilities that limited his attempts to reengage fully in school life.

I always remember sitting on the bus and having to go look at a place to live in grade 11 and just feeling resentful and abandoned... I was getting some money from my father, but I was having to pay for a good chunk of the bills as well, so I’d work on the weekends at a restaurant... I remember our basketball team won at the Islands,, and I couldn’t go to the game because I had to work. So, you know, for me, I’ll always remember that moment clearly because for me it defined the extent to which I could and could not be involved in high school life because my life had an adult component.

For a time, Ray’s continued emotional volatility led to several conflicts with students, including a serious classroom altercation that required a teacher to intervene. Although this resulted in a suspension, it was a sobering and in many ways useful experience,
allowing him to reflect upon his desire to be in school. It was "a rare moment of clarity.

...I saw the futility of violence."

Through basketball he found a means to establish himself socially and participate meaningfully as part of a group.

It generated social acceptance for me ... gave me a chance to positively interact and contribute to their efforts, a sense of purpose ... and a sense of physical power ... also I had to work part time as well as go to school and basket ball rounded out my life, gave it another dimension.

Ray recalled the powerful influence of his coach, a student teacher, whose caring, humour, optimism and encouragement made a significant impact.

Once, coming home after school on the bus, we had a game, but I wasn’t going...he said, we need you. And he played me that night. When I made a basket, he’d stand up and cheer. I appreciated his encouragement ... he asked my opinion on things ... engaged me in conversation ... when teaching me a specific skill, one of the things he was good at was showing me how to shut off the self-talk and worry, and focus on the skill itself ... He would talk about school with me ... if I told him I was angry, he would acknowledge that anger ... come back then with advice, but first acknowledge, not just sympathize ... he had a way of laughing at a situation, a lightness about him ... in a way that wasn’t flip. He helped me to see the humour in situations, laugh at myself a bit.

Indeed, Ray spoke at length of a number of teachers and staff members who touched his life during this year.

There was Mr. C, a social studies teacher ... he would use humour, try and get us to see outside of ourselves and talk from our own perspective, but he wasn’t willing to be totally emersed in an adolescent mindset, part of him would retain a sense of who he was ... He was helpful to me because I was living on my own and I didn’t really identify with the typical adolescent experience and I was skeptical ... There was a VP at the school. He would see my strengths and comment on them, like, “You are a really independent person, I bet you work really well alone, and that’s a good strength to have”, things like that ... he would acknowledge me in the hall and say hello ... say my name ... mentioning a person’s name consistently over time can just have such an impact ... there’s a lot of power in that ... It implies that you have a relationship with someone ... It dispels notions of superficiality ... There was Ernie, a youth worker at school ... he had a Christian students’ club at school and I started to talk with him a bit ... we talked a lot about spirituality and writing ... about philosophy ... we formed an enduring friendship.
Ray recalled the powerful impact of Shakespeare and a budding academic interest,

I remember I had a great student teacher in grade 11 . . . she played MacBeth on a record and that just grabbed me and that was the first time that I became interested in academics in all of high school. I’ll always remember feeling the drama, and it just went straight through me. When I look back on it now . . . I think one of the reasons why Shakespeare is great is because his characters go through such intensity of emotion and yet they are able to articulate that you know, in such precise ways . . . that can have a lot of meaning for teenagers and for me it certainly did . . . it was very powerful.

By the end of grade 11 and beginning of grade 12, Ray finally achieved a sense of belonging which in turn served to fuel his commitment to school, and eventually the shift in focus from athletics to academics.

I finished grade 11 and went into grade 12 . . . by this time I had friends and contacts and I was somewhat of a character and I had a little bit of a community, you know, and I was accepted. That was really nice. I don’t know if I had a lot of close friends, but I had a lot of acquaintances . . . Being on the basket ball team helped a lot. And grade 12, coming back and not walking into a foreign environment . . . I had put in some time with people, I had been there the year before . . . also it was a small school . . . it was a little bit more low key, more intimate environment . . . that helped . . . it was harder to be invisible . . . once we are familiar with each other, intimacy comes much easier . . . and the fact that I was a little more adult made me stand out more . . . I developed an assurance that I was going to be OK . . . The difference was me, I wanted to get involved with school, I wanted to meet people.

Ray spoke of a powerful moment in his Grade 12 English class when his teacher, Mr. J., publicly acknowledged his writing. The sense of self-worth and competence this engendered further awakened in him the long subdued passion for learning evident in his early years, and he began to explore with greater clarity his personal and academic goals.

In grade 12 English, I had Mr. J . . . I remember when he read out something that I had written and I just felt so proud . . . I still remember the feeling of being acknowledged . . . I was just so proud of myself because I was living out of home and I remember he gave me an A on it, and I was just blown away . . . and I can remember looking over and there was this other girl sitting over in a corner and she was a genius, she was miles ahead of anyone in the classroom, and I knew it and she wrote some incredibly articulate things . . . and he brought up my piece along with hers . . . those few moments have shown me that I could write.

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Indeed, this moment was a sort of intellectual epiphany, an awakening and an acceptance.

You know how your mind can be right there, right now... sort of like your heart being right there, right now... it's spiritual... you feel like you are on the right path... you feel like there's light around you... athletes talk about being in the zone... everything's clicking... for a student to be really on their game... when a student's heart is connected to the mind, there's a real feeling of purpose, of value... it's the feeling that comes about from intellectual engagement, the reward for the risk.

Mr. J. was skilled in promoting this engagement,

The topics he chose, got us to take ourselves and place us in the novel, relate to our own lives, he got us to do descriptive pieces... and in discussions I felt brave enough to say what I really felt and thought and this teacher encouraged that... that English class was a real inspiration to me... I realized that academics satisfied a long restrained part of myself. I remembered being a child reading, and I realized I had lost that for a number of years, I reclaimed this.

Ray suggested that he had now reached a point of safety and security in his school life, and saw some worth in academics.

I realized I was spending a lot of time still working out and I was going to have to make a decision about where I was going to put my energies... I knew that if I didn't make that switch, I'd be repeating... I felt I could connect, and I wanted to move ahead... ultimately it was my will to move on and not get distracted... I had gone to a certain level with my body building and was growing beyond that, I wanted more, I wanted to get through high school. I developed a curiosity about myself, I was tired of floating and I could feel my mind getting stronger... and I recall deciding that I was going to put athletics in a secondary position and I was going to focus on academics and I got through with a technical grade 12.

However, even at this point, he did not have a clear vision for his future beyond grade 12 graduation. Ray was required to take a final summer school course in order to complete the requirements for a technical diploma. Ray chose a life skills course, and it was here that he experienced a second “intellectual epiphany”. The teacher introduced Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, and Ray found this work fascinating, indeed “invigorating”, “a light went on for me... wow this is interesting... It connected with me... she told me about that and ultimately I think that’s what got me interested in... university”.

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At the same time, Ray’s father encouraged him to begin to think practically about his future, and Ray enrolled in “track”, a trades program where he trained to be a steam fitter. This experience reinforced a sense of dissonance experienced years before when he left school. However, it was far more meaningful given Ray’s latter success in school and burgeoning sense of intellectual curiosity and excitement.

I realized very soon I wasn’t going to be a tradesperson. I felt nothing but contempt for them, and I actually looked down on them, and I felt that they were dead . . . they had little awareness beyond getting stoned and getting drunk and using the word fuck in every other sentence, and I just thought, this is not for me, and I knew I was interested I think because of that life skills course . . . I felt an interest in university, so . . . I went back to my high school for one course...I was nineteen and I was doing this steam fitting course and I was training for a body building contest and taking this biology eleven class and I found it fascinating.

Ray completed his steam fitting course, “in the full awareness that it was something I did not wish to continue” and realized that he truly wanted to go to university. However, this would require returning to secondary school to achieve an academic diploma. Given his age and checkered history, he worried about returning to school and enlisted the help of his old friend and counsellor Sherry who vouched for him with the principal. Ray returned to a full slate of academic courses. He found this overwhelming at first and he failed several classes, however, he now had a goal in mind, university, and he resolved to keep trying despite frustration and failure.

I was taking algebra eleven, Biology 12, Physics and Chemistry and I absolutely bombed . . . I dropped out of physics, I failed chemistry, I failed algebra although I tried, and so I put all of my energies into Biology 12. I ended up getting an A . . . and I passed a scholarship. I’ll never forget studying for that exam . . . I locked myself in my room for two days and studied and it was such an amazing feeling to learn . . . it started to click for me . . . and I just remember it was almost spiritual, you know, just that feeling of learning. By the time I wrote that exam I was so charged, and it was a good way of going into the second term. I redid algebra eleven and I’d failed algebra 11 four times, and I go back, and I got it, I got A’s and I remember the teacher’s comments like, you know, the phoenix rising from the ashes...he was blown away...that was a really fun experience and I loved trying to work out the problems . . .
my brain was coming alive. I'd worked through enough emotional stuff that I was able to learn and I could think in the abstract and that was a great feeling . . . I had a great history teacher and I got the scholarship in history and English Lit 12 and so just a wonderful experience.

Indeed, Ray achieved a great deal in this last year of school. It appeared as though he had thrown off the heavy cloak of personal distress and could now move forward, unencumbered.

That last year . . . you know, all this murkiness up until this last time . . . I was twenty one, but I just . . . shot through . . . I got it, you know . . . life was looking good. I think about that last year, and I was making all the right moves . . . I started to train for the marathon in Seattle . . . and started working in the new year at a university cafeteria, that helped me to earn some income. I was also getting some money from my father for rent and food, some emotional reinforcement from athletics. I also had friends in university at the time and was interacting with them more than with high school students. I would go to the university and was interested in what they were doing, I would talk to them about their courses . . . I had older friends and adults who were emotional outlets . . . they provided advice . . . the gym was important, hanging and talking to the guys . . . I was beginning to see education as something worthwhile, I could see the benefits of that from people at the gym and at university. Prior to this year I viewed education from a practical angle, but now I experienced wonder and inspiration, I saw the value of education from a more aesthetic perspective.

Finally, Ray also spoke of the power of a few simple changes, including setting small goals, focusing on one thing at a time, and developing and finding strength in routines. He also commented on the importance of physical health to his academic success, not only through regular exercise but also diet. Ray also found both inspiration and emotional retreat in his continuing interest in music.

Upon graduation, Ray enrolled in a community college business diploma program, prior to attending university. His choice of teaching as a career came later, "a combination of practical and aesthetic things . . . I needed to make a living and I liked the interaction with students . . . I hoped I could achieve something with meaning and purpose."
As I listened to Ray’s story of reintegration, I was struck by the power of inclusion during his final years. Ray showed remarkable growth in part, I believe, as a result of the consistent attempts by staff to include him in the life of the classroom and the school. Indeed, he reflected on the power to be found in the validation and valuing of all students’ experiences and particular gifts. In so doing, he rejected the notion of the “at-risk” student, indeed for Ray the label serves only to mask the wealth of experience and wisdom such students bring to a classroom,

I think at-risk kids . . . it’s a label you know. It’s a label of convenience as are so many . . . they bring something to a school...I mean we all, everybody goes through at some point in their life . . . a period of . . . being overwhelmed with troubles or whatever, and some of these kids are just coming to that zone early . . . but they bring . . . honesty . . . and I think that’s what I gave back . . . I think kids who have by fate or necessity been shoved into contending with adult themes very early on and may deal with them in very unhealthy ways, they’re still capable of being leaders . . . that may be limited to “hey, can you help me pass these papers out” to being involved on a team . . . these kids bring soul to the school, you know.

I was also struck by the impact of adult caring in these latter years. Often it was the simple things that made a difference, saying hello, asking for an opinion. Throughout, Ray spoke eloquently of this impact.

What changed? I think it would have to be numerous encounters with numerous different adults who . . . genuinely cared . . . that made efforts to interact with me and bring out some of my goodness . . . helped me manifest it . . . There are kids who will . . . try and shut down from the world, and just try to become invisible, and I think, for me . . . I knew that I’m a person who craves contact with people, and what worked for me was adults who were willing to spend some time with me . . . I think back to Mr. H and to Mr. J, and Mrs. X . . . Students are an immense place of wonder, you know . . . It’s just a really wonderful thing when an adult can . . . just accept the student for who that person is.

I wondered about the qualities that these meaningful adults shared. Ray commented on their ability to create happiness in themselves and others, and in their optimism, their levity, their “strong belief that life will work out, that life is good”. Humour and the
ability to inject fun into life and school also played a significant role, as did modeling courtesy and respect.

Through being silly, being able to laugh at themselves . . . to be able to get a teenager to laugh at their own selves is also a big skill and I think my foster parents and other people were able to do that with me.

Ray explained that caring adults can introduce new ways of being in the world, so important for children caught in a cycle of violence, isolation, or simply intellectual atrophy.

I think some kids and certainly some adults are trapped in cycles. Trapped in patterns and I think a teacher . . . can show them how to get out of that pattern, how to . . . take on a different perspective. I don’t think I felt I was that smart. I think I felt I had average intelligence, and I think I’ve realized that I have a mind . . . and I have a curiosity about the world and when that comes on you know, it’s beautiful, it’s very powerful.

He also spoke at length of the importance of this acknowledgement of spirit, of “personhood”, by significant adults in his life.

I hadn’t really talked about “my spirit” with my parents . . . the first person was Mark, my foster father, who talked about my spirit in relation to my person . . . Our schools are secular institutions but people’s spirits do dwell within them . . . two thirds of teaching has nothing to do with what you’re teaching, its how and who you are . . . I don’t think you can have institutions that are responsible for students and ignore the soul and the spirit . . . I think you need to find what it is that makes that student feel more of themselves . . . for me it was writing, working out, being athletic, sharing my thoughts.

Perhaps the safety, acknowledgement and freedom to take risks generated within such caring relationships enabled Ray to find a path that “fit” for him, allowing him to more fully commit to the educational experience he craved.
Chapter 6

Deirdre

I always had a sense of being more than I was being, of being successful, having a job, not disappointing my family, of my parents being proud of me...

Deirdre was in many respects the most challenging participant to interview, simply because the pain of her recollections at times overwhelmed her ability to reflect on and share her past. Extremely sensitive by nature, Deirdre had not invested a great deal of time exploring her past prior to our interviews, choosing to simply move on and “forget” the impact on family and self. Indeed, she had perhaps “disengaged” from her past. As a result, our interviews were initially halting as we attempted to piece together her disengagement and reintegration to school. An exception to this was found in her description of her early school memories. She spoke of these with an enthusiasm and joy absent throughout much of the remainder of her story.

By and large Deirdre’s early recollections of school were very positive. She enjoyed elementary school and although the memories were often difficult to retrieve, she spoke of several teachers who touched her deeply and made school a special place. Such relationships, characterized by a “personal touch” in the classroom, were very important to Deirdre; perhaps because of the deep need to belong and be accepted that became more evident later in her school career. She appeared truly engaged in school life, both within and without the classroom, participating in sports, drama, dance and choir. In general, academic learning was not a great challenge, although she struggled somewhat learning to read. However Deirdre was cognizant of the “difference” between herself and her
father. She felt somehow unable to live up to his achievements, and was keenly aware of a perceived difference in scholastic ability. This need for approval, first evident within her family relationships, was later characteristic of her relationships with peers. As time went on, Deirdre became increasingly peer oriented, and the desperate need to be accepted socially became her only priority, foreshadowed in her grade 7 visit to her secondary school, her abandonment of adult-approved activities and finally, her estrangement from both school and family.

Deirdre’s story of reintegration was tempered by the sadness of the disengagement that preceded it. Evident throughout is a fervent wish that things might have been different. The process of reintegration was fraught with disappointment, as she made several attempts to reintegrate into “regular” high school life. Eventually she abandoned this in favour of a learning centre where she finally found both a sense of belonging and of self-worth. A fortuitous school canoeing trip provided both the context for the development of a meaningful mentoring relationship with a caring teacher and reintroduced her to the pleasures of outdoor activity, allowing her to free herself from her past and more fully engage in her future.

**The Early Years**

As we spoke of her early school years, Deirdre was at her most animated. I noticed that as our interviews progressed and we began to deal with more painful, troubled times, her recollections were less vivid, perhaps her way of dealing with the dissonance these events produced; the girl in these memories was so very different from the girl she truly was and the woman she is, and it is difficult for her to come to terms with these
contrasting self-images. But in her early memories a joy is evident. Deirdre described this as “innocence”.

I loved it...I think just because of what I went through in high school, I always looked back at that time of my life being really innocent...Something I always wanted to go back to and wish that if I could start over again it would be in that place.

Deirdre began her kindergarten year in a private Catholic school, possibly because of her mother’s traditional values. Her recollections of this year were few, although she described it as a cold, sterile place, recalling the smell of cleaning products, and the strict, possibly harsh, demeanor of the nuns. However, this had little lingering effect on her view of school. In grade one she moved to a public elementary school and remained at this school and neighborhood throughout the remainder of her elementary years. This provided a community for Deirdre, and her comments belie the importance of belonging:

I loved the school...I loved the area, I loved where I grew up...I had a lot of friends and I just knew everyone because I grew up in that area, so I knew everyone in the school.

It was here that Deirdre found her “inspiration”, Mrs. P.

Grade four, you know how I said I would like to be an elementary school teacher, well, you know sometimes people go oh, because I had this great teacher and this was her for me...she was the best...she’s just so charismatic...she had this way about her....she just had a lot of energy about her...She was strict but I mean at the time maybe that wasn’t, you know, no one likes a strict teacher, but you know later on you kind of thought this is for the best you know, she’s a great teacher...she had a lot of compassion for the students and was really genuinely interested in and concerned for them. I just remember she had all these things like you know to do and she was full of energy, you know we’d go outside and play dodgeball and then you know come back and have some singing lessons...she would get the class to sing and so we were like a choir...she’d play the piano...we sang Beatles songs...everyone would have a little part...it was great and I loved her... and so you could see that she really was dedicated...she made it fun!

In addition to her playfulness and energy, Mrs. P was organized and held high expectations in the classroom.
Deidre had several other teachers that touched her life, though none so profoundly as Mrs. P. In general, it was their compassion that mattered most. In contrast, her grade 7 teacher was not able to connect with her personally, and this was a great disappointment to Deirdre in her final elementary year.

He was very...just very businesslike. Like you know, get down to work...after having such great teachers and then having my last year with him, it was just quite a disappointment...he favoured kids, and so right off I didn’t care too much for him...it was discouraging you know...it kind of made you feel inadequate at times.

Learning in elementary school was at times a challenge, particularly learning to read, possibly due to some attentional difficulties, though overall Deirdre did well academically. Her greatest challenge was “focusing”, particularly on material that she considered boring, that didn’t capture her interest. This sometimes made it difficult to follow a lesson, and left her struggling to catch up. Deirdre commented that although she was a keen learner and enjoyed school, she had early doubts about her intellectual abilities, “I knew it wasn’t a strong point...I knew I would never excel academically”, and she often compared herself to other students, “My best friend was so smart”. She was at her best, however, when actively engaged, particularly in a creative way.

Extracurricular activities were a regular part of school life for Deirdre: singing, dancing, plays, and sports.

Everything that came up in school...we’d have like little plays and I’d audition for those and um, sports...anything, I mean I was in everything. I was in the volleyball, basketball, soccer...I was really athletic, so I enjoyed sports...so everything, pretty much everything I really enjoyed in elementary so anything that was going on I would go for.

Friends were, from the beginning, an important part of school life, and were to become pivotal to her disengagement in secondary school. Early on she associated with the “popular” girls, and although not comfortable with being the center of attention,
Deirdre enjoyed the benefits of being part of the inner circle, the “in” group. She commented on the social competition that was inherent in social life, and her discomfort with this. These early experiences fueled Deirdre’s apprehension about moving into high school. It was important for her to be part of a group, to be accepted, to be liked. As we discussed where this need may have originated, she talked of fears of being alone, and suggested that she looked for acceptance socially “maybe because I didn’t do so well in school”.

Deirdre recalled her parents as interested in her schooling, particularly her mother. She has happy memories of her mother volunteering at sports days, and recalled both parents showing interest and concern over report cards. Education was valued, evident in her father’s own achievements, her mother’s concern over private vs. public schools, and the availability of reading material in her home. Graduation was an expectation. She recalled working on homework with her father, but commented on a wish that her mom had read to her more.

Deirdre recalled the intimacy of her family in those early years, with regular family dinners, outings and holidays. Her parents were there for her and she was comfortable talking with them about problems, however she noted that this changed as she entered high school. Significant to Deirdre were her father’s achievements, and she admired his “genius.” However, this was also a source of anxiety as she compared herself to him and felt she could not measure up.

I was looking at his report cards and I mean every area it was A, A, A, A . . . and scholarships . . . I mean, he just worked really hard and he got the results . . . I was really envious...I just always felt I was trying to add up to more for him, like if I was going to do well, it was going to be for him and . . . everything he does, he has a million projects going on and . . . I always wanted that...you know to have his ambitions, his goal setting, and I knew at an early age that I wasn’t as . . . as smart as
him with school . . . It was hard, I always felt that I wanted to prove something to him, you know . . . I just didn’t have it in me.

Comments such as those above suggested a growing insecurity and sensitive nature, which perhaps played a part in her growing reliance on peers. As her elementary years drew to a close, things began to change, and apprehensions about what was to come grew.

**The Middle Years: Secondary school**

Early in our first interview, Deirdre alluded to her worries about going to high school, first experienced during grade 7:

I knew high school was going to be really hard and I had some earlier influences in grade seven and knowing that they were, it was going to be a hard situation in high school that I always wanted to hold onto elementary you know...to hold on to fun.

She explained that through a girlfriend’s older sister and this sister’s friends she had a “taste” of high school social life and the power of peer pressure while still in elementary school.

I guess many people experiment with drinking, and we had this girl in our class and she knew some high school students and so very early on I was hanging out with people in grade eight, well not hanging out with them, just, she knew them and we would get together at this girl’s house and have some parent’s liquor, so I knew this was going to be a situation in high school.

She experienced ambiguous feelings over such events,

I was hanging out with them...but it was also a weird thing because you know while we were doing that I wasn’t too into the drinking as some of the girls were but...some of the girls I hung out with would go and look at that person like, oh you know...what’s wrong with them...so I knew that going to high school there was going to be a lot of pressure...I didn’t want to drink but you know everyone else is so then I would participate but I didn’t really want to be there.
Deirdre viewed these experiences as a lesson in how to behave in high school, and also perhaps as a marker of what was most important in high school: social success. Indeed, this was confirmed for her on her class visit to secondary school.

Well, I remember going to sort of like a preliminary meeting at the high school where you know elementary kids would go from grade seven and then visit the high school rooms...my best friend at that time, she had a friend who would hang out with all the people in high school right, and then they were considered like the cool group...we went into their drama class and we were just sitting down and I remember everyone saying, oh yeah, she’s going to do really well here, she looks cool...so then I was like, umm to feel that acceptance was, it was almost nice you know, like, oh, okay, I’m cool. Whatever that means.

I asked Deirdre to expand on what that meant to her:

Well it meant that you know, I was going to do well in high school, like that I’m going to be accepted and because it was really you know, a really hard transition and I knew it...I knew that I was going to dread it you know, going from elementary to grade eight, so, yeah, you know, you felt accepted.

Success in secondary school, therefore, was defined strictly in terms of social acceptance.

Deirdre had internalized this view prior to her first day in grade 8.

Deirdre described the actual transition to grade eight as “awful,” and her first memory is of the overwhelming size and feelings of isolation that she experienced. For her, the safety of elementary school disappeared as she entered this large, impersonal institution.

It was huge. It was so much bigger and I didn’t know anyone, except for some of the people that moved with you through elementary, but you know they were in different classes, and it was just big and awful. So many people, and there was...nothing that was personal...I didn’t know how to deal with it.

She suggested that fewer teachers or perhaps a smaller school might have made things easier for her, and she lamented the lack of care in secondary school, which led to a feeling of invisibility.

In high school, it’s so big, with different teachers for every class...no-one really cares about you anymore...going to high school is the place where you’re like no-one.
Gripped by fear and a need to find her place, she recalled her earlier “lesson” and turned to peers for security, while the academic moved quickly to the background. I should have been focusing on school but all these social things started coming into play and it just, I couldn’t, I didn’t know how to deal with that...I mean right away, you can distinguish...the cool kids are the ones that had the friends and looked cool and evidently they were the ones partying right and not into school so...from very early you know I always tended to hang out with like the people who I thought were cool and you know...I almost automatically go well you know, if I’m going to do well here I’m going to go hang out with the cool people.

Attending classes, academic achievement and extracurricular activities were abandoned, as peers did not respect these pursuits.

It started out that way...these people you know would skip class and not be interested in it, and umm, it would start right away like, oh, is this what you do, okay, well let’s just not be interested in school and...in elementary school I was just so athletic and then you know as soon as I got into high school, I was just like, I was failing PE, like, my whole world just went, and it just completely ended in high school...I don’t know what I was doing...I think I was just trying to fit in...saying, oh well, I’m just going to be cool and hang out with these people and who needs school.

As Deirdre abandoned more traditional pursuits, adult influence was completely replaced by peer, and thus the well-meaning attempts of some teachers to steer her in a different direction were futile.

I mean I had so many chances and everyone seemed really concerned...I’d get told...you’re hanging out with these people, and you know, they’re not right for you, you should try to separate yourself from them and do well here because I know you have it in you...I got that all the time.

Deirdre viewed their interest with surprise, but for her, only peer acceptance was truly meaningful, a lack of which meant failure. She tried to avoid that sense of failure at all costs. School failure, however, did not impact her as personally, and was justified in a belief that “I’ll do better next time”.
As her grade 8 year progressed, skipping became more regular. This proved to be a "vicious cycle".

When I would come to class or you know start to get serious about what was going on it was almost too late because I’d say to myself, oh this is really interesting but you know, how did they get here? You know, so I was out of the loop and so it was hard to get back into it when I really wanted to.

 Skipping led to disciplinary action, but this was ineffectual. Detentions and suspensions were the usual administrative response, which led to her falling further behind in school. These did little to deter or change her behaviour, although they engendered an initial sense of disappointment.

I think some of them were pretty harsh in the way they were executed...I almost felt that it had the wrong effect. I think they were thinking, oh, you’ll go home and you’ll think about this and then you’ll want to be back here. It really didn’t happen that way.

Later, as we reflected on the impotence of such responses, Deirdre commented that she did not altogether dislike gong down to the principal’s office, “I liked the attention of getting in trouble...having people care...it was cool to tell friends you were suspended.” However, it was soon clear that there was little “care” to be found in such discipline, and she noted that contacts with administrators were procedural not personal.

Outside of school, Deirdre’s social life was predominant, and homework had no place. As she moved into grade 9, Deirdre became increasingly disengaged from home and school, and her peer group reflected her increasingly negative self-image and self-destructive tendencies. These individuals treated her poorly, yet she clung to them, seeking acceptance and love. Her memories of these times are full of shame and regret, but Deirdre was unable to feel so deeply at the time.

I was a really negative person at that stage...I think I was really angry and mean and I don’t know if that was because of the drugs I was doing and the drinking but nothing
was really important to me anymore...I was angry at the way I was ruining my life, I was angry at my friends, but I would then just release myself...drink...do drugs.

Eventually, after a series of suspensions, she was suspended from her school and not allowed to return. Deirdre was unclear as to the reason for the final suspension, but noted that this began her experience in alternate programs throughout the district.

At that stage I was just disconnected from the whole school system...I was upset at first because I didn’t succeed and deep down I knew I didn’t want to be on that course, but then... it just didn’t matter.

Following a meeting with district officials, she began the In Transition program, a temporary “alternate classroom” which served students awaiting placement in more permanent alternate programs. This led to the Sunny Alternate program, which for Deirdre was short-lived and unsuccessful, in part because of a perceived lack of direction, a sense of impermanence, and what she believed to be low expectations for students. A part of her longed to return to high school, but she recognized her own limitations.

I didn’t have much success at that time with those alternate programs...it was a way for me to be doing something like going to school...like I always wanted to be going to school, but they didn’t further any ambitions...well not like I had any ambitions back then right, but they didn’t seem to do anything for me so I don’t really have any great thoughts about those alternate programs...You know it could have been the idea behind an alternate program that it’s not a forever thing...it just didn’t seem like I was going anywhere and it never seemed to be accomplishing anything...I guess I just didn’t see ahead because I had felt you know I was jumping from school to school and just wanting to go to high school but knowing that I wasn’t ready for it... I wasn’t focused on anything positive.

Within the alternate program she experienced little warmth or personal interaction from teachers or students, commenting on the lack of “warm, fuzzy feelings”, and as a result, she kept to herself. Despite her disengagement, however, she held on to a sense of worth and some hope.

I always had a sense of being more than I was being, of being successful, having a job, and not disappointing my family, of my parents being proud of me...
The Road to Graduation

Somehow, Deirdre stumbled upon Mountain View’s grade 10 Challenge program, and was able to complete her grade 10 requirements. For Deirdre, this was the beginning of a new phase.

I think I was tired of going through the alternate system...and I just wanted to get ahead so I figured that ...you know I started having a plan so then I went to the grade 10 Challenge program and I got my grade ten from them. For once I thought, yeah, I can get my grade 10, I can accomplish something. I never felt this in alternate.

Although this too was an alternate program, with only 15 to 20 students in one classroom, she sensed it was different from those she had been to before. She enjoyed the teachers there, “they cared, they were nice” and commented on the personal touches, from warm greetings to jokes and “horoscopes”. Completing one course at a time, using pre-set goals and a progress sheet, she completed grade 10 quickly.

Still anxious to go back to “regular” high school, Deirdre then enrolled at a local secondary school, however an overly ambitious course load quickly led to frustration. The alternate programs had not prepared her for an academic course load.

After that I wanted to go into the regular high school system again, and I did...but I was a little too ambitious and I had a really heavy course load and it felt really overwhelming and I couldn't handle it...I remember one time in the counsellor’s office just crying.

This encounter with the counsellor led to a recommendation that she try a learning centre, a suggestion that she was less than happy with, as she truly wished to make it in the “regular” school. For Deirdre, this was embarrassing, an acknowledgement of failure, but she also felt as though this was her only option. She enrolled in the learning centre in her grade 11 year, but with a sense of disappointment.
It's not as structured as high school and high school has your electives, like drama and art, or graphic design...whatever...I knew they didn't have that at the learning centre...just the fact that it was going back to a learning centre was kind of disappointing to me...like I'd failed the high school system once again...you know, I really thought that time was going to be it and I was gonna you know really be successful in (school name).

As we reflected on this, she commented that perhaps she had expected too much too soon, but was uncertain as to whether this was truly the reason, and suggested that a lack of commitment on the part of the school was also to blame.

It just didn't seem like anyone was interested in making it work at the high school...if they had offered me a different schedule I would have stayed. If anything would have worked I would have tried it.

Deirdre continued to struggle in her personal life, and peer relationships continued to be problematic. As her grade 11 year progressed, Deirdre continued to use alcohol and drugs, experimenting with acid and cocaine. However, as she began to complete coursework at the learning centre, she started to change:

At that time I was...getting more serious about school and kind of disengaging from the party scene and it seemed funny because well I graduated from grade 11 and then I think it was more towards the end of grade 11 and then into grade 12 that I kind of disassociated myself from everything from my past.

Important during this time were the teachers at the learning centre.

Yeah, I think it had a lot to do with some of the teachers at the learning center ...that really helped me. I remember Don runs canoe trips and he had set up a canoe trip with the school and so I went on it and I just really loved it and I had always liked the outdoors before that...and then when I was introduced to canoeing I was like "Oh wow this is great you know...I'm missing something here."

This canoeing trip proved to be a turning point, allowing Deirdre to develop lasting friendships with several teachers, and connect “having fun” with a healthier pursuit.

When I associated having fun it was to do with drinking and then when I went on these trips it was just...you know this is really fun, hey wait we’re not drinking and I ...I felt there was more to life than just partying.
Indeed, from this initial interest Deirdre became involved as a guide, at the invitation of Don, “I mean that really changed, changed my life”. Don proved to be both a mentor and a friend, and with his help Deirdre found it easier to engage in school, and find her own path.

He really did have a profound effect and I just really turned around. He’s great, I mean he changed so many lives, because he really changed my life...he’s been my friend...He has an extraordinary sense of humour and presence, he makes you feel like you can accomplish anything you set your mind to... there was so much negativity and now this real positive person comes along... I trusted him, I felt he was such a good person, that he was there to change my life, I felt drawn to him.

As she engaged more fully in school and other pursuits, she more actively disengaged from negative peers. Perhaps this was easier as Deirdre welcomed adults into her “world”.

It was hard, especially cause I was so close with Dana, and it was almost like a surprise to her...like all of a sudden I just stopped hanging out with her, so I just felt I had to. She wasn’t getting serious about anything and...I mean it just seemed like she was always in party mode...it just kind of got tired you know?

She began to more clearly articulate her goal:

I think I just wanted an education...I wanted just some freedom from that ....scene. I just wanted to get away from it and I felt that I had to stop hanging out with her...I felt you know...I was freed up from that kind of lifestyle and I was focused on things that I felt were more important. I started soccer again...I felt like I was you know on the more positive road.

As she reflected on her eventual success in grade 12 and current success in college, Deirdre commented that she had always intended to go to college. I found this latent optimism interesting and wondered where this came from.

I guess maybe my dad because I knew he had a degree and I didn’t want to disappoint him so maybe that’s why I’m doing a degree now.
When asked what could have been done differently in school, Deirdre suggested goal setting, and alluded to the importance of structure, a more personal, involved approach, and higher expectations.

Maybe some goal setting, something you know you do this and this is due at this time ...I remember some of the teachers...well, how I was expecting a teacher to be in an alternate program, some of them didn’t meet my expectations, I expected more, I don’t know what...maybe more hands on with the student...I guess...some of them...you could get away with slacking and it was just...like a holiday...I had a problem with the self paced work and I felt that it could have been a little bit more structured.

She also commented on the fragility of youth entering secondary school, on the need to belong, and on the changing nature of students’ relationships with teachers as they move from elementary to secondary.

When you go to high school, you’re really young, you’re very fragile...if you went to high school and felt a sense of place, a feeling that you belong there...Up until high school, you look up to teachers, but how can you look up to teachers if you don’t know them?

Asked what she would change if she could, Deirdre suggested:

I would change everything...I wish I could go back and have the attitude that I have now and start over because back then...my priorities and the things I thought were important were just mundane...I mean friends were important to me and hanging out with you know the wrong crowd, I just would have changed all that and just focused on school.
Chapter 7

Alisha

To me a Leo woman is a very strong individual and I hold myself to that and I know I will survive . . . because I don’t let myself be weak. I don’t let . . . something that happens to me hold me in that same position and say poor me, poor me . . . I make sure I deal with that issue, if it takes like a week to deal with it, fine, deal with it, but get up and move on. Don’t sit there and be stuck there for the rest of your life, don’t be a victim.

To meet Alisha today is to be in the company of a strong, self-possessed, confident and reflective individual. She has goals for the future and a certainty of their realization. Indeed, her strength was evident early on: in her willingness to confront perceived injustice; in the frequent attempts to gain a sense of control through breaking the rules; and in her constant struggle to remain in school. Although she still struggles occasionally with the intense anger and emotional fragility characteristic of her early years, she now understands to some extent the reasons for both her extreme emotions and behaviours, and she possesses a growing repertoire of coping skills. She has also developed a new way of relating to the people in her life. Such is the mark of maturity, and indeed, she comments upon the simple, yet curative impact of time. Yet it was not only the passage of time that facilitated change. Key also were several influential relationships with school personnel, individuals who persisted in their care despite her initial inability to accept such care. Although the efforts and interventions of these individuals were often insufficient to combat Alisha’s overwhelming difficulties, over time their constant support became a lifeline as she struggled to complete school. Alisha experienced her first academic success within the flexible learning environment of a learning centre and
found a sense of purpose and hidden talent for helping through involvement in a life
skills training program. The combined impact of these relationships and programs,
coupled with her own strength of character and increasing maturity, allowed Alisha to
complete school despite a history of learning difficulties, family chaos, social alienation,
racism, insensitive and inappropriate school programs and violence (of which she was
both victim and perpetrator). Indeed, she still looks upon her achievement incredulously.

The Early Years

Alisha’s early years were marred by family and political upheaval. The second of
three children, she was born in Fiji to successful, professional Indian parents, several
years before a political coup forced her family to flee to Canada. From her earliest days,
Alisha witnessed her father’s abuse of her mother. The memories of this are but
snapshots, childlike images, but they command an immense power for her. Alisha
recalled the fear and helplessness she experienced. This fear only intensified after her
parents’ separation when she was kidnapped by her father and forced to live with his
family. Although reunited with her mother shortly after, the trauma remained.
Subsequently, Alisha’s father moved to Australia and began a new life and new family,
and these remain her only memories of his presence in her life, with the exception of a
single phone call at age 13. This came at a vulnerable time for Alisha as she entered the
throes of adolescence, desperately seeking to understand herself better.

Alisha began her elementary schooling in Fiji, and her early impressions were
negative, “My elementary school years, they were unpleasant . . . very unpleasant”.
Although her memories of preschool were happy ones, of time spent playing with her
sister, Alisha quickly learned that “real” school was not a place to have fun.
We attended a basic Muslim school and it was very strict, very strict... dress code... you got hit if you didn’t do your work or if you didn’t know what you were doing.

Alisha experienced learning difficulties immediately, exacerbated by the competitive nature of her school and family, engendering feelings of both jealousy and invisibility.

I wasn’t into that school because you had to strive to be first, second or third in your class, and it didn’t work for me, because even back then I remember struggling a lot in studies... like comprehending things... just little things like that... I remember having a lot of problems and not wanting to go to school... It was hard and I was constantly competing. My sister always made first in her grade and there was me, who made like eighth, ninth or tenth you know, and I never got to stand on that podium and take a bow and say you know, I did it. Like I’ve always wanted to be on that podium... that was really hard because I know that I worked hard to make that tenth and not to be recognized for it.

She found little help or encouragement in her relationships with teachers.

I can’t remember having help in any of my studies... I remember my mom helping us and doing homework and stuff, but like as in having a tutor or teachers working side by side with me, I don’t remember any of that.

As Alisha lived in a close, tight-knit community, teachers were often related in some way to her family. This served only to heighten her sense of failure, given their high expectations for achievement.

I remember struggling all the time... I would crouch down in my desk, because I wouldn’t want the teacher to call upon me. I was like, please don’t call upon me to give you an answer because I don’t have the answer... it was very embarrassing, because people in your class were like friends and family... the teachers... they’d either be friends of my mom or they’d be a relative... and it was always proving ourselves to them.

Alisha recalled a brutality in her dealings with school personnel, and once at the hands of her mother:

If you didn’t do your homework, if you didn’t memorize the prayer, you’d get hit... I was caught cheating in that school and I remember my mom taking huge offence to that and I remember going home and I got the beating of my life... I think my mom was really ashamed that a relative was telling her that her child was caught cheating.
Although her mother’s reaction was extreme, and abuse was not a regular feature of this relationship, she was left feeling afraid of her mother’s power and potential for violence, and reassured of the need to hide her own weaknesses.

Despite the fear engendered in her relationships at school and home, Alisha’s inner strength and unwillingness to abdicate total control of her life occasionally burst forth. As a result, she was prone to minor misdemeanors at school and swearing at home, a youthful rebellion against overwhelming authority. Although the need to control threatening situations would later lead to conflicts with peers, teachers and family, her strength was also her savior, “it carried me through quite a bit, it’s made me survive quite a bit in life”.

Alisha’s one happy memory of school in Fiji was of her third grade teacher. Her help and encouragement served to motivate Alisha and provided a sense of recognition and accomplishment.

I remember having this one teacher... she was really nice... I remember her sitting down with me and doing English with her, she spoke English and helped me pronounce things... and my times tables, I remember her helping me... she taught me how to do it with my hands and just little things like that. She’s the teacher that sticks out quite a bit... I think she was the only one that I remember... that was there to help me out in a way... like Canadian teachers who sit with you, or a tutor that sits with you and works with you on something and gives you little hints or rhymes to remember things by. She did that for me... that made a huge difference... that was the best I ever did in math... it got me motivated into, like, I know what I’m doing... I can do more... I was like the teacher’s pet... I remember I was so excited being up there in front of the class and the teacher going you’re going to watch the class until I come back... I loved it... I was happy to be doing well and being recognized and being called upon... You know, saying, “hey, you’re the right hand gal”, you know? That was like a happy, happy moment for me. That truly sticks out... I was really proud. I was happy. I liked being recognized for what I did. I think that’s what made me so happy at that time.

At the age of nine, Alisha’s family was forced to flee their home to escape possible persecution after a successful political coup by native Fijians. The time prior to this
move was fraught with danger and heartache, and Alisha was witness to not only the political and social upheaval accompanying the coup, but the sale of her home and possessions.

It was hard moving . . . there was a war there and we all had to leave and my grandparents sponsored us . . . the initial move was hard because we watched our house, all of our belongings being sold . . . I remember being sad when people were going through the stuff and our house . . . we had to sell everything. We would be scared to go anywhere . . . we had to get out of there, it was really, really dangerous . . . I remember being at the airport and seeing guards and guns, a lot of guns . . . and people were crying and screaming because they were being turned away.

Alisha’s life was irrevocably altered. Despite the trauma of her early life, she had lived a relatively secure existence financially. Her mother was a well-connected nurse / administrator of a large mental health facility and the family was considered privileged. Upon coming to Canada, her mother was forced to retrain, necessitating frequent absences from home and little extra money. Alisha’s family moved in with her grandparents, and they became primary caregivers while her mother first studied, then worked extended hours as a nurse.

Alisha described the transition to elementary school in Canada as “hell” and recalled her first experience with racism in Canada, something she was already familiar with in Fiji. She immediately felt different and recalled feeling forced to alter her appearance in order to fit in, something she believed was encouraged by the school administration.

Elementary school out here . . . it was hell . . . I remember when we were enrolled, like Fijians by trait we all have long hair . . . and we had nose rings . . . and I remember . . . we had to cut our hair and take out the nose rings to be enrolled into that school and that I didn’t like at all . . . I didn’t really understand racism at that point but I felt that the principal didn’t like us being there . . . that’s what I had thought . . . it didn’t feel like they wanted us there, like being in that place it just seemed like what we had just gone through back home, you know, people not wanting us there.
Due to her age, Alisha was placed back a year into the fourth grade. She was also placed in a “pull out” ESL program. She felt both frightened and angry, and found staff well meaning but condescending.

That was really hard and then having to fall back a grade... we were thrown into ESL immediately and that was really hard because being in ESL people spoke to us like we were aliens, you know, we knew English, we just didn’t know how to speak it that well and we were really quiet. Like by the time I left Fiji I was nine years old, I knew enough English to get myself by in this country... I’d be able to work and do what I need to do to survive and I remember these ladies speaking to us like “hiii, how are youuuuu doing?” It’s like, okay, I’m not deaf... I can understand you, I’m just scared... That was just my perception of the people that were around me and being extra nice... at one point I did laugh at one of the teachers because she offered me a cookie and she’s like... this is a cookie, cookie good... mmm, and I just burst out laughing... and then I didn’t even bother, I just turned around and I sat down because I just felt like I was some kind of retard you know.

Alisha responded by retreating within herself and refusing to speak. Although she now realizes that this was self-defeating, silence provided a place of safety and time to reflect on the loss of her home.

I was scared to death... the reality was setting in that we’re not going back home... I just didn’t want to talk to anybody, I just wanted to go home... to me at that point I felt safer... yeah a lot to do with safety because if I talked I knew they’d want me to talk more... I know I didn’t help the situation by not talking back to them because if I did, they’d be like oh, okay, she’s not deaf, she’s not blind and she knows what a cookie is... she knows English.

Alisha felt socially isolated and experienced the prejudice of fellow students.

There was a lot of name calling at that time... I personally believe my sister, me and my brother were the only coloured people in that school but that’s just my perception at that time... I had a lot of racial slurs sent to me by other kids and I don’t remember having one friend at that school. Not one.

Yet, despite the negative experiences, Alisha found in her classroom teacher a warm and accepting individual, who acknowledged and spent time with her. This in turn motivated Alisha to both speak and participate.
In my classroom I talked to my teacher only . . . he sticks out because he was so nice. . . step by step he helped me . . . Like I remember that we were learning how to make pizza and he did not leave my side . . . and he held one finger of mine the whole time and he guided me . . . I remember saying thank you and I think that’s the first time I spoke, I spoke to him . . . that meant a lot because I had nobody . . . and that worked out perfectly because I actually bothered talking in his class and bothered doing my homework and bothered to do something . . . I used to be really happy when I saw him smile at me.

Alisha reflected on the power of good teachers to motivate students:

There are always those three or four students that they impact and they don’t realize that. . . they help that person out . . . I know kids still come here who don’t know any English . . . and they don’t do anything and I know they’re doing the exact same thing . . . cause you just shut down. . . Like physically you can’t say or do or want to do anything because there’s nothing motivating you.

She also recalled her fifth grade teacher positively, noting that his teaching style matched her learning style.

He was very visual in his teaching and it was interesting . . . it sticks out a lot because I didn’t catch on to too many things unless it was visual to me. I think it was really easy for me to learn when I had things in front of my face that I could look at.

Prior to sixth grade Alisha experienced yet another family move to B. She recalled an austere living situation in the basement of her grandparent’s new home. Her mother continued to work long hours as a nurse to support the family. The move to a new school proved disastrous, indeed she suggested “that’s where the hell began in my life”, as both her social and academic life deteriorated. From her first day, she felt different, alone and unacknowledged. She was again placed in ESL, and noted the deleterious effect of trying to adjust to new teachers and teaching styles. Academic success remained elusive, and Alisha retreated into her shell to avoid embarrassment. Fear was a regular feature of school life, both of failure and of students. The bullying she experienced rendered her alone and helpless. As a result, she attempted to avoid school whenever possible, feigning illness to stay home.
As soon as I got into that school, again I was really quiet I didn’t bother talking at all. I remember being in the class and people looking at me and going “Doesn’t she talk?” . . . everybody again assumed I didn’t know any English. And, guess what, I was shipped off to ESL again. And that’s where the whole learning process started again because while I was at (previous school) . . . the ESL teachers taught me in one way . . . and when I went to NE . . . I was taught over again a whole different way . . . I used to come home and I used to cry because I couldn’t get the times tables right . . . I could not get it memorized at all . . . well that sucked really bad because I was laughed at . . . I felt stupid, I felt so stupid . . . everybody used to bust out laughing and . . . you would see the smirk on the teacher’s face too. And it was like, okay, I’ll sit back down now and not talk again for another week or two, and that’s what I ended up doing and the majority of the time I spent was in ESL and I spent time being the library monitor where I didn’t have to speak.

I remember not having any friends, and . . . there was a bully in this school by the name of Jane . . . she used to pick on me a lot . . . she would laugh at me so much and she pushed me around . . . the fear of her was horrible, because I’d lie to my mom and not want to go to school at all. I’d tell her that I was having problems studying . . . I needed to stay home and I wasn’t feeling well, and I used my illness from back home . . . to keep myself home . . . I’d make myself believe I was sick to the point where I would be physically sick.

At this point, Alisha’s mother became increasingly concerned with her poor achievement and arranged for a tutor. However, for Alisha it was too little, too late.

She was really nice but I wasn’t interested . . . I lost all my interest in wanting to learn . . . and I never really gained that interest again until like later on in high school.

Driven by the fear of being held back and the associated stigma, she began to develop simple strategies to convince the tutor that she was learning the material.

That’s when I created my first cheat sheet . . . I think to me it was just the fear of having to start all over again . . . in grade six you don’t want to be learning things like grade two students are learning . . . I had this massive fear of being thrown back in school years . . . I didn’t want them thinking I was stupid. Although I know today I’m not stupid , back then I believed I was stupid and I didn’t want my mom to be ashamed of me.

Alisha felt inferior to her high achieving sister, and recalled her mother’s angry reaction to her first “D”:

It was scary . . . she just went off and my mom is very verbal with her feelings, and she went off, she was like, what are the family members going to think...everyone is going to laugh at you.
The pressure proved overwhelming and her response was to give up.

I remember that day in the washroom, I was sitting next to the bathtub and I was sitting there going, I can’t do it, I can’t do it . . . Then I made myself believe that I couldn’t do it and I tried fighting that later on in life . . . my interests were gone in education and I just sat there and I was just like whatever, I cheated when I had to cheat.

Alisha became increasingly fragile emotionally, easily startled and highly reactive.

Any little thing would make me faint, because it’s just the fear of what was going to happen, who was going to come after me and all the threats from school.

Grade seven, although still a struggle academically, saw some social gains. Alisha made several new friends, became increasingly involved in track and field, and ran for treasurer of the student council. Yet despite these accomplishments, her overall impression of elementary school as “hell” did not change, and she met the transition to grade eight with relief and anticipation at the opportunity to start over.

Alisha’s first memory of grade 7 was of Sarah, the new girl. Alisha surprised herself with uncharacteristic assertiveness when she approached Sarah and asked to be her friend. Sarah provided Alisha with her first opportunity to be “a kid”, to have fun, and her voice filled with joy as she described the time with her.

I went up to her and I said “Do you want to be my friend?” and she said “yes”. And I was shocked because I’m not the type of person to be blunt or assertive like that, especially in that school . . . I think I was just desperate. Because she didn’t know me, she didn’t know what had happened at the school before and you know, she was as they say, fresh blood . . . her and I became awesome friends and we used to go places . . . we used to go to rec. centres and we used to play basketball, and do what kids do . . . she took me out for Halloween, and it was like one of my first Halloweens with a friend . . . I remember her a lot.

However, to Alisha’s great disappointment, Sarah was successfully recruited by the “cool crowd”, and although they continued to talk and share tales of Sarah’s exploits with this new and exciting crowd, Alisha was no longer a significant part of her life. Alisha
viewed Sarah’s abandonment as understandable, and although deeply hurt, suggested she would have behaved similarly given the chance. Indeed, Alisha’s language suggested she saw Sarah’s move as a “right of passage” of sorts. Alisha secretly longed to be accepted by the cool kids and share in the excitement that Sarah experienced, a longing that would define her secondary school years.

You could tell that she wanted to hang out with the popular kids and I didn’t blame her. I was hurt, but I didn’t blame her because if it was me in her position I would have skipped over. I remember how excited she was, she used to tell me stories like after when we would talk she’d tell me the stuff that they’d do you know, smoking and she’d had her first beer and I was like, oh cool.

The Middle Years: Secondary School

Despite some social success throughout the latter half of grade 7, Alisha was happy to leave elementary school behind for the new beginning she believed awaited her in high school. For Alisha this was an opportunity to begin again, and, freed from the shackles of her reputation as an outcast, make new friends. She approached her grade 8 year with a mixture of anticipation and fear. Although she found the size of the school overwhelming and frightening, she was excited by the many opportunities this school offered, particularly in sports.

It’s not easy in a high school because I started at (school name) and that’s a big school. And it’s eight to twelve and all these big kids and people looking at you and I was like oh great I’m going to get my butt whooped at this school too. I was severely scared. There was like four different buildings that you switch over to and half the time I’d get lost in the crowd. I was the smallest out of the three or four hundred grade eight students there lots of changes that was scary. I felt like I was like two inches tall walking in the school especially in grade 8 because people were just, like all the other students are like checking you out, who you are, what you look like but going to class, it was fun it was exciting at first to meet all your teachers like you want to size everything up you want to know where your locker is, who your locker partner is going to be just little things like that and it was like cool.
Extracurricular sports played a significant role in Alisha’s grade eight year, and she spent most of her spare time involved in various athletic endeavours.

Grade 8 was exciting because I liked sports and I got into volleyball and basketball... I was in track and field... I got involved in all of that and that was like really exciting for me because I was good at long distance... playing sports was huge, huge until just after grade 8.

Alisha suggested sports provided a sense of community, of belonging, which she had never before felt at school. They also provided an escape from problems at home.

I had something to do after school... it kept me going and it gave me the excitement of wanting to do something... I never... understood until later on in life... what that meant to me... it was belonging... it was something to do besides being at home... I was having a lot of problems at home.

Alisha also commented on her experience of caring in her relationship with her coach.

The coach would be like, you know, you’ve got to work on this a little bit more... I’m watching you... it was just like, okay, they care, and they want you to be in shape and stuff like that, because to me it meant that they knew what I could do... and that worked.

Socially, Alisha was increasingly accepted, although not yet a part of the popular crowd. She recalled learning how to smoke and skipping out for the first time, with her “cool” friend Bee.

I met this girl... she was really cool, hyperactive and pretty and she wanted to be friends and obviously I’m gonna go along... she was really cool... she used to come over all the time and she used to smoke... Grade 8 was my first time skipping out and being caught. I think I left way too many hints... I didn’t know back then you know, how you can come up with lies and stuff... I was let off with a referral and no contact to my mom, thank god.

Academically, success remained elusive. She was again placed in ESL for support, and continued to struggle in math. Alisha no longer strove to achieve higher grades, indeed, a passing grade became the measure of success.

By that time I was like... math? What’s math? You know I was just so sick of it... math... oh my god that was horrible... we had a dud as a teacher... math was the
weakest point in my life and I used to just sit there and I'd be like I can't do this, I'm going to fail math, I'm going to fail math... that's all I did... you could explain it to me like thirty different ways, you could sing me a song and I could memorize that song, but still it would not stick to me... and I cheated as much as I could, got myself a D and you know, that was good enough for me... at least it wasn't an F.

Although she did poorly in some subjects, Alisha recalled several classes, such as French and Social Studies, with pleasure. In each case, she equated her enjoyment of these classes with the teachers and their enthusiasm, commitment, ability to make learning fun and acknowledgement of her efforts.

I remember being really excited about French class, I believe I got my first B in French... Mr. T... he was really cool... I remember him clearly, this thick mustache, and he was so excited to teach French to us new kids because we didn't know nothing about French... he was really exciting. I remember liking his class a lot. I remember being able to pronounce a French word and say it and speak the sentences.

I remember going to social studies class with Miss C. God, she was awesome... she was like the world's sweetest teacher. She again made things interesting... I don't remember anything specific from that class but I remember liking her... I remember saying hi to her a lot. Any chance I saw her... she was always nice, you know, asking, oh, how's it going, how are your classes? How did you find this test that we did last week... if you want to make it up, you let me know. I'm free after school... just little things like that... social studies was not like the best area of my knowledge either, so she would put in time and encourage me to come see her and do the extra work, or she would hand me outlines of what I needed to study for the test and to know what was coming up next... that helped a lot.

Although Grade 8 proved to be a more successful year at school, her family and emotional problems were becoming increasingly difficult to manage. Throughout the summer prior to ninth grade Alisha struggled with anger, depression and her first suicidal thoughts. She described a painful episode in which she was sexually assaulted by a male relative while staying at her aunt's home. Her version of the story was questioned and in the end she was left feeling betrayed and bewildered.

It was horrible because nobody would believe me. They all came to the conclusion that I lied and that was really hard... I remember that was my first ever thinking of wanting to kill myself... that night... I just couldn't find anything... I was scared.
I was so scared I remember staring out the bedroom window and looking at the road. It was just a windy road that let out and I didn’t know where it went, I just wanted to crawl out of the window and run... I needed to make myself feel safe and I didn’t feel safe there at all... I sat up the whole night until the next morning when my mom came and picked me up... I don’t remember talking to my mom about it at all.

Alisha’s feelings of betrayal and anger intensified soon after when she found out her mother had attended a meeting at the home of the man who assaulted her.

My mom lied to me and said that she was going to a party and I found out by accident... this was a massive, massive turning point in my life because I hated her. I hated my mother... I didn’t want to see her, I didn’t want to speak to her. I wished her dead. I didn’t care, I just wished her dead because that hurt so much and I remember being in my mom’s car... my mom and I were arguing and I brought it up to her and I said I know, I know where you were that night... after what he did to and she’s like, you know what... I’m sick of this, I’m sick of you and I’m sick of this stuff always happening to you, how come it always happens to you?... I opened the car door ready to jump out... that was so hurtful.

Alisha’s grade 9 and 10 years witnessed growing familial and academic disengagement, as she became increasingly peer oriented. She again moved schools shortly into her grade 9 year. It was here that Alisha finally found the belonging and acceptance she had so long craved through her acceptance into the “cool” crowd. Alisha could finally abandon all attempts at academic success, indeed, her friends frowned upon such success and continued failure ensured her belonging. She also abandoned extracurricular sports. Although such endeavours were also ridiculed by peers, she suggested that this choice was motivated by a growing self-consciousness and poor self-image. Alisha began to skip school with greater frequency and developed an increasingly sophisticated repertoire of strategies for avoiding detection, both at school and home. She became increasingly angry and at times violent, often bullying others in her desperate attempts to build social status and establish herself as “tough”. Alisha readily acknowledged that these actions were based in fear. Her grades deteriorated even further,
and she was often late or absent. Alisha's recollection of these years is limited, perhaps due in part to her extreme disengagement from schooling and her increasing drug and alcohol use. It was during these years that she was referred to the YES program for at-risk students, and found a place of refuge. Although too soon to impact her fully, this program and its coordinator would become essential to her later success. It was also during these years that Alisha developed a relationship with her Vice Principal, who worked tirelessly to encourage and support her.

Alisha described the move to a new city and school as difficult and frightening. She recalled few details of her classes that year, explaining that social issues were of far greater importance, and she described the social "games" embarked upon by adolescents:

Actually I was more worried about fitting in that year than I was about my schooling. I was skipping class as much as I could, because again like once you enter that school, you have a set group of people who like bite on you and they take you into their crowd. Meaning like you know people walk around you, they study you and they're like, oh, you know, is she good enough to come into our crowd and they'll actually come up and say, do you want to be friends, do you want to hang out with us? . . . I was in . . . the popular group for my grade . . . I hung out with the cool people, you know, the people that actually snuck out of the house, they went drinking . . . who smoked, who drank, just that group. The ones that are out there . . . the wild rebels . . . we went to dances. We'd have friends who would drive cars, people who could boot for us or people who had ID you know, just basic stuff like that. That's the kind of people I hung around with. I remember being scared of wanting to drink . . . I was kind of getting out of control . . . I had no fear of anybody . . . I didn't know the teachers that well.

Alisha contrasted her acceptance into the cool crowd with her lack of social standing, indeed, lack of personhood, at her previous school.

I was nobody in (previous school name), because I was just like a little runt . . . I was like the smallest, skinniest, weakest looking person . . . people didn't want to talk to me.
Alisha developed many strategies for cheating, skipping school and sneaking out of her house, although she commented that her mother’s hectic work schedule afforded ample opportunity to be alone in the evenings and come and go as she pleased.

Although her school transcript indicated that she had learning assistance during her grade 9 year, Alisha did not recall this support, only her growing frustration and disengagement. Discussing her science class, she commented:

I wished I’d bothered listening . . . but I . . . just felt really lost and the work that everyone was doing, like if I tried doing an assignment I couldn’t get it and I would get so frustrated that I would throw it away.

Alisha found greater success in summer school, and suggested this was due to the organization of the summer program, including the shortened term, and fewer social contacts. During the regular school year she would often do well initially, then fall apart as the school year progressed, losing both interest and concentration.

Oh yeah, it was a huge pattern . . . I did half my school year and then I stopped concentrating . . . I lost interest . . . the only time I didn’t lose interest was if I had a specific interest in the topic or the class or if the teacher kept me there, that’s it.

Alisha noted that the teachers often played a significant role in her success and she recalled one class with pleasure, her Spanish class with Miss P.

She was young and really energetic and she didn’t act like a teacher, she was like, just like a cool person . . . it seemed like we were in college because she’d treat us like adults.

However, while a good teacher had the power to motivate and keep her in class, a teacher with whom she clashed would often guarantee failure.

I remember my English class, I had Ms. C…she was rude and mean and I stopped going to English class. I refused to see her face. She had labeled me from the beginning.
Alisha was sensitive to perceived injustice, and became, throughout grade 9 and 10, increasingly confrontative with staff as she attempted to maintain personal control.

Alisha believed she was labeled a troublemaker by some.

I’ve been labeled...I’ve had teachers say it to my face: you’ve failed all these classes, what makes you think you’re gong to pass this one? I’m like, what makes you think I’m going to come back...I found that I was prejudged before I got into a class...I was always in the back of the room with the problem causers, you know, the people who skipped class, you know, why stretch your voice when you’re not going to pass anyway.

Despite her increased social acceptance, fear and anger remained important motivators for her behaviour during these years. Alisha became increasingly violent, bullying others in a desperate attempt to establish herself as strong and in control, despite the ever-present memory of being a victim.

I think I was more scared of being bullied again, so I became this tough person to put up this kind of front basically, say, don’t even think about it because this is who I am. And once I had a front, this fake person that stood in front of me, I had to keep that up, and if I was acting tough, I had to do things that look tough, and that’s where bullying came into the role...that was the point where I had to learn how to fight, and if I didn’t want to fight anymore I had to make sure people knew that they couldn’t come up to me or even bother asking me for a fight, and that’s when I really started bullying and pushing people around...it was a huge, huge front, I wasn’t tough at all.

She recalled an incident prior to grade 10 where she lost control in an attack on a girl. The intensity of her anger and propensity for violence frightened Alisha enough to encourage her to break up with an abusive boyfriend and briefly attempt to get her life back on track.

Alisha began grade 10 with a fresh resolve to start over. Indeed, her early reports indicated fewer absences and average to above average marks, most above C, although she admitted that she still put in little effort.

I had a weird way of thinking, it was, oh, I have a B or an A so I can skip out for a little while and my percentage will be fine...as long as I’m there for the tests.
However, once again, Alisha’s achievement began to dwindle as the year progressed, although she was not clear on the circumstances surrounding this decline.

Overall, Alisha’s grade 9 and 10 years were a roller coaster ride. Although she started both years with some academic success, she gradually became frustrated and lost interest. Alisha found it difficult to maintain her concentration over the entire school year, and struggled with a host of emotional, social and familial problems which fueled her anger and aggression. She often experienced a sense of hopelessness in school, believing herself incapable of learning, and yet she sensed that this was somehow erroneous. It was this tiny kernel of belief in herself that perhaps fueled a growing sense of injustice and resultant conflicts with school staff.

Yet there were some bright moments during these years and she pointed to one individual who worked tirelessly to support and guide her, the VP, Mr. U. Through his eyes Alisha saw reflected the girl she knew she could be, and this motivated her to keep going despite the weight of her emotional life, although it was several years before she was truly able to reciprocate the care that he showed, and accept help.

You know it wasn’t easy for me in high school to say, oh, Mr. U, I realize what you’re doing is... really nice... as I was able to grow up and put it into words and say you know... me in high school was so fake... and he saw through that. He must have seen something to believe in me that much you know... that’s why he sticks out in my mind because he did, he guided me in different ways. I always had respect for Mr. U, like until this day. You know, he really wanted me to succeed... to graduate. He really wanted me to be somebody you know. And he gave it all that he could, and I, I sensed that from him... although, like when you start that school everyone is like, the principals are just assholes, so... that’s who and what I thought he was. I thought he was out there to get me. I thought he was out there to make my life miserable... I never gave him a chance in grade nine... I remember he really tried talking to me. He was like is there something going on at home you know, what’s going on in your life... I was just like, I don’t know, I don’t know, you figure it out... that was my basic response to him. I didn’t know how to
open up to him... that was a part of my life when I didn’t know how to talk. I didn’t know how to express what I wanted to express.

Alisha’s initial contacts with Mr. U were over her growing numbers of lates and absences. He initially tried the usual sanctions, including detentions, letters home and garbage duty, yet these had little effect on her behaviour. Instead of suspensions, he would assign “homework detentions” and monitor her personally. Alisha sensed in him a protective element. He did not fly off the handle, or call home at every transgression, but attempted to find out what was really going on, and offer a helping hand. His opinion was valuable, and Alisha experienced great sadness when she felt she had “let him down”. Reflecting on a particularly violent fight:

I thought about it for the longest time the way that Mr. U looked at me that day and I was like, you know, I felt so stupid and pathetic... he didn’t even say anything... it was just the way he looked, it wasn’t angry either... I was really concerned about that because I was thinking he gave up on me, that that was it, that I had used my last straw with him.

I wondered what qualities he possessed that made him stand out for her.

Mr. U has a very calm and accepting manner to him... everybody knew Mr. U was like tough but he smiled at you, you know... in the hallways like even if he’d been on his walkie talkie, he’d be like “hi”... he was just more approachable, you know students actually bothered saying hi to Mr. U... he treated you like a human being, you know, he’d be like, oh, how’s your family doing, how’s your sister, how’s your brother...

He used to give me detentions... I couldn’t get away without doing anything... he would walk by constantly watching what I’d be doing and I’d have to do my homework... it got me to do my homework and I needed time to pass so I bothered doing my homework... that was more effective... it was more caring... like he cared about what I did with my time in detention and got me to do my homework... I remember telling him that I was having a hard time at home... there’s counsellors, there’s the YES team and all that stuff, and I was like...okay...that’s when I started getting involved with Mrs. M (counsellor) and talking to the Yes team.

With Mr. U’s encouragement, Alisha connected with Anne, the coordinator of the program.
The Yes team was probably like the best thing that happened to me. It was exciting. It got me turned on to counselling because they got to work with kids and I thought it was really neat.

The program provided a “safe haven”, a place to go when Alisha felt she could no longer handle the stress of the day,

Instead of skipping, I had somewhere else to go . . . For Anne and Mr. U . . . for them I’d go out of my way to attend class because they would have asked me to . . . I’d go out of my way not to skip, or if I was to, I didn’t go to the park, I’d go to Anne, and I remember making a promise to Mr. U, saying that I wouldn’t skip, I wouldn’t leave the property, I’d go see Anne.

Often, she would simply take her books and work there instead of in her classroom.

Alisha enjoyed the atmosphere.

It was neat because we got to talk during class, you know, we goofed around, but the work got done...it was very interesting being involved with the YES group because you got to sit around with other students and talk about nothing and everything and a lot came out . . . Anne and I would just sit around and yap about everything and anything and a lot of things came out you know...a lot of things came out, like talking about life, about guys, about drinking about feeling cool . . . it didn’t seem like counselling or preaching ...I didn’t have to make and appointment...I would just show up and that would be...it.

Alisha was also referred to the school counsellor, Mrs. M. Although this relationship was not as intimate as that with Mr. U or Anne, Alisha found her to be interested, approachable and concerned.

She tried to reach out and get to me, she did her best and she kept me coming back to her . . . She always had time . . . She’d ask me how things were going, how my boyfriend was and stuff, she knew I was drinking , and she’d ask me about that, she tried to keep track of that, that was a huge concern for her . . . she’d always tell me you know, I’m worried about you, I remember she said that to me a lot.

Alisha credits these three individuals with her ability to persist in school despite the chaos of her life, “Oh yeah, Anne and Mr. U and Ms. M. are three people that stand out who fought for me”. However, she noted that she was not yet able to fully open up, or truly
accept help. Indeed, it was several years before she was able to reciprocate the care they offered and fully participate in her education.

**Grade 11: The Boiling Point**

Alisha described herself, at the beginning of grade 11, as lost in the chaos of family dysfunction, anger and substance abuse.

I was lost myself...I was having a lot of problems at home, a lot of problems. I couldn’t get along with my mom, I wanted to be out every night... I was just really really angry... about things that happened in the past when my mom and me were fighting and things that were said... she was wanting to know so much and I wasn’t ready to open up about myself and I was confused myself. Like I didn’t know what was emotionally going on with me, I was everywhere, I was falling apart... I found a safety haven with doing cocaine... I tried it and I liked it...I believed I was still able to control myself off of it. But I was falling apart even more because I wasn’t able to control myself.

Alisha continued to attend school, albeit sporadically, and became increasingly aggressive. She continued to find belonging and identity in the company of her “crew,” friends who shared her tastes for drugs and violence, and who were equally disengaged from school.

Like I bullied so many innocent people it wasn’t even funny. Like I picked on people for standing too close to my locker you know, or looking at me if I was being loud and obnoxious... it was like, what’re you looking at? Such stupid things. And I was so proud that I had a group, a crew of friends that I hung out with and we were known as the Kokanee crew, for drinking beer at the park. I was proud because I was able to out drink all the guys... that’s when I started losing it slowly by slowly.

She found herself wondering often about her father.

I was really curious at that time about my dad because I was just going through a phase of wanting to know, like I was having dreams about walking by people without faces an wondering you know, what kind of face would I put on my father... it was a really odd time for me emotionally.

Alisha continued to deny her need for help, despite Mr. U’s insistence that she seek it.

As she again drifted away from school, she was recommended to a learning centre.
Initially resistant to the idea, she quickly became enamoured by the casual, intimate atmosphere and self-paced curriculum.

No, I didn’t want to go there at all, but I liked it better there . . . I liked the studying there, like you were left alone and the teachers, like J., he never assumed anything about you, he let you do your work . . . and you were left, you know, you can do three chapters this week, or in three months . . . he left you at it . . . and they were encouraging, they’d walk around, look over your shoulder, and say, hey, good job, keep it up, why don’t you go out for a smoke . . . it was fun because it was so relaxed . . . we had coffee . . . you know it was like, oh, okay, we’re adults, we’ve got coffee.

Alisha enjoyed the teaching style, and found the teachers to be nonjudgmental, respectful and willing to help when she was stuck.

It was a very different atmosphere, especially from the teachers’ perspective the way they talked to us and the way they treated us . . . the teachers were great. They helped you out, you know . . . if you were really stuck on something they’d be like, okay, this is how you do it here’s the answer . . . they’d give you the answer to that situation . . . but then they’d give you something different to work on.

She also found the organization of the learning centre better suited to her learning style.

Alisha struggled with a lecture format in regular high school, and found the self-paced curriculum and small, clearly defined objectives more manageable.

I found it really easy to study there, like I flew through English and you would never catch me in English class . . . in high school. But it was in the way where you were left to do you own thing. Like you were given chapters to do . . . little sections like A, B.C, and D and you’d complete all of them and you’re finished your first phase of English and that was easy because you had given just a little thing to do . . . I remember flying through these courses . . . Any questions I had they were answered. It was broken down into very simple things to do.

For the first time, she felt successful and in control of her education.

I was like, okay, either these people have made it really easy or I do have some brains . . . and I remember one of the teachers telling me, you know, you do have a brain . . . because this course isn’t easy . . . I didn’t feel stupid.

Despite newfound scholastic success, Alisha’s difficulties at home soon reached a boiling point and she moved out, staying periodically with friends.
I was gathering myself together education wise at that point, but family wise I was everywhere...I'd fallen apart...I started losing it ...at home....my mom was like...it’s about time you get out.

Soon after, she lost her job at McDonalds, a crushing blow as work had often provided a distraction from the reality of life and a place where she did not worry about acceptance or achievement. It also provided income and a sense of control. Its loss left Alisha despondent.

Alisha moved home again at her mother’s insistence, however their relationship continued to deteriorate, and in frustration and desperation, Alisha attempted suicide.

I don’t know what came over me that day, emotionally I was just everywhere ... I grabbed every single bottle that I could find and went into my brother’s room and I was on the phone with my best friend ... and I was crying and talking and I just didn’t know what to do ... I don’t know what was going on with me, it’s just way too much medication in me and then my mom was going what’s wrong what’s wrong...I looked at her and I just wanted to get her to get hurt you know ... I was so sick of being in and out to the house ... I was like abusing alcohol and I was so wired on coke it wasn’t even funny.

Indeed, although this was her first serious suicide attempt, she had been admitted to hospital twice before for drug overdoses. Alisha was admitted to the psychiatric ward at a local hospital, where she remained for two weeks. Although she described this as a particularly distressing period in her life, it was in many ways a turning point. Alisha was finally able to acknowledge her need for help.

I think I was trying to figure myself out, because I remember feeling like I had no control over what I was doing ... or saying ... emotionally I was just everywhere and I needed to get a hold of myself and I didn’t know how to ... I had figured out at that point and I had accepted that I needed help and I was willing to go for help, it was just ... where to go and who to go to and that was the confusing part ... I had support from the YES team ... through Anne ... she came down and she saw me and I used to talk to her although I needed to take it a step above that to figure out myself and I couldn’t do that with just a YES program.
The Road to Graduation

Alisha returned to her secondary school after leaving the hospital. She was given a part time schedule, primarily spending time with Anne in the YES program. However, she found it hard to focus and felt stigmatized. Her primary goal was emotional, not educational, and as such she was unable to give herself fully to school. A meeting with Mr. U, Ms. M and Anne led to a referral to a community-based life skills counselling program. She attended this during the day, and the learning centre at night. Here she explored her anger and developed new ways of coping with the stress in her life. Indeed, it was here that Alisha discovered a latent talent for helping, and with the encouragement of her life skills coach, enrolled in a life skills counsellor training program.

I liked the way I was talking. I liked the way I was figuring things out for myself, you know, when I was getting angry I learned instead of yelling and screaming at home, how to talk with my feelings...and that helped a lot...it’s all experiential...learning how to take...feedback instead of something personally...I learned how to separate what people were saying from what was meant...to hurt me...learning to process was a big thing...when people say something to me, I need to walk away and process it, because if it becomes overwhelming to me...I get defensive...I start swearing, I will not listen.

Alisha also had the opportunity to explore a history of abusive relationships with men, something she had never before acknowledged.

Alisha approached the training program with enthusiasm, anxious to begin helping others.

I was just ready to get this course done and over with so I could get out there and talk to kids and say, I’ve been there, I bought the t-shirt and I wore it and tore it up you know. I was just excited to get out there...it was a turning point for me to be able to turn my energy from anger into helping people.

Through this program, she had the opportunity to reflect upon her constant struggle to remain in control.
Like my main thing in life is having control, power and control . . . I don’t think I was ready for a teacher telling me what to do or when homework was due, when you should be in class and all that stuff like authority didn’t sit well with me because authority meant I didn’t have control, they had control over what I was doing.

As a result, Alisha began to experience a dissonance, a lack of comfort with the way she was living and relating to her family. The counselling and training programs helped her to find new ways to relate to her mother, and for the first time, they started really talking.

I was just so dumbfounded and stuck about home and relationships until I started my course with life skills coaches training and that’s when I learned to give up issues with my mom . . . I can’t really remember the transformation between my mom and I but there was a massive, massive changeover . . . we were able to talk to each other and I was able to explain to her what I was going through in school. I was able to open up to her about what had happened between me and my ex . . . the abusive guy that I was dating . . . ever since then we’ve had a whole different relationship. We talk about anything and everything.

Alisha’s final year in school was a testament to creative, flexible scheduling. Her final transcripts are difficult to follow, as she took classes at both her secondary school and the Learning Centre. She was determined to make up for lost time, yet unable to function within a regular, secondary school timetable. While at her regular secondary school, Alisha spent the majority of her time with Anne in the YES program, completing catch up work.

She was working with my teachers and working with me, and I would refuse to go into class, so I’d be doing all of my work with Anne. Basically, my attendance was semi there, but I was with Anne and they knew that, and that’s the only person I would do my school with.

In addition to completing academics, the school gave her work experience credit for helping Anne in the YES program, which in turn helped Alisha to graduate on time. She found the flexibility essential to her ability to remain in school.

I remember if I wanted to skip, I’d go and see Anne. I’d ask her, can I go to the corner store to get this, or do that, and we’d make arrangements there, how I could make up time for the class and she’d let my teachers know right away that I was with.
her. It worked out fine. My teachers became more understanding as to why I wasn’t in class. I guess cause they knew where I was, that I wasn’t skipping their class, just going somewhere else to do the work.

I wondered about what qualities Anne possessed that allowed Alisha to feel such safety.

She was very friendly. She was younger, giddy, she was different . . . She’d hang out with us after school hours . . . she was just completely different . . . age was a huge factor . . . her approach was as a friend . . . like she made me give my answers to myself so many times . . . and it made me feel good because it came out of my mouth . . . and if I was really stuck, she would tell me . . . she’d get you to the point where you’d give yourself the answers . . . she never left you stuck . . . so many kids stayed after school in that portable like doing their work, just hanging around talking, she’d play music, just a whole different atmosphere . . . she never kept her personal life from us . . . she talked about herself . . . that was the amazing thing, she didn’t treat us like “clients”, like I have no other relationship with you. Like the way you get from teachers, like I’m just your teacher that’s it . . . there’s nothing else to me, I’m just your teacher.

Alisha noted that Anne was flexible and understanding, but expected her to follow through on commitments. If Alisha made a promise, she insisted that Alisha stick by it.

Through her own efforts and the support of her in school mentors, Alisha was finally able to complete all of the required courses for graduation. She is still amazed at this accomplishment, and as she talked about it, her speech was emotionally charged:

I always told Mr. U . . . make sure you keep a space on your wall for my high school diploma because I’m gonna get it and I think I gave it to him when I wrote him that letter, because I didn’t think I was going to do it, and he always said, you’ll do it Alisha . . . I was so proud of myself . . . even like after I went to work and learn and did everything and I was already taking the life skills course before I received my diploma, I was like, yeah right . . . you’re never going to see it. But it happened.

Yet, graduation, for Alisha, marked a beginning, not an end. It symbolized her struggle to prove herself worthy and opened the door to future success.

I guess I can say a lot of healing came afterwards . . . after I was able to finally . . . get over the fear of success . . . like to me, graduating high school was success. You know and it gave me more . . . power, more energy.
Chapter 8

John

The first day I actually remember going to class, I was so excited. I actually was excited to go, but it just wasn’t fun, it wasn’t what I thought... I remember going up, I remember being at the front door. I remember my mom taking a picture of me on my first day with my kindergarten teacher... you see I think I had a different expectation of school... That’s about all I can remember, it wasn’t fun like I thought it would be... but I do remember them wanting to fail me in kindergarten... grade one they ended up failing me and I did grade one twice, I have no idea what that proved...

John’s earliest school memories are of disappointment and failure. It is difficult to say whether these memories were influenced by what was to come, indeed, I have wondered if his extreme disengagement resulted in a filtering of experience, such that only the negative memories retain influence. Regardless, these early memories are symbols of what school meant to him: it never lived up to his expectations, and it expected far too little from him. From the earliest days John was disappointed in his teachers and the system, and through much of our conversation he spoke of school as a waste of time and space, little more than a daycare. This belief was reinforced by memories of boredom and inactivity, and his words speak to the level of his disengagement:

My honest opinion of school... it’s basically useless until grade eleven and twelve. It seems like they do a lot of wasting time... I just remember sitting in class... sitting there doing nothing but twiddling my thumbs for like minutes and minutes and all of a sudden those minutes start adding up over the days and they turn into weeks... how much do you actually do there because you’re sitting there waiting for something to happen? That’s why I was so frustrated because you’re not doing anything.

Anger and frustration were present in our talks, masked at times by humour or nonchalance, but frequently reappearing as John discussed his teachers, his early
placement in a segregated program and the associated stigma, his lack of belonging and eventual withdrawal from school. Despite his later success, and the existence of people and programs that facilitated this success, these memories and the associated feelings have the strongest hold, leading to an overall negative view of the education system and those within it.

John disengaged from school long before the physical act of dropping out. Yet it was through this act that the seeds to reintegration were sewn. Working in construction not only forced John to explore his wants and needs more thoroughly, but also reinforced the sense of cognitive dissonance experienced in his early days in special education. The realization of his need for “more”, yet the seeming futility of its realization given his academic history, sparked a depression and subsequent attempts to find solace in alcohol and drugs. However, supported by his future wife, he found the courage to return to school. He returned as an adult, though still encumbered by the weight of his early failures. Determined to go it alone, he initially rejected attempts by school staff to support his efforts. Yet he relented in the face of true caring. In his final years, John developed a close relationship with a tenacious, yet patient special education teacher who supported his reintegration and eventual graduation. Through this relationship he experienced for the first time a sense of acceptance. Ms. B provided both support tempered by a freedom that did not encroach upon his need to make his own choices. John credits her with his eventual success, yet it is impossible in listening to his story to ignore the impact of sheer determination.
The Early Years

Learning was difficult for John from the beginning, which he attributed in part to his learning disability and attention deficit disorder, with its associated hyperactivity.

I was active and hyper and I didn’t pay attention. I couldn’t concentrate on anything, my attention span was thirty seconds, it still is pretty close to that.

He was unable to read and as a result was first held back in grade one, then placed in special education classes. However, despite the system’s attempts at remediation, John did not learn how to read until his final year of high school, with the individual help of one patient, yet stubborn, teacher and his own sheer determination to graduate. He attributed this early failure to learn to read to a lack of direct instruction and a system that placed low expectations on his ability and future.

Failure figured prominently from his earliest days in school. The resultant sense of betrayal engendered a distaste for school and encouraged a lack of respect for teachers. Indeed, teacher quality is a theme oft repeated in our conversations, and he spoke with disdain of those teachers whom he believed were only in the profession for the money or pensions. Despite his descriptions of numerous teachers whom he liked and felt were competent, and his acknowledgement that without the support of B., his last LD teacher, he may not have graduated, these early teachers represent education to both John and his family.

I remember them wanting to fail me in kindergarten and my mom basically went, no, like what do you learn in kindergarten, it’s just a waste of space as a day care for four hours a day . . . So they didn’t do that and then in grade one they did . . . I thought she was a cool teacher but my mom says she was a pain in the butt, but usually all teachers are. I really have no respect for a lot of teachers.

When I questioned this, he explained that the positive experiences were often negated by the memory of the negative, “It’s kind of like the old theory . . . it only takes one sour
apple to spoil the bunch”. He noted that even those teachers whom he liked seemed to struggle accepting and dealing appropriately with difference, “I mean, I had some good teachers, they just had no idea how to deal with anybody who was not the typical student”.

I asked about the first “sour apple” experience, and John described the feelings of betrayal and frustration when his grade one teacher failed him.

My first thought . . . is when a grade one teacher that I thought I really liked wanted to fail me and the thing is I have no idea if she wanted to do it because she thought somehow I might be better off if I was held back a year, but it really ticked me off after going through the entire year thinking this person likes me and then all of a sudden saying okay you’ve got to stay behind now because you’re just not as up with everyone else . . . which is total bullshit because you don’t learn anything in the first grade anyway. . . I just remember thinking why? It was so boring the first time, why do I have to repeat this a second time?

John noted his inability to read or write as the official reasons for failure, however more significant then, and now, were the feelings of hurt and confusion.

This marked the beginning of a sense of intellectual dissonance, which haunted John throughout his school career: knowing he was smart and yet surrounded by indicators of a lack of ability.

I believed I was smart but not smart, I don’t know how to describe it, it was this weird feeling . . . like, I believed I was stupid, but I thought I was smart, but in a different way, I guess . . . It’s basically a feeling, yeah, it’s this gut down inner feeling, your head is saying you don’t belong, but your gut is saying you know you’re not that dumb . . . I mean I knew I wasn’t stupid, I could memorize play books of football by looking at them once because it didn’t have letters in them it had x’s and o’s.

It was also the beginning of a personal dissonance, a lack of fit or belonging, exacerbated by his transfer to a segregated program in grade two.

I was held back in grade one and that was utterly useless. All it did was make me absolutely huge compared to the other kids. Let’s take a kid who already is like the tallest kid in the class and make him an ogre. I think it’s really stupid to fail kids until they get into grade eight because all you’re doing is making them realize that they’re
not the same as everyone else . . . Then they put me in this program for people who had learning disabilities and were mentally retarded and just everyone that wasn’t normal . . . there was a blind kid in there, there was everything you could think of that was out of the norm . . . I was stuck with a bunch of mental kids . . . I still see myself as very different just because of the whole disability thing and that is something you’ll never lose, it’s been ingrained that you are not the same as everyone else from the beginning, so you’re not the same . . . I didn’t want to be in school . . . maybe a part of it is I didn’t belong in it and I had always been told that . . . No, I didn’t belong. I never belonged in school . . . I still don’t belong in school. I’m in university and I don’t belong here . . .

Segregation begat stigma, social isolation and conflictual peer relations.

I was totally separate, you did not do anything with the rest of the school. The normal kids . . . I had a lot of problems with them . . . they’d tease you . . . you’re the mental kid . . . I got teased a lot. I mean no matter what I tried to do to be as cool as I could, I got teased just because I was in the retard class . . . I didn’t like them much. I mean I think it was just envy or something. I wanted to be in with the normal kids.

John suggested his placement in a special education program so early in his school career and the resultant lack of academic expectations and social alienation were catalysts for his later disengagement.

The only thing I would change is not putting me into the class. That’s the only thing I can think of that would actually have done anything. I may not be here talking to you if that was different, because I may not have been expected to not be able to do anything. I may have had more pushing. I don’t know if that would have helped or not, but I may have been expected more of . . . if you’re expected to do it, you do it. If you’re not expected to do it, you don’t do it.

John decried the lack of direct teaching during these years, recalling only play and a focus on socialization, though he acknowledged that this may be the result of poor memory.

I mean, I didn’t do anything, I played with trains all day long . . . there was one to one but it wasn’t instruction, there was one to one “hey, how’s it going?”, talking but never really teaching.
He later described the same lack of expectations and paucity of direct instruction in his secondary school Learning Disabilities program and modified classes, culminating in his placement in a pre-employment program which focused exclusively on vocational skills.

Despite the intellectual and social poverty of his school life, John found belonging in community sports, where his high energy levels were valued, and a sense of community among his teammates.

I played football, I played soccer, I played every sport imaginable so I had the friends from that and they were in the same school but they just assumed that I was younger and that I wasn’t in the mental class...they all figured I was younger, so it wasn’t a big deal.

He was unfortunately unable to experience the same acceptance in school extracurricular activities.

John also found belonging, acceptance and emotional support within his family, which he described as a perfect, “Leave it to Beaver” type, with a mom, dad, and younger brother. Both parents were professionals (Dad is an engineer, and mom is an accountant), although his mother remained at home during his pre-school years. During his elementary years, John witnessed both parents return to school at different times to complete the requirements for their chosen careers. However, despite this early exposure to further education, he was also keenly aware of his parents’ disdain for the education system, explaining that they had both hated school due to the cruelty and boredom they had experienced. Within his family, education was seen as a necessary evil, of extrinsic value as a means to a career and financial rewards, but of little worth in and of itself.

Although John’s home provided the emotional support he craved, he described significant personal freedom and few boundaries. Indeed, neither parent pushed him to excel in
school, and often John’s lack of achievement and effort were excused due to his disabilities.

Though both parents expressed an interest in John’s well being, it was his mother with whom he identified and who was most active in his education. The school’s reaction to his ADHD and learning disability was the beginning of an ongoing conflict between John’s mother and school.

They said put this kid on drugs, because I was hyperactive . . . my mom said no, he’s already on asthma medication, he doesn’t need more drugs, it’s not my fault you guys can’t handle him. I don’t have a problem at home. My mom was the fighter, so she went in . . . basically the way she puts it, she did nothing but fight constantly.

In his description of the conflicts between the school and his mother (over medication, over retention and over program choices) it became apparent that she had little regard for teachers or the education system, although she herself continued on to university and a professional career in accounting.

She’s pretty well a very similar person to me. She was the ADHD kid too. She had dyslexia, still does. She hated her teachers completely and utterly.

John recalled his mother reading to him early on, although this practice waned by grade one or two. Though his mom at times insisted on him doing homework, in his elementary years she would often do it for him.

I remember stuff being done and handing stuff in but I didn’t do it, my mom would do it for me. She would do it and she would make me sit there beside her . . . I can actually understand why, because if I didn’t do it, it wouldn’t have gotten done, and I mean face it all parents help their kids.

John’s father played a less visible role in his family and education, due to his work and school commitments. He disliked confrontation, and therefore did not push John to achieve.
He was cool, he didn’t want to argue, he didn’t want to fight about anything, he’s like, if you just want to have fun, let’s just have fun...like if you want to have fun and get away from that crap I understand. He said he’s always hated school too...it was always boring.

John remained in a segregated setting until grade five, when, at the insistence of his new special education teacher whom John believed recognized the stigma associated with segregation, he was integrated into the regular program. This was his first experience with a teacher who challenged him intellectually, who held high expectations, and whom John believed genuinely cared for him. John described him as genuine, persistent and creative:

I started with this new teacher...he seemed to know how to help better. He forced me to do stuff I didn’t want to do. I didn’t want to do it. I don’t know if I was lazy or just frustrated, but I didn’t want to do it. He started getting me to do it... he played around with stuff to try and get me to go faster.

Near the end of grade five John’s family moved to S. For John, this was an opportunity to finally shed the stigma of special education, to be normal and accepted.

The day we moved I was so happy, it was a nice period of freedom...just to lose the stigma ...I could start all over again. I was basically changing myself...I went and bought new clothes to try and be as cools as I could, and it worked. I didn’t have the stigma anymore. I was the new kid. But the thing is I really didn’t change myself that much, I just lost the stigma. Honestly, the stigma of being out of the mental class...I mean it all came back very fast, but the kids didn’t know it.

In his new school John experienced several “good” teachers, and though he struggled with a more specific description, caring, youth and idealism seemed central.

I had Miss W., she was a great teacher. She was really young too, like it was her first real job, so she cared at that point. A lot of teachers you got the opinion that they didn’t care. They just plugged the new ones out and get the new ones in...like a conveyor belt...but Miss W...I actually did reports, I did stuff in her class, just because she made you want to do it. It wasn’t like she was super tough or anything like that, she just made you want to do stuff...I had things that interested me at the time, and she brought these things out, she pointed me in a direction of something that may have interested me...then in Grade seven I had Mr. B, he was an RCMP
officer then he went for his PDP. He could have left teaching but he didn't because he liked it and it actually showed. Another good teacher but young...

John equated caring, youth and idealism with better teaching, "Maybe they're more driven ... young and wanting to do it I guess...maybe to make a difference in society".

His new school also approached his learning needs in a different way and John found ways to develop his strengths.

All of a sudden in (city name) they just handled it in a different way...it was just different the general outlook on it all...they just treated it totally different. It may have been that school was just a little bit ahead of its time or something...
In grade six they started taking us to the computer labs and I had had a computer since I was in grade three or something and I had a friend who showed me how to program computer games, so I mean we went there and that was like, wow, I'm going to show these kids actually how to do something, so that was a confidence builder....

He also recalled psychoeducational testing that finally confirmed what he had suspected all along, that he was indeed "smart".

I like tested really high in certain areas, and then low in other areas because the reading and writing just screwed it completely, but, she just said stuff like you're actually a pretty smart person.

Yet, despite all of the changes, his overall sense of his experience in elementary remained negative. He was still unable to read and he recalled the futility of his learning assistance classes.

I didn’t read, because I couldn’t, so why bother. I mean I got comic books and I would look at the pictures, I wouldn’t even try to read them because I couldn’t but I mean you can get all the story just from looking at the comic pictures... I don’t remember doing anything in there (LD class). I remember wasting time. I mean that’s what I’ve done through all my years of sitting in those disability kind of things, you just sit there and wait for the time to end. Sometimes you just sit there and try to sleep with your eyes open or you just have a book there...what the hell were they thinking, you’re going to be reading? Oh look it’s a miracle, Johnny’s reading.

John frequently used illness as a means to avoid school, continuing a pattern of school absence that began while at his first school, and continued throughout his school career.
I didn't necessarily like going to school still. I still had my usual I have a tummy ache, I have a head ache...Oh, I'm wheezing...a lot of times with the asthma I could fake it really well, it worked awesome, so I could just stay home...I may have gotten four days a month at home, but I mean compared to later on that was nothing. I mean I skipped months at a time in high school...sometimes though it was real, I was sick, I mean being asthmatic your immune system is down a lot more so you are going to get sick more often just because of the asthma and the stress of school. I mean it was weird, but I didn’t realize it was stress until later on when it went away and then I’d feel it again and it would be like, what’s going on?

However, he commented that by his secondary years he no longer cared enough about school to feel stressed; he simply couldn't be bothered anymore.

**The Middle Years: Secondary School and the Path to Dropping out**

The transition to secondary began a new phase in John’s life. Socially, he was increasingly accepted, while academically he continued to accomplish little. School was little more than a social event, and John began to skip with increasing frequency, developing simple yet effective strategies to avoid detection by his family. As we chatted about these years, the absence of any real academic expectations or challenges was readily apparent in John’s story. He repeatedly described exerting little effort, indeed doing the bare minimum, yet somehow passing courses and being promoted to the next grade level. His growing disengagement was evidenced in his increasing truancy, until eventually he merely dropped in at school, then finally, dropped out. As time progressed, John’s parents also disengaged, becoming less involved in his school life and accepting his decisions to move into pre-employment and eventually drop out to begin full time construction work.

John recalled being overwhelmed by the size of his new school, but remembered little else of his grade eight year.
Grade eight...that was scary. It was this big school, compared to everything I’d ever seen before it was huge...like twenty different elementary schools to one school now. And then...you shift around to different classes.

He was pleased to find that the special education class was now an exclusive program for those with learning disabilities, and recalled being placed in some modified courses.

However, there were few real expectations placed upon him. The most significant event in this year was meeting his best friend. Indeed, throughout John’s secondary years, increasing popularity accompanied his growing academic disengagement.

That’s where I met my friend in grade eight, right there in the beginning. We were in a couple of the same courses and we had played football together... I don’t remember very much of my grade eight year, I still don’t remember doing much of anything, I don’t honestly think I did much work in grade eight either, I just didn’t have to for some reason...I could always squeeze through math without doing anything. Never had to really work in it. I don’t think I ever got good grades because I just think I didn’t try...English, I was put in the modified English but I didn’t have to do anything. They would read stuff out so I would just remember it so you know, if I went to class I learned something. If I didn’t go to class I didn’t learn anything. I think I failed the courses, but the school had finals so I could always just pass by a final...grade eight, nine and ten were pretty well a blur altogether.

John began to skip occasionally in grade eight, and this became a regular occurrence in grade nine, though he was rarely caught.

Grade eight was the first time I skipped. I skipped with a friend of mine...it was grade nine, I started really skipping. We started going over to a friend of mine’s place and we’d go there and his parents were both working parents. They had lots of money, lots of toys, they had all the things...so we just went there, we played DND all day long. It was just like paradise.

He generally avoided detection through some simple strategies.

I just didn’t go in between classes. I went to first class and then came for the last class and at that time I had my own phone line so I left my phone as the school phone. Not rocket science, just easy as hell to do...I could always figure out a way not to get caught. That was not a problem, there was always a way around the rules.

Even on the rare occasion when he was caught, the administrative response did little to curb his behaviour.
I would get caught skipping sometimes, but my parents never found out. Sometimes it was us walking away that we got caught because a teacher would be coming in or something would happen...so I got garbage duty as usual. I had a lot of garbage duty. Just garbage duty, garbage duty. Some detentions...oh yeah, I always did it...I didn’t care...I mean I usually didn’t even go to school that day and I came just to do garbage duty because I didn’t want to get in any more trouble. If you skipped a detention you were in total crap and then they would definitely try and get a hold of my parents.

Indeed, John became an expert at manipulating the system.

I mean there were always ways around getting in any sort of real trouble...do you know how many times a family member died? I mean they don’t want to call home in those cases. I wasn’t stupid...you can get anywhere with bs...I could bullshit my way through anything.

It was during this time that he began to experiment with alcohol and drugs. Although his use of alcohol was infrequent, drugs did, at a later point, become a more regular part of his life.

Grade nine, I drank. Like I always stole liquor from the parents’ cabinet. I got caught, but I mean, my parents were very liberal about a lot of things...I just did it at that point because it was cool. I drank say once a month, or maybe twice. Like we snuck out of school and we’d play dungeon and dragons or shoot pool and order pizza, and we’d drink, but it wasn’t like a bunch of kids getting drunk, like we had our core group that would go there and we would drink, but we wouldn’t get drunk...my parents didn’t care actually as long as I didn’t steal their alcohol...then in grade ten we walked out and a guy had a joint and it was like what’s that...huh...okay I’ll try it I don’t care...later I started getting into some heavier drugs...just around the end of my third year of grade eleven...then it started getting a little more daily because well, I wasn’t going to school, I wasn’t doing anything...but school was bearable when we were stoned. . .you just smoke a little so you’re a little happy and school’s not quite so painful, but then at the very end I started getting into a bit more marijuana with some coke.

Despite his lack of effort in school, he somehow managed to move up, and he attributed this to his ability to “con and scam”.

I don’t understand how I got through, they must have just passed me because I didn’t do anything. I didn’t do a thing. I didn’t do any homework. I didn’t do readings...I mean I went to class maybe once or twice a week, even sometimes for a week straight but then I’d just skip again...I don’t think I’ve ever really generally passed a grade to be honest with you, I think they just passed me...I mean I scammed my way through grade ten: I failed and everything. I don’t think I passed a single course and this time
they were going to fail my ass. But I scammed my way through that again. I said if you send me to (another secondary school)...I'll go into the pre-employment program...so I got the counsellor to pass me to (school name), I mean I didn't pass anything, I didn't even have grade ten socials, I had nothing.

I wondered why passing was important to him at this point and he explained that although there were few pressures to excel, his family did expect him to at least pass.

More important, though, was his sense of personal dignity and self worth: he didn't want to be "stuck behind" again.

I felt like that was like...from like grade one, that sucked. All my little friends that I had from kindergarten and grade one are now over there and I don't get to see them anymore and I'm now with these little shits, so I didn't want to have that...I wanted to be with my friends and I didn't want to get into trouble at home for failing. Failing is different than doing bad. Doing bad is whatever, that's just what you're going to do, you're dyslexic it's hard...I mean it really is, it was hard. Even if I tried at the time, I don't think I could have gotten through all of it...I still couldn't read anything.

Throughout these years, John resisted placement in a pre-employment program, hoping to avoid the stigma of his early years and convinced of his intelligence.

Same stigma as before. And the kids in that, actually I saw them as dumb, and at that point...yeah, I'm not dumb, all I have to do is see something once on TV and I've got it memorized...Eventually I ended up going into one though, but not for like a couple of years, just because I scammed my way and the only way I could stay in school was to stay in that program.

In grade 11 he transferred to a new school, under the guise of attending pre-employment.

Somehow, he managed to enter the regular program. It was here that he experienced another "sour apple", Mr. W, his special education teacher.

His typical thing, you go to his class, and he doesn't interact with you at all. He just did nothing. He didn't give a damn about you, it seemed like. He was supposed to be a special education teacher and he basically never once interacted with any of the kids...At the end of every class you're supposed to grab a form and fill out what you did...You'd go into those little cubbyhole things and he'd say fill out your form. The form took twenty minutes to say what you did in the fifty-minute period. It was stupid, totally stupid...He didn't care. He never cared. He never really wanted anyone to succeed.
Although he began the year attending all classes, and found success through the use of adapted materials such as books on tape, he quickly began skipping again, which he attributed to his placement in Mr. W’s social studies class.

I went to every single class, and I was actually doing socials, something I haven’t actually passed since grade eight...I was actually doing work and they stared making books on tape available so I had a couple of things available for me to read if I wanted to...so I’d do a little bit, I mean I’d listen...A lot of it was just listening to the teacher...you go there and he talks about stuff. So I’d learn that way and then all of a sudden this Mr. W. guy, no matter how much I begged and pleaded for him not to put me in his socials class, he put me in. All he did was go there and talk in a monotone voice and he’d have these sheets of paper that you were supposed to write all out about the notes and he didn’t even read half of them out in class ...I’m like, he puts me in a class like that? I’m supposed to read this? So I skipped...

However, he was no longer able to simply drift along.

My grade eleven year I skipped and skipped, it was months at a time they wouldn’t see me...but the thing is it finally happened that I got to a certain grade that they’re not just going to pass you...my scams didn’t work. I mean I could still cut school and all that without getting in trouble, but I couldn’t get to the next level. It’s like you can’t get past go. You’re stuck.

Although John found satisfaction in work outside of school, his schedule was exhausting, and as a result he skipped even more often in order to catch up on his sleep.

After two years in the eleventh grade, John finally entered the pre-employment program as a last resort, but from the beginning he distinguished himself from others in the program.

The kids in that, I saw them as dumb...they were all messed up...they came from very bad homes. I mean, they weren’t stupid...I don’t know what it was with them because they didn’t seem intellectually equal but I don’t want to say that because they weren’t stupid...but I always thought I was a lot smarter than them, I don’t know why I should even.

The program entailed primarily work experience, with few academics, leading to a school leaving certificate only. He was critical of this option for its lack of worth, although he acknowledged that the work experience could be valuable for some.
You got this piece of paper that meant crap... it was a waste of every kids’ time in that school... all it does is it baby-sits them for an extra two years until they’re old enough to say that they got some graduation, I got my grade twelve... I actually to this day believe the pre-employment program needs to be reconstructed... I think it’s good, but I think it should be open to everyone. Forget just special kids, I think real kids need to have work experience ... there are so many people that go into university here and get through and they have no idea what it is to even work... 

John’s parents accepted the move with resignation.

They didn’t really say much. I guess they just figured fine, if that’s what he needs that’s what he needs. Dad was getting less communicative about school at that point. Just kind of whatever. They were getting frustrated but what could they do?

Eventually, attempting to balance his unpaid work experience with his own job became overwhelming, and John began to find it difficult to justify working for nothing when he had a paying job outside of “school”.

Since I was fifteen I had a job that paid me money and they (school) wanted me to work for free, and I kind of went fine, whatever, I’ll do a little bit, then they stared wanting me full-time, eight hours a day then I went to my night job that was full-time and it’s like, I’m getting no sleep here... I was getting only four hours a night. I did that for a while but then I started skipping the pre-employment thing because I’m not going to skip my regular work, that pays me, I’m not going to skip that... who gives a damn. Then I finally just said screw this. I didn’t actually quit, I just quit going.

I asked about the administrative response, and he described the futility of attempts to curb his behaviour through traditional discipline and the inability to offer him a compelling reason to stay, in the form of a meaningful academic program.

They may have tried to suspend me but what point would that make, I’d already quit... They tried expelling me, saying you can’t come back, and I said I don’t want to come back. I didn’t tell him why. I wanted to say because this is stupid, this is boring, this is dumb, this is useless... I’m not going to get a degree working at Planet Superstar.

Although he did try to return to school the following week, he was rejected and officially withdrawn from school. John’s response was characteristic, “I just went, okay, fine, whatever, you’re not going to let me in, screw you, good-bye”.
Construction: The Eve Opener

With that, John began a new phase in his life, leaving a part-time job at McDonalds to begin full time work with a construction firm. This was a period of intense self-discovery and growing maturity, a process he now views as essential to his eventual success. His construction experience proved a turning point for John, and he discovered that a regular paycheque was not enough to satisfy him. John found the work itself mind numbing, and he experienced a growing sense of social dissonance, distinguishing himself from his colleagues, and recognizing that he expected, and was capable of, so much more. Prior to this, John had thought little of his future. He was now keenly aware of what he did not want to do, but found himself caught in a double bind: knowing that he could not continue in this line of work, but believing scholastic success to be beyond his reach.

Maybe it forced me to be an adult and realize that there is a future coming up or something like that. I just know it happened while I was working at that job going, I don’t want to do this. There was so much solitary time...I started thinking I’ve got to do something...I can’t do this, I can’t got to school, I can’t pass that stuff...what am I going to do...”

John continued with his job for a while but found himself growing depressed and drinking more than ever before. Eventually, he began to “skip” work.

I started going, okay, I’ll just do this because there’s nothing else to do, but then at the end it was just like, I don’t want to prime another fricking ceiling. I just don’t want to do it. So, I didn’t, I started skipping, I didn’t give a shit anymore, and then I just finally one day said I don’t want to come in anymore... But before that I was going to the pubs drinking, I admit ... Drinking more than I actually ever drank before which is weird. I think I was kind of getting depressed or something ... I don’t drink much anymore, I quit drinking probably right about the time I met Lynn.

Lynn, now his wife, became a significant influence and positive role model in John’s life. She accepted him and encouraged him to do whatever he wanted as long as he was happy
and productive. She was attending SFU at the time and seeing her spend time studying proved to be a motivating factor when John later returned to school.

I said, hey I've got this girl, I like her and why the hell if I was her would I be with a slack ass bastard...before that, there were no serious relationships that made me think about the future, so maybe it was the fact that I was in my first real relationship and I cared about how this other person thought...then when I started going to school, it actually helped that she was in university doing homework, it's like, well, she's doing homework, what am I going to do? Well, I'll grab my book, okay I'll do an assignment...before that I had no friends that would come over and do homework...

The Road to Graduation

After several months working construction, John contacted the school district to discuss requirements for graduation and armed with this information, returned to his original catchment school to register. Although turned away, he persisted, eventually persuading the principal at his second secondary school to take him back.

I went to (school name) and said I want to come back and they said no, and I said, oh, shit...it was getting closer and closer to the beginning of school...so the first day of school I went back to (school name) and I said, I've got to get in, you've got to let me in, I'm going to graduate this time, I've got to do it, I'm getting too old to be going back for just night school courses that will take me another five years to get an actual graduation and I don't want to be working construction during the day...and he let me in and I was really shocked, he let me in, I guess he thought okay, maybe this time he's sincere enough to actually do it. At that time I was nineteen, so I was at the legal age and I guess they could have said no. But they took me back and then the rest is well, as they say, history, I went back and started going to school.

This time around things were different. John suggested that this was the result of a variety of influences coupled with his own developing maturity and newfound desire to succeed (graduate) no matter what.

I just knew, grade twelve, do one thing at a time. And that's maybe what did it too. I thought one thing at a time. Not like, in the future I'm going to be this rich business person, no, I just get this, then I get that, and the first thing I needed to do was go to school...to actually get to graduation, the first thing was to get to school and do some work. At that point I had the right circumstances, an actual desire and I was a little bit older now...then having someone else around you who actually is doing work, that was funky, because I had never actually seen anybody do work before.
John was initially resistant to any extra help and steadfastly refused to be a part of the learning disabilities / special education programs. However, he cites Ms. B, his LD teacher, and her tenacious yet ever patient manner, as a key factor in his eventual acceptance of help. Indeed, he sees her as in many ways responsible for his success.

Then Ms. B slowly got me more into the LD program, and now I realize that I needed it to graduate... At first I thought, I don’t want to be here (LD PROGRAM), this is not where I want to be, I don’t want to be in this class, and Ms. B, she bit her tongue and bid her time... she didn’t say too much which was good, she didn’t explain too much, she didn’t get into any detail... she just let me talk... She just said if you need any help you come down... She was never aggressive about it. Never, never, never. She was always in the background... just there if you needed her or if you needed a little tiny kick... she didn’t push herself, because if anybody pushes me, I always seem to fight away, I don’t like to be controlled... I’m like, all I want is to be able to get someone for the reading and writing of my exams. I said, that’s all the help I need, I don’t need to stay in this class and waste my time. That’s not going to make me graduate on time either, if I waste one of my class times... then I had to read this book, and what do I do? I don’t know how... and she’s like, I can read it to you, and I went okay. So after class or whatever, whenever there was a break she would read the thing to me and I would have a copy of it and I’d read along and it slowly started helping my reading. Yeah, it was after school, or sometimes I’d skip out of class and go to the disability center. We probably read about sixty percent of the book, which at that time was phenomenal because I’d never read a book in my life... I don’t think I saw it at the time... but later on... if it wasn’t for her I wouldn’t have graduated. I realize that now... the best way I can describe it to you is that... I would get discouraged and somehow she would encourage me again.

Ms. B. saw John as special, and for the first time he experienced the thrill of acceptance.

I just thought I was her favourite or something, and I have always felt like I was the unfavourite, I was always the one that they wanted to push away and ignore and to actually feel like a teacher’s pet... was quite weird, weird in a good way, in like, wow, this is kinda cool to be like the teacher’s pet. I was always the teacher’s worst nightmare!

Most important, she respected his need to be in control of his achievement and to direct his own learning.

If anybody pushes me I always seem to fight away, I don’t like to be controlled, I can’t stand controlling people...
John began to work for the first time in his school career, although he was quick to add that he still found ways to "get by"; school was still (and will perhaps always be) a means to an end. John found some success in courses, such as accounting and math, that did not require reading, and spoke enthusiastically of his science and technology teacher, noting his creativity and attempts to make learning fun.

I actually enjoyed it, which was weird, because I took it before and I had it with some teacher who talked like this (MONOTONE), and you couldn’t understand him so of course that one didn’t work out ...but I enjoyed it this time because it had a guy who was really articulate and he really enjoyed being there, it was like his second year teaching and I think it was his first year full-time, and he really enjoyed being there, and he wanted to make it fun for the kids...I remember the day he took us out to his brand new Honda and we checked out the engine ...then he described in science and tech how it worked.

Indeed for John, the quality of instruction and the teacher / student relationship were significant.

I noticed actually for good teachers I work hard. Even in university. For good teachers I work hard, bad teachers I just do enough to get by...I have no idea how to classify it. Someone who makes me want to work. That’s all I can say. Someone who makes me want to work, and maybe they do it by being enthusiastic, the person motivates me, maybe that’s it...and usually it’s the younger ones too. They are the ones that do the most motivating, the older ones just want to get the heck to their retirement is what I figure.

He also found the timetable at this school more manageable, given his understanding of his disability.

It was semestered, which was really nice because I can’t do year long...there’s no way...it’s the whole attention span thing, I need instant satisfaction.

Also important to John’s success was a decision to focus solely on school, giving up any external employment. For years he had attempted to juggle school, a job and a social life, and in the end, school lost.

I wasn’t working at the time either...this made a huge difference, because before if I skipped all day with my friends, then I would go to work afterwards, if I went to
school I would go to work afterwards, and then you don’t have time to do any homework. You don’t have time to get anything done for school. At the time it didn’t matter, but now it’s well, I’ve got to get to school, but how can I juggle both, I need more time to do school work.

Initial success bred further success, although John at times felt he did not deserve the grades he received. He recalled his surprise when he received a B on his first math exam, and realized how easy it was for him to succeed. With Ms. B’s help, John began to explore his learning style and develop some coping strategies that built upon his excellent memory. He was allowed extra time and a scribe for exams and assignments, and was provided with books on tape. In all, through more active learning, individual instruction, practice with reading, extra time, adapted materials, enthusiastic teachers, a semester system, greater maturity and sheer perseverance John eventually made it to the honour roll and graduation.

Most significant, perhaps, in John’s story is the power of sheer determination. John described himself as stubborn, and believed this quality perhaps propelled him to graduation.

Every student is different, but I still think every student can do it. Every student can do it, but it’s the will. It’s their own will...it’s all it comes down to. They may talk the talk, but it’s not until they walk the walk...it’s not amazing it’s just the fact of wanting to do it. Any kid could do it. Any kid could learn it...the thing is I went back three times before I did it...I’m a very stubborn person. That may be the one fact that is why I did it and why other people can’t. Pure stubbornness.

Yet it was, and remains, difficult for John to articulate his goals. He struggled to explain why graduation was important, or even why he now attends university. In the end he suggested that he was searching for happiness and normalcy, indeed, this is what he had always sought.

I want a normal life like everyone else, to make money and be happy... It’s all about being happy...my entire life is about being happy...If I’m not happy I don’t want to
do it. And I didn’t want to do school, I wasn’t happy about doing school, so I didn’t do it, then I wasn’t happy about not being there because I didn’t want to be a construction worker, it was a very unhappy job...I just had the sense that I didn’t want to be bored. I wanted to be happy. It’s really weird, because that’s all I can think about it coming down to, what did I want, I wanted to be happy.

For John, happiness and belonging were elusive in school, at least in the early years. However, he found great solace in family and friends, and believed he had a very happy childhood. Indeed, he remarked that he would change little of his life, given the chance, with the exception of his placement in a segregated program in elementary school. John noted that had he not experimented with alcohol / drugs, skipped out, and partied at that time in his life, he may not have approached his university studies seriously. I can’t help but wonder, though, if things had been different, if he had only found pleasure and acceptance in school, perhaps he would not have felt this need to disengage and escape through such high-risk means.

As we reflected together on school and learning, it became apparent that along the way these had become disconnected. Though John could find pleasure in learning, this rarely occurred in a school setting because the work seemed irrelevant and the process unnatural. Indeed, real life and school were seen as separate entities. John suggested that it was not the learning process per se that he disliked, but the way learning occurred in a school as opposed to real life setting.

See the weird thing is, I like learning certain things, I really do. But unfortunately most of them do not involve school. I love learning how to play football. I love learning all of the fundamentals behind racing, the cycle racing that I do...I love learning all the fundamentals behind it because it’s not just get on your bike and peddle...learning in school just seemed very useless...it was irrelevant...that’s why I think I liked science and tech...it was nothing to do with school, it was about real world stuff. I like learning things that are more useable in real life, that’s about the best way you can say it...relevance is a key thing...that might help a lot of kids that are in the same boat as I was...make everything really relevant to what their life is.
Fortunately, he can now find ways to connect pleasure, learning and school, at least enough to motivate him to persist and hopefully obtain his university degree.

Oh yeah, if it’s productive, like I’m having fun studying the balance of trade and all that stuff right now, that I find interesting...it’s not as fun as if I was on my bike racing, but I do as much of it as I need to get through and get a decent grade.
Chapter 9

From At-risk to Risk Taker: The Process of Disengagement and Reintegration

The primary goal of this study was to explore the process of disengagement and reintegration to school as experienced by successful at-risk students and, as such, I utilized a narrative methodology which allowed for an exploration of process over time. The preceding narrative accounts emphasize the wide range of experiences and influences in the lives of disengaging students. Indeed, their stories are unique in the particular; while general similarities exist, the details of each case are unique. Despite the idiosyncratic nature of their stories, certain common themes or categories of experience emerge. Such thematic analysis is in some ways inherently unsatisfying, as it is in the detail, the richness of the lived experience described in the preceding stories that we gain an empathic understanding of these students. Yet, if our work is to have meaning beyond the particular, it is necessary to examine what is common, while acknowledging what is lost in such an examination.

Disengagement and reintegration, for these participants, resembled a roller coaster ride. Most participants reported a growing disenchantment with various aspects of their early life and escalating series of problems, followed by a middle period characterized by a series of disengaging experiences tempered by continued attempts to reengage or at least hang on (survive) culminating in a "critical period" defined by an increasing intensity of both personal difficulties and self examination / growth. This critical period was the catalyst for the final, most frightening, but ultimately most satisfying part of the
“ride”, putting oneself on the line and returning to school / recommitting to graduation. What follows then, is an attempt to combine a temporal / thematic analysis of student disengagement and reintegration to school. Three “movements” are discernable, and within each movement, a number of common themes emerge: Early Problems and the Search for Belonging; The Middle Years and the Struggle to Survive; and From At-risk to Risk Taker: Agency, Relationships and the Road to Graduation.

The use of the term “movement” for describing this process is borrowed from Loncaric’s (1998) study of the meaning of disengagement as experienced by students who dropped out of secondary school. Using similar methodology, Loncaric discerned three movements or patterns of disengagement including an escalating cumulation of problems, increased school maladjustment and an increased engulfment in a spoiled identity. The first two movements arising from the data in the current study (early problems and the search for belonging; the middle years and the struggle to survive) are similar in many respects, and thus provide support for, Loncaric’s initial movements. However, participants in this study, despite their common experience of escalating childhood problems, recalled, in their early years, a number of positive experiences (possible precursors to reintegration) that perhaps served to buffer the impact of increasing personal distress throughout movement two. Further, while Loncaric’s participants became increasingly engulfed in a spoiled identity leading to their eventual disengagement and dropping out, participants in this study were able, within the supportive structures described in movement three below (and particularly through the development of caring relationships with adults), to become agents of their own lives and, as a result, successfully reengage in a school setting and graduate.
Early Problems and the Search for Belonging

Throughout their early years (birth to grade 7) each of the participants experienced an escalating series of problems, in at least three of four domains (family, school, community and intrapersonal), culminating in feelings of difference and a lack of belonging. It is important to note from the outset that these domains are not impermeable. Nor do I wish to imply a causal framework. For example, it is impossible from this study to ascertain if low self-esteem was the result of, or genesis for, peer or learning difficulties. It is only possible to say that they coexisted.

Despite their common experience of escalating childhood problems, all participants also describe positive, “grounding” experiences in these early days, generally either positive family or in-school relationships / experiences that provided a measure of hope for the future to which these individuals, often unknowingly, clung. Although this hope would wither somewhat during the second movement, it would reemerge in the critical phase to support their later attempt(s) at reengagement.

Family problems. For Jade, Ray and Alisha, family disruption and dysfunction dominated their early years and limited their parents’ abilities to provide appropriate boundaries, guidance or nurturing, leading to the premature assumption of adult responsibilities. Although Alisha described her early upbringing as overly strict, perhaps even rigid, her mother’s frequent absences due to work / school responsibilities after the move to Canada afforded her a greater degree of freedom than she was able to manage. Jade’s mother was incapable of parenting due to her substance abuse and increasing helplessness, and although her sister attempted to fill this void, Jade was in many respects left to parent herself and her mother. Ray experienced inconsistent, often overly rigid,
rules, exceedingly high expectations, and parental indifference to his academic and social problems. By the age of fourteen, he was living alone. In all, the family problems experienced by these participants served to engender feelings of isolation and difference. Such feelings in turn fueled needs to belong, to be accepted, and to be loved. In each case, attempts to fulfill these needs would lead to a further escalation of personal distress.

School problems. All participants reported a series of school related difficulties throughout their early years, including academic, social and behavioural problems, leading to a variety of coping responses, including school avoidance, peer affiliation, and acting out.

To varying degrees, John, Alisha, Dierdre and Ray reported difficulties with learning early on. The most extreme example is that of John, who struggled with a combined learning disability and attention deficit disorder. The school responded to his needs first with grade retention and later, placement in a segregated special education classroom which housed both intellectually and learning disabled students. For John, such interventions served only to exacerbate a growing sense of alienation and dissonance (both intellectual and social) as he sought to make sense of his disability. He decried the lowered expectations and paucity of direct instruction in the special education program, wondering why he was not taught to read, and described his frustrating inactivity and overwhelming boredom. Alisha recalled early comprehension difficulties and a failure to thrive in a highly competitive school environment. She later experienced the frustration of placement in ESL, recalling the well meaning but condescending teachers and lowered expectations. She responded with a retreat into self. Dierdre recalled a limited attention span and a more general sense of academic inadequacy perhaps engendered in her self-
comparisons to her high achieving father. Finally, Ray experienced increasing
difficulties in math, although he excelled in other areas, such as reading and social
studies.

Perhaps most significant to the participants were the social problems they experienced
at school, including bullying, peer conflicts, racism, and pressures for group membership.
Ray, Alisha and John were victims of bullying and harassment by fellow students. Ray
was regularly teased and ostracized for being “weak” and overly sensitive, Alisha’s race
rendered her a highly visible target upon her arrival in Canada, and John was labeled the
“mental kid” by fellow students. Fear was a regular feature of school life for these
students, and this fear, in conjunction with learning difficulties and feelings of difference,
fueled the desire to avoid school whenever possible. Although not a victim of bullying,
Jade recalled conflicts with peers in her latter elementary years. Dierdre reported a
growing sense of the need for peer affiliation and the potential for peer pressure as she
entered her latter years of elementary school. Although not yet involved in risk taking
behaviours, she was increasingly worried about securing her acceptance within a social
group and fearful of the repercussions should she fail. By grade 7 she recognized that her
success in secondary school would depend solely on her ability to secure a place for
herself socially. Alisha and Jade recalled a similar awareness of student subcultures and
the growing desire to find a place for themselves within a “cool” group that would later
dominate their secondary school agendas. In all, these students’ social difficulties
sparked a deep seated desire to fit in, to belong, to find membership and acceptance
within an “acceptable” social group.
Several students recalled negative teacher relationships during these early school years. John recalled feeling betrayed and humiliated by his grade one teacher when she failed him, describing her as a “sour apple” that spoiled his opinion of all teachers. He was also critical of his special education teachers for failing to teach him to read. Alisha decried the lack of help and support from teachers in her strict Muslim school and the condescension of the ESL teachers when she moved to Canada.

Finally, both Alisha and Ray were victims of school policies permitting corporal punishment. Ray recalled a terrifying moment in the principal’s office when he lost control of his bladder, and it became clear that no area of his life was free from fear or violence. Alisha described the humiliation of her learning difficulties and the fear of being hit for failing to achieve. She quickly learned to disguise her difficulties and used “invisibility” as a tool to escape punishment.

Community instability. All participants reported community and school moves during their elementary years, although only Ray, Alisha and Jade recalled these as negative. Due to her parents’ divorce and mother’s remarriage, Jade experienced numerous family moves during her early childhood years. Although her family finally settled in one town for her first 5 years of elementary, she then experienced two more moves prior to grade 7. Ray experienced several family moves and attended three elementary schools. Alisha recounted her family’s “escape” from Fiji, and numerous moves once in Canada. She also attended three elementary and two secondary schools. These participants reported feeling displaced by these transitions, which served to increase their sense of isolation. All recalled their feelings of loss: of home, of friendships, of community, of familiarity. While Jade’s scholastic and athletic success,
combined with her strong personality, enabled her to cope with these moves, Alisha and Ray found it increasingly difficult to fit in and survive, and found in withdrawal (physical and emotional) the means to cope.

**Emotional / intrapersonal difficulties.** All participants reported a variety of emotional problems throughout their early years and it is clear these feelings played a role in their growing disengagement from school and life. While uncomfortable during the elementary years, these emotional states intensified throughout the second movement, demanding attention from the participants who sought to mask their pain with a variety of negative coping responses, such as alcohol, drugs, school avoidance and attempted suicide. All reported feelings of worthlessness. Yet all recalled the dissonance such feelings engendered. Although only Ray reported experiencing depression as a young child, all participants described this affective state at some point in their stories, most during the second movement, and several (Jade and Alisha) described suicidal plans or attempts. Dierdre, Alisha and Ray reported a generalized anxiety or emotional fragility throughout their early years. Dierdre recalled her constant worry over peer acceptance, Alisha recalls dizzy / fainting spells and frequent illness, and Ray noted the ever present feeling that there was something very wrong with him.

**The making of resilience and the precursors of reintegration.** While the early lives of participants were peppered with problems often beyond their limited coping resources, each of the participants could recall some positive, grounding experiences and personal qualities which enabled them to keep going and perhaps provided some form of insulation against the onslaught of personal distress.
In the stories of Jade, John and Alisha, an early strength of character is clearly evident. Although in the second movement such strength would often be interpreted as defiance due to increasing confrontations with authority figures, this strength would later support them in their risky endeavours to reintegrate to school and graduate. Both Ray and Dierdre would later gain such strength through athletic pursuits. All participants reported an underlying belief in their abilities, a desire to be successful in school, and hope for the future, although this hope was often masked during the second movement.

All participants recalled positive elementary school experiences. In each case, participants reported the powerful influence of a caring teacher. Jade excelled academically and athletically, and saw her elementary school as a place of refuge, an escape from her volatile home life. She found in her track and field coach a caring mentor who believed in her. Dierdre recalled a feeling of community during her early elementary years, and participated actively in sports, drama and choir. She specifically remembered her grade four teacher, Mrs. P, a charismatic, energetic woman of uncompromising character with high expectations, unbounded enthusiasm and creativity. Most importantly, she was genuinely interested in and concerned for her students. Dierdre recalled this classroom as full of surprises and energy. Alisha’s only positive memory of school in Fiji was of her third grade teacher who provided one on one assistance and entrusted her with classroom responsibilities. This teacher made her feel special. Later, in Canada, she encountered several caring elementary teachers. She recalled her grade 5 teacher tearfully, noting his patience and willingness to help her with even the simplest of tasks. She also remembered her grade 6 teacher whose visual teaching style matched her learning style and ignited her interest. Ray recalled an early
passion for learning and pleasure in reading, which served as a means of escape for him. Although he did not forge any close links with teachers during these years, he noted one particular teacher whose enthusiasm and creative teaching style ignited his interest in geography. After several years in a segregated program, John was finally integrated into the mainstream program. He recalled his teacher this year as both caring and intellectually challenging, describing him as genuine, persistent and creative.

Several participants described supportive personal relationships during their early years that served to buffer the impact of family and school problems. Both John and Dierdre recalled the support and guidance of their families. John described his as the “perfect Leave it to Beaver family”, and found in his home the belonging and acceptance absent at school. Dierdre described a loving family life and is now pained by the recognition of the suffering she caused her parents. Finally, Jade found in her older sister a loving, nurturing caregiver who attempted to fill the parenting void left by her mother and stepfather.

Several participants found success in athletics. While Jade, Ray and Dierdre excelled in extra-curricular sports at school, John found athletic success in community sport associations. Stigmatized by his “special education” status, John felt unwelcome in school sports, but found a welcoming community among his out of school teammates. These children were unaware of his status, allowing him to develop meaningful friendships.

The positive personal characteristics and school / family / community experiences described above were early foundations for the “risk taking” stance adopted by each of
the participants as they re-entered school (physically and / or emotionally) and began the arduous journey to graduation.

**The transition to secondary school.** As the participants entered adolescence and prepared for the transition to secondary school, they recalled feeling at times powerless and unable to control events in their lives, and all reported feelings of loneliness, isolation and difference. Although several participants looked forward to secondary school and the chance for a new beginning, all entered this new and challenging phase somewhat weakened by their childhood exposure to family dysfunction, learning and social difficulties, community instability and troubled emotional states. Similar to Loncaric’s (1998) disengaged participants, these individuals entered secondary school with an “increased vulnerability” and “a reduced ability to trust” (p. 184) which would later become an “increased self reliance or a more defiant attitude towards authority” (p. 185). For them, success would be defined in social terms, rather than scholastic, and within classes, their achievement would primarily depend on their relationships with teachers and staff. All began secondary with a desire to find a place for themselves and to quell the ever-growing tide of unbearable emotions, in short to find a sense of peace and belonging.

**The Middle Years and The Struggle to Survive**

Participants entered their grade eight year with mixed emotions, increased vulnerability and a heightened awareness of the importance of their social positions. While gladly anticipated by some (Jade and Alisha), the transition to secondary was described by all participants as overwhelming due to its unfamiliar size and organization (numerous classes and teachers) and the accompanying increases in freedom,
responsibility, anonymity and peer pressure. Within this setting, security and belonging proved elusive, and given their heightened sensitivity most quickly turned their full attention to securing social acceptance. Only Alisha described her grade eight year as somewhat positive, emersing herself in extracurricular sports and establishing several friendships. Yet this sense of security proved short lived, disrupted by yet another family move. As she began grade 9, she found herself once again searching for a place to belong.

For most participants, grade 8 was a year of experimentation, as they toyed with alcohol and drugs (Jade, Alisha, Deirdre) and truancy (all). Some (Jade, John, Alisha and Dierdre) found themselves exhilarated by the excitement and control afforded by such behaviours. Ray simply felt peace and relief in his sojourns away from an abusive, competitive school environment.

All participants commented upon the powerful social pressures to be accepted into a group, and the ritualistic social games embarked upon by adolescents. Alisha, Dierdre and Jade turned their full attention to securing a place within the “cool” or popular cliques. In each case, they were expected to conform to group “rules” regarding underachievement, drug / alcohol use, and school avoidance in order to ensure continued belonging. John recalled his increase in popularity in secondary school, establishing a group of friends with whom he regularly “skipped out”. Only Ray failed to find a place for himself, and continued to struggle with bullying and isolation.

As they became increasingly peer oriented, the adults in their lives lost influence or simply retreated. Parents reduced their involvement in school matters, as their children became more difficult to reach. For some participants, this was a period of increasing
family disruption and decreasing or nonexistent boundaries. Jade’s mother was incapable of setting firm boundaries, and even provided her young daughter with alcohol. Alisha’s mother worked long hours and as a result Alisha was left alone well into the evening. Over the course of this movement and into the next, Jade, Alisha and Ray moved repeatedly in and out of their homes, assuming adult responsibilities long before they were ready to cope with them. Dierdre recalled with great pain her growing disenfranchisement from her family. Although her parents struggled to maintain influence in her life, her need for social acceptance far outweighed their attempts to save her. Only John recalled little family distress during this period, although he noted that his parents allowed him a great deal of personal freedom and became less involved in his school endeavours.

Academic pursuits and extracurricular activities were increasingly abandoned in the quest to fulfill social needs, and often as a requirement of group membership (Alisha, Jade, Dierdre). School was increasingly avoided physically and or intellectually. Yet, at least in the early part of this movement, all participants managed to “get by”, and indeed, some made repeated attempts to reengage (Jade, Alisha) or avoid expulsion or placement in a vocational track (John). Most reported their belief at this point that no matter what, they would be able to pass their courses and make it to graduation, and all suggested that deep down they wanted to remain in school. Indeed, their growing repertoires of survival tactics and strategies for avoiding detection and failure speak to their desire to at least keep their bodies within the school, if not their minds.

Relationships with teachers and school staff were key to success or failure in the classroom setting. All participants recalled some teachers whose personal and
instructional styles motivated them to at least attend regularly. Key to such influence were teachers’ enthusiasm, innovative teaching practices, ability to show personal interest in each student, availability, willingness to help, acknowledgement of student strengths and expectations or belief in student ability. Although participants named each of these characteristics, initially most simply described these teachers as “nice” or “caring”. Yet none of these teacher relationships were personal or intimate enough to provide the kind of mentorship and guidance they craved. Although Alisha found in her Vice Principal, school counsellor and YES program coordinator caring individuals who tried repeatedly to reconnect her with school life, as this movement progressed she grew increasingly incapable of receiving this care. Yet, the seeds of these relationships were sown, and later, when her ability to accept such care increased, they became powerful means of change. Several participants commented upon their lack of readiness to accept caring adults into their lives during the latter part of this movement.

Each participant also recalled negative interactions with teachers that led him or her to simply stop attending class. Some believed they were labeled troublemakers (Alisha and Ray), while others found a teacher’s unrealistic expectations, impersonal style or lack of demonstrated interest to be offensive (John, Jade), and all decried a lack of relevance or interest in many classes. While attending a private school, Ray was physically assaulted by several teachers. John described the futility of his special education classes, low teacher expectations and their failure to teach him to read, and he described with disdain his second “sour apple” teacher, Mr. W.

All participants described school policies and / or administrative responses that were at best ineffective, and at worst, promoted their disengagement. Most noted the limited
impact of detentions and the damaging impact of suspensions, rendering them even further behind academically and isolated from adult influence. All noted how easy it was to avoid detection for truancy, using simple yet effective strategies. In short, it was easy to slip through the cracks. Only Alisha recalled meaningful discipline during this movement. Several participants (John, Dierdre) found themselves pushed out of their home schools and into specialized programs. Dierdre was moved from one alternate program to another, growing increasingly disenfranchised and disheartened. She decried the poor teaching and lack of expectations in these programs. Most importantly, she felt uncared for. John finally succumbed to the pressure of administrators and entered the pre-employment program. While he acknowledged that for some, this program might provide meaningful work experience, he decried the utter lack of academic content. A purely vocational program, it did not lead to a dogwood certificate, and thus John felt this was an inferior, indeed useless endeavour. He quickly recognized himself as different from the other students, and the dissonance reminded him of his early days in special education. However, now nearing adulthood, he was unwilling to simply accept his lot, yet he was not ready to commit to education. As a result, he took control and simply dropped out, turning his full attention to his employment outside of school.

Although some participants found a level of social acceptance, none found the love and belonging they craved, and as this movement progressed most began to engage more fully in risky escapes such as alcohol and drugs (Jade, Alisha, John, Dierdre), violence (Ray and Alisha), petty crime (Alisha and Dierdre) and associations with much older peers (Jade, Dierdre, Alisha). Jade, Alisha and Dierdre sought out new memberships beyond the school, forming exciting alliances with older, out of school peers who could
provide alcohol and drugs. Some adopted a more aggressive stance as they attempted to gain control over their lives. Both Alisha and Ray described a growing aggression with peers and increasing conflicts with school staff, in both cases defensive postures adopted to protect themselves against further victimization (real or imagined). All participants found a measure of escape and personal control in employment, and throughout this stage, all managed to secure and maintain jobs. As they became less engaged in school and family, these individuals increased their work responsibilities, which in turn provided income for alcohol, drugs and social pursuits, and access to older, out of school peers.

As school, family and personal problems intensified, all participants found themselves growing increasingly depressed and angry. Jade described several instances of suicidal ideation, while Alisha described one suicide attempt and several reckless drug overdoses. In all, this movement is characterized by escalating personal distress and an intense struggle to survive both academically and socially, culminating in complete school disengagement.

From At-risk to Risk Taker: Agency, Relationships and the Road to Graduation

This movement witnessed an initial intensification of personal distress coupled with an in depth reexamination of personal goals, and culminating in a commitment to academic success and graduation. This movement began with a critical “incident” or series of events such as rape and pregnancy (Jade), attempted suicide and hospitalization (Alisha), moving out / foster care / dropping out (Ray), entering Grade 10 Challenge / failure to reintegrate to secondary school (Dierdre) and dropping out (John). In each case, participants were forced to come to terms with the past and begin to look towards the future. Where many might simply give up, this group of resilient youngsters, at great
personal risk, attempted to give success another chance. In each case participants were supported by a significant personal relationship with a caring adult(s), who provided safety, guidance, belonging and expectations for success. Whereas in the past, participants had been unable to develop such relationships fully or accept care, they were now open to receive the care offered by these patient, persistent individuals. In so doing, they finally found the belonging they had so desperately but unsuccessfully sought throughout their school careers. In addition, all participants recalled numerous indirect, supportive relationships, less intimate in nature, but within which participants found additional encouragement. Several participants (Jade, Alisha, Dierdre) also found support within the context of a specialized school program. As this movement progressed, participants began to explore new interests, which although non-academic, provided a sense of accomplishment, hope and belonging. With a greater sense of future goals, and increasing confidence in their realization, participants were able to loosen the ties of peer orientation. As they developed a repertoire of coping skills and experienced increasing academic success, participants grew in confidence and self-acceptance. They described a greater sense of belonging, and increasing sense of hope. This movement was a time of repeated attempts to get their lives on track, and tended to be the bumpiest part of the ride. Yet with each success, participants found themselves growing stronger and better equipped to cope with disappointment.

It is of interest to note that participants were universally cavalier in their accounts of this movement and their successes. While I was astounded at times by their willingness to keep going despite adversity and by the changes across this movement, participants’ descriptions of this movement were often rather brief in comparison to earlier discussions.
of their failures. In each case, participants described an underlying belief in their ability to make it, a sense of optimism that success was somehow predestined, and therefore "no big deal". They found it far easier to discuss their failures and the reasons for them, than to discuss the reasons for their later success. As such, their accounts of this period in their lives were far briefer, necessitating a great deal of probing and clarification by myself.

Also of interest were participants' descriptions of themselves as stubborn, and indeed upon first hearing their stories, it seemed as though this quality was shared by all. Yet what truly shone through, upon further review, was their strength. It is difficult to ascertain whether this strength was borne in adversity or simply a predisposition shared by all.

**Relationships (direct and indirect).** Each participant described at length their relationship(s) with one or more significant individuals who provided not only care but also a belief in their ability to succeed. All described at least one teacher / counsellor within the school or community, and several described meaningful personal relationships (Jade, John). Finally, all noted the additional, albeit indirect, support of teachers who inspired them to attend and succeed through their personal approach to teaching.

All participants developed close mentor-like relationships with one or more teachers / counsellors / administrators. In each case the primary descriptor used by participants to describe these individuals was "caring". These individuals were able to communicate this care to students and participants, in turn, were ready (with time) to accept such care. Despite the diversity of relationships, the characteristics of these individuals as described by the participants were remarkably similar.
At the urging of a close friend, Jade, struggling to come to terms with a rape and miscarriage, initiated a relationship with her school counsellor, Ms. H. Over the course of two years, Ms. H. provided Jade with a sanctuary in which to come to grips with her troubled past and present, and move forward, unencumbered into the future. This was an arduous journey, not without its setbacks, the most significant being Jade’s continued drug use. Yet, Jade described Ms. H. as her “guardian angel”, always available and willing to offer a tentative, nonjudgmental helping hand with her characteristic humour, creativity and optimism. She recognized Jade’s need to make her own decisions, to control her future. Somewhat unconventional, Ms. H’s style matched well with Jade’s “funky” personality and interest in the spiritual aspects of being. Together, they worked to develop Jade’s ability to cope with not only past, but also present difficulties. Throughout their time together, Ms. H. showed an unwavering belief in Jade’s ability to survive and graduate.

In addition to her counsellor, Jade, through her engagement in a cooperative education program, developed a close and rewarding relationship with her teacher / coordinator. Ms. X served as a “back-up” counsellor on the rare occasion when Ms. H was unavailable and possessed similar characteristics: optimism and belief in Jade’s abilities, familiarity with her personal life, persistence, energy, creativity and caring.

John credits Ms. B., his tenacious yet loving special education / learning assistance teacher with his ability to finally succeed in a regular secondary school program. Initially resistant to any special programs or assistance, John steadfastly refused to be placed in a special education support block upon his return to secondary school. He was determined to make it on his own. He recalled that Ms. B. respected his wishes, simply letting him
know that she was there to help no matter what. As time progressed, and academic
difficulties began to weaken his resolve, John found Ms. B. to be extremely flexible,
willing to provide assistance during non-school hours, allowing him to continue with a
regular course load. He described her as stubborn yet patient, with an unwavering belief
in his personal worth and ability to graduate. She was creative, encouraging, and
accepting, refusing to give up or allow him to do so. Importantly, she recognized his
need to be in control of his own education and future, and perhaps most important, she
genuinely liked him and it showed. For the first time, John was the “teacher’s pet”; he
felt special and reveled in this new experience of acceptance.

Dierdre found in Don, her Learning Centre mentor teacher, a kindred spirit who
introduced her to outdoor pursuits and whose humour and presence “changed my life”.
On a canoeing retreat with the learning centre, she was finally able to experience pleasure
in healthy pursuits, and found in Don an adult who approached life with humour and
enthusiasm. She noted his ability to inspire a belief in herself. His high expectations and
constant care provided the consistency she required to achieve her goals. She described
him as a friend as well as a teacher.

Alisha credited several individuals with her eventual success, including Mr. U, her
Vice Principal, Anne, her YES program coordinator, and Mrs. M., her counsellor. It is
for Mr. U that Alisha reserved her highest praise. A truly persistent and caring
individual, Mr. U worked tirelessly to support her long before she was able to accept his
care. Yet he never gave up, and always believed in her ability to graduate. She described
him as approachable, consistent, interested and patient. Yet, he was also firm and held
high expectations. He did not back away from confrontation, insisting she face up to the
consequences of her behaviour. In his disciplinary interventions he attempted to move beyond the traditional, supervising her detentions to ensure she used her time wisely. He was a guide and described as a father figure. Through Mr. U., Alisha met Anne, her YES program coordinator. In her unique role, Anne was able to cultivate personal, equal friendships with students, and for Alisha, this was particularly meaningful. Here was a young adult who offered an alternate model of being in the world. Anne shared her own personal trials and successes with Alisha, and offered a tentative helping hand to guide her as she struggled to cope with her problems. Nonjudgmental and always available, she created a friendly, relaxed and flexible atmosphere where Alisha found safety and acceptance. Yet she also held high expectations for her students. Finally, Alisha noted the influence of her school counsellor. Mrs. M. "always had time" and was aware of Alisha's personal problems. She refused to allow Alisha to slip through the cracks of the system, consistently checking in with her and expressing her care and concern. Common to all of the individuals in Alisha's life was an unwavering commitment to caring for her despite her initial refusal to accept such care. For several years Alisha maintained a distance from those who tried to help her, yet they did not let go. Eventually, she was able to reciprocate and benefit fully from their care.

Unlike the above participants, Ray found his most meaningful adult relationships in the community, first with his counsellor, Ken, and later with his foster parents. Showing remarkable resolve and maturity for a young teen, Ray sought counselling when his family difficulties became unbearable. In Ken, he found something special: a caring adult who was willing to listen and who genuinely respected his opinions, yet one who pushed him to accept a measure of responsibility for the maintenance of this relationship.
Through their work together, Ray developed a broadened perspective and was able to move forward from a "stuck" position. Within the context of a safe and caring relationship the foundation for coping was laid. Through Ken's intervention, Ray was placed with a foster family. For the first time he experienced unconditional love and acceptance, and he reveled in a newfound safety. This safety permitted him to finally explore the various dimensions of his personality and to try out new ways of being and behaving. Although these were at times less than optimal behaviours and roles, the ability to just "be" was exhilarating. Interestingly, it was this new found security which enabled Ray to drop out of school, to finally acknowledge that he was absolutely "stuck", a critical event that preceded his reintegration to school.

It is clear that these meaningful individuals shared numerous characteristics. Participants repeatedly commented upon their patience, availability, persistence and willingness to help. They believed in the participants even when participants did not believe in themselves. Cognizant of the participants' histories, they did not try to control or direct, but simply to guide. All possessed humour, optimism, creativity and enthusiasm. Further, all held high expectations for the participants' success. Although in each case, the relationships were challenged by repeated setbacks, these individuals never gave up on the relationship. At the very core, each relationship was based in genuine care. In each case, this care was first demonstrated by the adult mentor, and initially unreciprocated fully by the participants. Yet over time, participants learned how to care and in so doing fully engage in the relationship.

As noted above, each participant found additional sources of support throughout this movement in a variety of indirect or less intimate relationships with quality teachers.
These individuals publicly and privately acknowledged participants’ abilities and efforts, respected and valued their unique histories and potential contributions, offered alternate models of being in the world, made learning fun, and inspired participants through their genuine, creative and innovative teaching practices. All participants noted teacher quality, defined as caring and exceptional instructional skill, as key to their continued success.

**Special programs.** Several participants were supported through specialized programming (Jade, Dierdre, Alisha). Both Dierdre and Alisha found their first tastes of scholastic success within the learning centre environment. They credit the structure of this program, including personalized, one on one assistance, self-paced learning, small, achievable objectives, flexible schedules and adult oriented environment with their success. Further, the small, personal nature of this program enhanced the ability of staff and students to engage in meaningful relationships and reduced the anonymity and isolation they experienced in the larger secondary school setting. For Jade, success was found in a specialized cooperative education program within the regular secondary school setting. In addition to providing an opportunity to explore personal and career interests, the organization of the coop program encouraged close teacher/student relationships and reduced anonymity, promoting attendance and achievement. Students remained with one teacher for all courses. In addition, the concentrated nature of the academic program encouraged Jade to attend regularly.

**Personal Attributes:** Throughout their reintegration, each participant demonstrated a variety of personal characteristics that supported their ability to stay in school and graduate. All noted the simple yet powerful influence of their growing maturity, which
allowed them to finally accept themselves as different yet worthy, and to loosen the ties of peer influence. For some, time away from school was necessary to allow for this growth. All participants commented upon their will, or stubborn belief in their ability to make it. Armed with a desire to turn things around and a growing belief in their ability to enact positive change, participants were willing to give it one more go, to chance failure once again. As they began to engage in school, they became increasingly future and less peer oriented. Through the meaningful relationships described above, they were able to cope with the many obstacles they faced with increasing skill and were able to finally accept the care of adults. Through this acceptance, they learned not only how to care for others, but for themselves. Evident in each participant was a growing acceptance of himself or herself as different, yet special. It was through this acceptance that they were finally able to feel membership in the school community.

**Special interests:** In each case, participants pointed to the emergence of special interests that provided balance to their lives and feelings of success. Participation in team or individual sports (Ray, Dierdre, John), peer tutoring (Jade) and life skills counsellor training (Alisha) afforded each participant the opportunity to develop new skills and interests.

**Summary.** Through the development and maintenance of meaningful adult relationships (direct and indirect) within the school and community, participation in specialized programs, development of special skills and interests, strength of character and acceptance of self, participants began to experience a sense of belonging within an academic environment. Such belonging bred success, and although each participant faced numerous obstacles to such success and encountered many personal setbacks
throughout this movement, they were now able to meet failure with maturity and increasing coping abilities, and as such move forward, not backwards. They were no longer victims or problems, but agents of their own success.
Chapter 10

Discussion

This study utilized a narrative methodology to examine the process of disengagement and reintegration to school as experienced by successful at-risk students. Two levels of findings were presented. Chapters four through eight presented five individual narratives of disengagement and reintegration to school. These narrative accounts emphasized the broad range of experiences in the lives of disengaging students, and lend credence to the suggestion that "a comprehensive theory of disengagement must be built on a holistic perspective. To be understood, dropping out needs to be seen as the cumulation of a whole life up to the point of departure" (Loncaric, 1998, p. 205). I would suggest that an understanding of reengagement requires a similar commitment to holism. Indeed, similar to Loncaric's study of disengaging students, this study

raised doubts about the possibility of separating various influences like school, community, and peers . . . Like different types of grapes that have been made into a wine, the individual contributions are significant but no longer distinct . . . Just as with metaphor, the experience can only be grasped in its entirety" (p. 204).

Chapter 9 presented a second level of findings, a temporal / thematic analysis of the process of student disengagement and reintegration to school. Three movements were discernable: (1) Early Problems and the Search for Belonging, (2) The Middle Years and the Struggle to Survive, and (3) From At-Risk to Risk Taker: Agency, Relationships and the Road to graduation. Within each movement numerous common themes emerged. The process of disengagement and reintegration to school, for these participants, resembled a roller coaster ride. An early period of escalating problems within the family,
school, community and themselves was followed by a middle period of disengaging experiences tempered by continued attempts to reengage. A critical incident (or series of events) characterized by increasing intensity of personal distress and in depth self examination was the catalyst for the final phase of the ride in which participants, at considerable personal risk, but with equally considerable support, made a commitment to academic success and began the often bumpy descent to graduation. Findings provided general support for the theories and research on disengagement and persistence/reintegration presented in chapter two. However, due to their complexity, the individual stories do not fit neatly within any one theoretical framework. The following will review this literature as it pertains to the three movements identified in chapter 9 and present a framework for understanding reintegration based on the development of “agency” and the primacy of caring. I will then present educational implications, limitations of the methodology, and directions for future research.

**Literature Connections**

**Movements One and Two**

Throughout the first movement, participants experienced an escalation of problems in a variety of domains (family, school, community and intrapersonal) which culminated in feelings of difference and lack of belonging. Yet each participant described some positive, grounding experiences that provided hope for the future and perhaps laid a foundation for resilience. The second movement witnessed increasing personal distress coupled by a desperate struggle to survive both academically and socially, culminating in complete school disengagement.
**Individual deficit model.** Three clusters of characteristics are generally associated with disengagement and dropping out from the individual deficit perspective: demographic, individual and familial factors. The participants in this study did not reflect the demographic characteristics typically associated with at-risk students in this body of literature. Of the five participants, four were from families where the parents had some university education and middle class, professional status, and only one participant was from a visible minority. Such findings support Natriello et al.’s (1990) and Downie’s (1994) arguments for a more inclusive view of educational risk. Participants did, however, over the course of the first two movements, exhibit many individual factors typically associated with disengagement, including poor academic achievement, disciplinary problems, grade retention, lack of participation in extracurricular activities, chronic absenteeism, low self esteem and external locus of control (Ekstrom et al., 1986; Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992; Gilbert et al., 1993; Roderick, 1993; Rumberger, 1995; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Similarly, participants reported increasing family disruption and dysfunction that impeded parents’ abilities to support and guide their children and leading participants to assume adult responsibilities far before they were able to manage them. Research from the individual perspective does identify family structural and contextual characteristics that influence educational success, including family structure, processes (involvement and support, expectations, supervision and rules, communication, and parental values) and family adversity (Alexander et al., 1997; Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Ekstrom, et al., 1986; Ensminger & Slucarcick, 1992; Hanson & Ginsburg, 1988; Rumberger, 1995; Teachman, Paasch & Carver, 1996, 1997).
The family disruption / dysfunction and community instability described by participants is worthy of further consideration in light of a social capital critique of the individual deficit framework. As suggested in Chapter two, the individual deficit framework presents a simplistic view of these factors and fails to consider the impact of quality of social networks and parental relationships in the lives of children. Such family and community "social capital" is, according to Coleman (1987, 1988) and others (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Teachman, Paasch & Carver, 1996, 1997), far more predictive of school success than measures of family structure alone. Participants in this study found themselves less able to rely on or accept parental support and guidance as the years progressed, and many felt uprooted and isolated by numerous community and school moves. The latter might also be interpreted in light of attachment theory. Briefly, attachment refers to a child’s sense of rootedness in his or her environment. Early disruptions of attachment, particularly within the parent / child relationship have been associated with a host of adjustment difficulties (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Baumeister and Leary have noted the tendency for individuals to seek attachments and resist their dissolution. The family and community disruptions experienced by participants throughout movement one may well have disturbed this sense of “rootedness” and encouraged their struggle to find belonging and peace through less than desirable peer affiliations and risky behaviour. Subsequent research has utilized the concept of social capital with regard to the compensatory value of positive teacher / student relationships for at-risk students (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Muller, 2001). Again, all participants in this study identified the positive impact of such relationships in their early schooling. Such
relationships appeared to buffer somewhat their increasing personal distress. The value of such relationships will be discussed in greater detail at a later point.

The criticisms outlined in chapter two regarding the individual deficit frameworks’ lack of focus on school policies and processes are relevant here (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Fine, 1986, 1991; Kelly, 1993, 1996; McNeil, 1997; Rumberger, 1987, 1995; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000; Tidwell, 1988; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986; Wehlage et al., 1989). The individual perspective fails to consider the considerable influence of school and social factors identified by participants throughout these first two movements, including limited or damaging responses to learning needs, bullying and peer pressure, the impact of transitions (particularly from elementary to secondary), school policies and practices (such as suspension) and the critical value of teacher/student relationships. Finally, a strictly individual perspective cannot capture the need for belonging and its influence on disengagement as exemplified by participants throughout the first two movements.

**Process theories.** Framed by the work of social control and alienation theorists, the process theories of disengagement reviewed in chapter 2, including Participation – Identification (Finn, 1989), School Membership (Wehlage et al., 1989) and Critical Theory (Fine, 1991; Kelly, 1993) are far more useful than an individual deficit framework for interpreting the process of disengagement exemplified by participants in this study.

This study offered limited support for Finn’s (1989) Participation – Identification Model of disengagement. However, this model, with its exclusive school focus cannot account for the complex interplay of factors influencing participants in this study. Finn suggests that participation in and identification with school mediate school outcomes.
Identification refers to the internalized sense of belonging and valuing of school relevant goals. Participation is the behavioural aspect of engagement and precursor to identification. Through four levels of participatory behaviours, a student develops bonds to his or her environment. Provided students experience some initial academic success and experience quality instruction, their initial participation will increase, thereby increasing the likelihood of further success and promoting identification (belonging or environmental fit) with school. However, nonparticipation or withdrawal increases the likelihood of unsuccessful outcomes thereby impeding identification.

Participants in this study decreased their levels of participation in school related activities throughout the first two movements. While John and Alisha’s stories are more classic examples of Finn’s thesis given their early elementary experiences (Jade, Dierdre and Ray each experienced some scholastic success and participated actively in school activities throughout movement one) all participants described increasing truancy, lack of interest and participation in classes, limited homework or participation in academic pursuits out of class, decreasing interest and participation in extracurricular activities and a decreasing identification with school, resulting in alienation and withdrawal (physical and / or intellectual).

Despite the above, Finn’s (1989) model provides only a superficial explanation for what transpired in the lives of these participants. It ignores the influence of peer, family and community factors that for many participants were primary concerns. It also fails to address the complexity of school factors beyond the classroom and their influence on identification and participation, particularly with regard to peer affiliation and teacher / student relationships. Also, in assuming a relatively smooth developmental progression
Finn's model neglects the influence of critical periods or transitions (particularly elementary to secondary) in participants’ school careers. Finally, it cannot begin to capture the need for belonging expressed by these participants.

Far more illustrative of the participants in this study is Wehlage et al.'s (1989) theory of school membership and engagement. They suggest a theory of dropout prevention in which school membership and educational engagement interact and are viewed as intermediate goals leading to the longer term outcomes of academic achievement and personal and social development. Indeed, this theory is illustrative of all three movements described in chapter 9.

The school membership component of this theory refers to a student’s level of attachment, commitment, involvement and belief in the institution. In short, it describes a student’s sense of belonging and recognizes the pivotal role of high quality, reciprocal relationships between school staff and students. Reciprocity implies that students are not held wholly responsible for adapting to a school environment. Schools are responsible for addressing student needs, regardless of level of readiness or achievement, and facilitating membership through attention to the structural and functional characteristics that support or inhibit its development. Wehlage et al. (1989) suggest four impediments to membership which include adjustment (particularly during periods of transition), difficulty, incongruence and isolation.

Participants in this study each brought to school a host of personal and social concerns. During their elementary years, some were able to achieve membership within a school community (Dierdre, Jade) while others struggled to adjust to the demands of school (Ray, John, Alisha) both socially and academically, and found their schools
unable or unwilling to adjust to their needs. Indeed, for some (Alisha, John) the schools' response to their learning needs (ESL / Special Education) served only to stigmatize and alienate. These participants also experienced incongruence, or an inability to “fit in” with the value structure of their schools and / or find a peer group with which to affiliate. Frequent school moves exacerbated both their sense of incongruence and their isolation, limiting their access to adults who truly knew and understood them. As they moved into secondary school, all participants experienced adjustment difficulties (although Alisha’s were more pronounced upon her move into grade 9) which led to an abandonment of academic success in favour of social acceptance (Jade, Dierdre, Alisha) or simply as a means to cope with increasing distress (John, Ray). These students found the traditional structure of secondary schools incapable of adjusting to their needs and all noted the negative effect of school policies such as suspension and transfer to segregated programs, which served only to exacerbate their sense of isolation. All participants described negative relationships with teachers that led them to simply withdraw (physically or mentally) from classes. Finally, throughout the second movement, all participants described troubled and conflictual peer relationships adding to their sense of social isolation and need to find acceptance in other arenas, such as affiliation with older, out of school youth.

The second component of Wehlage et al.’s theory, educational engagement, is encouraged through the development of school membership and discouraged through an absence of extrinsic or intrinsic rewards, a narrow conception of learning and an addiction to coverage of a superficial curriculum. At the heart of such engagement, however, are expectations on the part of school staff for student achievement and success.
As witnessed by the participants in this study, "at-risk" students are keenly aware of, and influenced by, lowered expectations and beliefs in their "ineducability". Throughout movements one and two, John, Dierdre and Alisha each decried the limited expectations and poor quality of instruction within their respective "specialized" programs. All participants found many courses to be superficial and irrelevant to both their learning and personal needs.

Throughout the second movement, participants made repeated attempts to adjust and fit into the school environment, despite a lack of reciprocity on the part of their schools (at least in the cases of John, Ray and Dierdre). These attempts were for the most part unsuccessful given their debilitating personal and social concerns. However, all participants noted the positive influence of caring teachers who possessed exceptional pedagogical skills. These teachers possessed many characteristics described by Wehlage et al. (1989) in their description of successful schools. The fact that participants, despite their increasing disengagement, attended and passed these courses provides further support for Wehlage et al.'s emphasis on relationships.

The greatest value of Wehlage et al.'s (1989) work is found, I believe, in their emphasis on belonging as critical to school success or failure. Each of the participants described a lack of belonging as key to their disengagement, and later described a sense of belonging as critical to their reintegration. Although many reasons for a lack of belonging can be found in the stories of participants, in each case quality, relationships with adults appear to be central. We find further support for the role of relationships in the social capital research outlined above, and studies by Altenbaugh et al. (1995), Knesting (1999), Loncaric (1998), and Phelan et al. (1992).
**Critical theory.** What is not fully addressed by Wehlage et al. (1989) are the structural / societal critiques of critical theorists such as Fine (1991) and Kelly (1993). Participants in this study rarely addressed such concerns explicitly in their narratives, and thus it is difficult to ascertain their influence. Further, the nature of this study did not allow for an in-depth examination of school policies and procedures that may promote any of the forms of bias or social / academic inequities outlined by these authors. However, embedded within participants’ stories are examples of cultural insensitivity and incongruence, procedural “pushouts”, student subcultural affiliation and assignment of at-risk students to “second best” alternatives.

In the case of Alisha, we see a glaring example of cultural insensitivity on the part of “well meaning” school staff as they attempted, through forced placement in ESL, to address her learning needs. Alisha’s retreat into self, although a direct response to such insensitivity, was misinterpreted as inability, leading to further inappropriate interventions. Fine (1991), Kelly (1993) and McNeal (1997) discuss “pushouts”: students who are routinely discharged due to absenteeism or failure to comply with school rules and routines. In the stories of Dierdre, Ray and John we find examples of such policies. Further, in the stories of Alisha and Dierdre we see the powerful influence of student subcultures (Eckert, 1989; Kelly, 1993) on participants’ willingness to conform to school expectations and accept mainstream values. Finally, both John and Dierdre comment upon the “second best” alternatives offered them in the guise of specialized programming, such as pre-employment and alternate programs. Kelly’s explanation of “hidden hierarchies” suggests the failure of some such programs to re-engage at-risk students.
The making of resilience and precursors of reintegration. Throughout the first movement each of the participants described some positive, grounding experiences and personal attributes which enabled them to persevere despite their personal distress. It is possible that such experiences and personal qualities provided some form of buffer or insulation against the full impact of their many life stressors. All participants noted the powerful influence of a caring teacher during their elementary years, and several participants also noted supportive personal relationships external to school (John, Dierdre and Jade). Most (Jade, Ray, Dierdre and John) found a measure of personal success in athletic endeavors and all participants described themselves at various points as "stubborn", determined to succeed, hopeful, and convinced of their abilities, often in the face of contrary evidence.

Despite its brevity, the literature on student reintegration / persistence consistently points to the primacy of caring for the school success of at-risk adolescents (Altenbaugh et al., 1995; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Knesting, 1999; Muller, 2001; Noddings, 1992; Phelan et al., 1992; Wehlage et al., 1989) and this finding is consistent with a growing body of work in the field of resilience. Such research is based on the understanding that failure is not predetermined, but is indeed alterable or preventable. Indeed, the characterization of a child as "at-risk" does not doom that child to failure, or in this case, eventual dropout. Research indicates that many children deemed "at-risk" not only "survive" but are successful, both in school and society. Studies in the field of resilience have attempted to illuminate why some children persist and succeed in school and life, despite adverse circumstances. Resilience refers to "a set of qualities that foster a process of successful adaptation and transformation despite risk and adversity" (Bernard, 1995).
Although there is a limited understanding of the process by which “risk” is buffered, protective factors or processes appear to include caring and supportive relationships, positive and high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation (Bernard, 1995). The concept of resilience has received increasing attention since Werner and Smith’s (1982; 1992) longitudinal study of Hawaiian youth. Since then researchers have identified numerous “protective” and “compensatory” characteristics associated with resilience in children, including intelligence and problem solving abilities, self-esteem, external interests and affiliation, parental attachment and bonding, early temperament and behaviour, and peer affiliation (Fergusson & Lynkey, 1996; Rutter, 1985). Three main types of protective factors emerge from the literature: individual temperament / disposition, affectional ties within the family, and external support systems (Garmezy, 1993).

Questions remain as to the process of “fostering” resilience in children, particularly in the educational realm. In a recent review of the literature, Garmezy (1993) points to the positive effects of favourable school climate, characterized by collaboration among parents, teachers and administrators, in studies of successful schools in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. He concludes that “in this context the school can be a major protective factor; in negative contexts, schools add to the cumulation of stressors associated with poverty” (p. 133). Similarly, Goldstein and Brooks (2002) discuss “guideposts” for fostering resilience and point to the importance of helping children to experience success by identifying and reinforcing their “islands of competence” (p.18). The precursors to such “islands of competence” can be seen within participants throughout movement one. Later, as participants began to reintegrate to school and work towards graduation, each
developed “special interests” such as sports, peer tutoring and life skills counselling, which afforded them the opportunity to experience success within healthy pursuits. Further, each participant expanded his or her repertoire of coping skills allowing them to experience increasing social success and to manage disappointment effectively. Finally, through effective teaching practices and individual support, each participant began to experience academic success fostering a sense of academic confidence that for some participants was an entirely new experience.

**Movement Three**

Movement three began with a critical “incident” or series of events that led to both an increase in personal distress and an in depth reexamination of future goals. Participants were forced to come to terms with their pasts and begin to look towards the future. As they began the arduous task of reintegration, each participant was supported by an intense personal relationship with a caring adult. Other key elements of reintegration included: indirect, supportive teacher / student relationships, specialized school programs, development of special interests, and positive personal attributes. Throughout this process, and within the context of the elements listed above, participants became less peer and more future oriented, opened themselves to the care of others, developed a repertoire of effective coping skills, and experienced increasing academic and social success. The results for all participants included greater confidence and self-acceptance, and a sense of belonging within the school environment. They were finally fully engaged members of a school community (Wehlage et al., 1989).

As I considered the experiences of participants within the third movement, it became clear that each had become an “agent” of his or her life and school career (Cochran &
Laub, 1994). The process of change from patient to agent is useful as a framework for understanding the movement from disengagement to reintegration as experienced by participants in this study. However, I believe with regards to the process of reintegration to school, one must integrate the central role of caring relationships within this agentic framework. I would suggest that within such relationships, participants gained both instruction in agentic action and the opportunity to practice agentic experiences. Such experiences were reinforced in less direct, positive relationships throughout the school environment. In other words, although as a concept agency might appear to reflect an individual attribute, it develops within a social context.

Agency, according to Cochran and Laub (1994), cannot be regarded as a singular construct such as locus of control or self efficacy, but “must be conceived as a complex configuration of parts” (p. 3), the core ingredients of which include self determination, self-legislation, meaningfulness, purposefulness, confidence, active striving, planfulness, and responsibility. Such features are interdependent, and agency is concerned with their integration, the whole rather than the parts. Cochran and Laub address the issue of transformation from “patient” to “agent” and suggest that such a transformation resembles an initiation or rite of passage in which individuals experience an initial separation from a known “way of being”, a transitional period of wavering “between two ways or worlds” characterized by detachment and disorientation and an ending in which the individual is “reincorporated back into the tribe or group”. Within this framework, identity formation is key.

Once started, a transformation from a patient to an agent in a life course is governed by the Gestalt Law of Pregnancy . . . the beginning serves to dislodge a person, at least partially, from one story line, and to place a person on another story line that is as yet vague” (p. 49).
Four phases of transformation are discussed. In the beginning, an individual is “dominated by entrapment in a sense of incompleteness”. Within this phase Cochran and Laub (1994) describe the powerful effect of “mirroring”,

Throughout the cases, there are moments in which the person in his or her encaging situation is mirrored . . . when a person’s situation is mirrored, particularly in the beginning, he is cast as a spectator on his or her own plight . . . In stepping back for a broader understanding and evaluation, a person temporarily steps out of or emerges from the negative drama. It is an intense, penetrating, and compelling experience. Individuals report feeling stunned . . . moved . . . It is as if the mirror . . . penetrates to the heart of one’s situation, calling for a commitment to change (p. 146).

Such mirroring often leads an individual to reexamine or question the life they have been leading and fuels a desire to improve or correct it. The second phase, positioning, might best be described as initial goal setting and tentative striving. Initial experiences of success provide validation, hope for the future and a sense of purpose. Positioning is followed by actualizing in which the individual demonstrates a readiness and commitment to act, and through initial action further opportunities for actualization arise, “in this way, a person’s life begins to fill with roles, relationships, and activities”.

Cochran and Laub describe the enhancement of agency through agentic experiences and “enacting an agentic orientation” (p. 32). An agentic orientation consists of observing models with whom an individual can identify, imaginative rehearsal or practice in taking an agentic role, preparation for action (e.g. developing a skill), action and reflection.

The final phase, completion, is of course not an ending but the beginning of a new “agentic” life, open to possibilities.

In summary, agency is a dynamic, complex construct and as such is far more useful for understanding a process of change than more static constructs such as internal locus of control. Applied to the process of reintegration to school as experienced by
participants in this study, it provides a frame or lens through which one can better understand the process of change. Briefly, reintegration began with a critical incident (or series of events) which served to dislodge each participant from their familiar way of being. In each case, participants found themselves keenly aware of their destructive life course and felt compelled to come to terms with their pasts (Incompleteness and mirroring). This led to a re-examination of goals and values and an initial commitment to try again, or re-engage in school (Positioning). As participants returned to or re-engaged in school, they began to experience success and develop coping strategies and special skills, prompting further “risk taking”. As they integrated more fully into the school environment, they found themselves becoming members of a community and active participants in their education and lives (Actualizing). As they neared graduation, they did so with a greater sense of completeness and hope for the future (Completion). As each participant struggled to replace their existing negative plot with an agentic one, they were supported by caring adults who provided a context for enhancing agency through modeling, teaching and support. These individuals provided participants with a safe place to prepare for and practice their new way of being, provided specific skill training, supported participants through each challenge and provided a context for reflection and further action.

Of course the above gives the illusion of a smooth progression of events, when in fact participants struggled throughout this movement with failure, relapse, self doubt, and the practicalities of their lives (e.g. the need to support themselves). Yet on the whole, as they progressed through this movement, “agentic experiences” began to outnumber such obstacles to success.
Implications for Education

Through their narratives of disengagement and reintegration to school, participants provided numerous examples of both effective and ineffective school practices and policies that influenced both their disengagement and reintegration to school. Although one cannot form generalizations re: causation from these narratives, it is possible to suggest implications for educational practice, policy and leadership based on our growing understanding of the lives of at-risk students. The following will review implications for educational practice and leadership, and suggest a framework for building a community of care through transforming educational leadership.

The Value of Early Intervention

Each of the participants in this research discussed a variety of early difficulties in numerous domains (school, home, community and intrapersonal). Each also suggested the powerful buffering effect of early support and care. As such, early intervention from an ecological perspective is likely the most prudent and effective means of “dropout prevention”. In practice, this requires that schools, parents and communities work together to address the needs of students. Inter-agency collaboration is frequently recommended in caring for students, but rarely practiced given a long tradition of bureaucratic boundaries and exclusion. Parents generally have a desire to support their children, particularly in the elementary years. However, some, due to negative personal experiences or feelings of incompetence, may resist overtures to partnership. It is essential that schools work to build connections with all parents and community agencies.

An ecological perspective for early intervention focuses on all aspects of the child’s development, including social, emotional, behavioural and academic barriers to
engagement. Problems in each area must be assessed and addressed in a comprehensive plan. Such a plan requires the input of numerous team members and strategies must respect the dignity of each child. Several participants noted the deleterious effect of early learning difficulties and inappropriate school responses. Such difficulties must be addressed immediately. However, remediation need not result in stigma for the student. These same participants commented on the value of remediation when provided in a supportive context with a caring teacher. Further, they benefited most when remediation was focused on specific skills, such as learning to read. Other participants struggled primarily with family concerns in their early years, suggesting the importance of the availability of individual and family counselling resources within the school. Although community agencies are available to families, such resources within the school are far more likely to be utilized. Parent education is also of importance. An expanded role for school counsellors might allow for both parenting groups and more specific parent education regarding their essential role in the education of their children. Finally, the emotional and social needs of all participants were evident in these early years. Again, the availability of counselling resources is essential for supporting students in dealing with social challenges and personal distress, and for supporting teachers and staff members in their attempts to deal with challenging situations.

**Systemic Reform to Increase the Potential for Caring Relationships and Student Engagement**

The need for caring relationships in the lives of students has been outlined in the preceding chapters. All participants identified the role of such relationships in their attempts to reintegrate to school. Yet most school structures and policies are
incompatible with the development of such care, especially at the secondary level.

Further, although it is likely that most teachers indeed care for students, their students often do not recognize or accept this care. True caring is reciprocal and requires the engagement of both parties (Noddings, 1992). Noddings suggests that teachers must learn how to express care through modeling, dialogue, practice and confirmation.

Finally, administrators at all system levels must address the need for caring school policies and evaluate the effectiveness of punitive approaches such as suspension, withdrawal and expulsion.

Schools must attend to the structural arrangements that facilitate care. Noddings (1992) suggests that teaching, like parenting, requires long periods of time, or continuity in relations,

Good parenting or teaching starts with the construction of trusting relationships and works continually to build on the foundation of trust. Schools . . . pay too little attention to the need for continuity of place, people, purpose, and curriculum. Most fundamental, of course, is purpose. If our main purpose as educators were to encourage the development of caring in our students, we would begin to look more attentively at the need for continuity in place, people, and curriculum (p. xii).

Although elementary schools generally provide such continuity, at least in part, the traditional organization of secondary schools in which students face a series of rotating classes and teachers, and teachers face over 100 students per day, works against the development of caring relationships. Further, the size of most secondary schools serves to increase the sense of anonymity and isolation that such structures impose. Yet even within large secondary schools, it is possible to build and maintain relationships. For example, through a “house” system, students would be able to work with a small team of teachers responsible for the entire curriculum, over a period of several years. Of course, student needs and desires are important, and as such their assignment to such “houses”
must be flexible enough to accommodate such needs. There are numerous examples of alternatives to traditional school organization. Yet most districts continue to rely on a system that cannot truly facilitate care.

Relationships, at their very heart, require time to develop. They are not amenable to intervention through “strategies” or “programs” devoid of human caring. Noddings (1992) notes the tendency to “methodolatry” (p. 8) in contemporary schooling and the hope that through finding the best “method” we will be able to facilitate caring relationships without altering traditional structures. This is mere wishful thinking. Each of our participants found support for reintegration through the development of a long-term relationship with a caring teacher or counsellor. They did so by chance, in spite of traditional school structures. Would it not be better to reduce such reliance on chance encounters, by rendering caring relationships inevitable within a supportive school structure?

Caring relationships are reciprocal. It is not enough for teachers and staff to express such care. Care must be received and recognized as such by students. Noddings (1992) discusses four components of “moral education” from the perspective of an ethic of caring: modeling, dialogue, practice and confirmation. Teachers need to learn how to model caring relations, support genuine dialogue characterized by understanding, empathy and appreciation, provide opportunities for practice in “caregiving” and affirm and encourage the best in students.

Within the confines of school structures that work against care, it remains possible for teachers and other school staff to care for students. Participants noted numerous examples of both direct and indirect caring on the part of school staff. Indeed, as Ray
noted, caring is found in the seemingly small details, "you know it's just amazing how much the kind gestures of an adult can mean to a kid . . . love is in the details". Simply by saying hello, asking about students' lives, or acknowledging their challenges and successes teachers make a significant difference in the lives of students. Participants also noted specific instructional strategies and personal qualities that increased their likelihood of success in a class, such as patience, creativity, instructional skill, respect for diversity, one on one assistance, interest in and knowledge of students' lives, optimism and high expectations. Yet true caring was expressed in a willingness to persevere with students despite rejection and failure: in the tenacity of John's special education teacher, in the constancy of Jade's counsellor, in the persistence of Aisha's vice principal, in the creativity of Deirdre's mentor, and the high expectations of Ray's counsellor. Every child needs someone who refuses to give up on him or her, no matter what. Each of these participants found one such person.

Finally, school policies and administrative responses to at-risk students must be examined. All participants noted the deleterious effects of routine suspension and seemingly arbitrary punishments. They also noted the negative impact of non-response. Each participant noted the ease with which they "slipped through the cracks" or talked their way out of repercussions. Most noted their abilities to miss large chunks of schooling with limited consequence. Alternatives to exclusion or ignoring the problem must be explored and implemented by schools, regardless of size and structure. Students must be accountable for attending and participating in school. If we as educators believe this is important to their academic and social development, then we must address issues of nonattendance immediately and insist on the involvement of students and parents. All
participants noted the impact of high expectations and positive discipline. Caring requires such discipline, yet traditional means continually prove ineffective. Alternatives to out of school suspension including restorative justice, in-school suspensions that involve meaningful activity, and community service are but a few ways to express both care and expectations without excluding students. All staff members should be engaged in a dialogue to address alternatives.

Attention to Critical Periods

All participants identified the transition to secondary school as a challenging and ultimately unsatisfying experience. The structural changes addressed above would perhaps alleviate the distress associated with this transition for at-risk students. However, within a traditional school structure, educators might still reduce the negative impact of transition for vulnerable students. Through increased contact with elementary schools, through an institutionalized process for tracking grade eight students’ progress and a process for immediate intervention, and through the assignment of mentors for students recognized to be at-risk, some of the negative effects of the transition to secondary school might be minimized. In addition, through provision of a wide range of extracurricular activities, and personal encouragement to participate, students might find alternatives to negative student subcultures. All participants noted a decline in parent participation in their education beginning in their grade eight year. Focused parent education might support continued parental involvement.

Developing “Islands of Competence” (Goldstein & Brooks, 2002)

Each of the participants noted the powerful effect of opportunities to excel and the recognition of personal excellence. Often such opportunities were provided through
participation in athletics and music. However, these are but two possibilities for the development of specific strengths in students. For example, Dierdre noted the powerful effect of her introduction to canoeing and other outdoor pursuits, which provided a healthy lifestyle alternative and a sense of accomplishment. Alisha discussed her burgeoning interest in helping others, first discovered in lifeskills training. Schools should provide opportunities for students to excel in a variety of pursuits, and these must be afforded a level of acceptability and importance. Schools must also address the need for students to develop confidence in their abilities to manage their lives effectively. This, however, cannot be accomplished simply through more additions to an already overloaded curriculum. Within the context of caring relationships with school staff, participants received instruction in how to care, "agentic" experiences and specific school and life "survival" skills, such as goal setting and effective coping. They did not require additional courses in these areas. They simply required a caring adult mentor to show them how to care (model), listen and discuss with empathy and open-mindedness (dialogue), provide opportunities for the development and practice of skills (practice) and confirm their attempts at self-improvement.

**High Quality Alternatives for At-risk Students**

Although the best responses are preventive (early intervention and school restructuring), some students for a variety of reasons will continue to require alternative educational options. Alisha is an excellent example. The sheer force of her emotional difficulties rendered most school interventions impotent for many years. Only when she had begun to conquer these emotional difficulties could she return successfully to a regular secondary school, and even then, she required extensive flexibility in her
Participants in this study benefited from specialized programs such as cooperative education and learning centres. Yet others decried the educational poverty of some alternatives to which they were assigned. Alternatives must be afforded equal status and should not stigmatize students for their involvement. They must also expect the best, not the worst, from students and insist on their full engagement in their education. At the heart of alternatives lie people. Similar to the students in Knesting's (1999) study, participants in this study suggested that the key to the success of specialized programming lies in the opportunities for close personal relationships. People, not programs, make the difference.

Alternatives for at-risk students need not involve special programs. Flexible schedules (such as partial days) and changes to the school timetable or school year may make a significant difference for some students. We are often trapped by our preconceived notions of how schooling should be. Not all students are able to succeed within traditional notions of a ten month school year or six hour day. Nor will all students graduate within a 13 year period. Flexibility means openness to alternatives.

**Dialogue, Research and Program Evaluation**

This study attempted to articulate the voices of successful at-risk students. By including such voices we significantly enhance our attempts to address issues of disengagement and reintegration to school. Researchers must continue to listen to students, parents and educators. Similarly, individual schools and districts must provide opportunities for student, parent and teacher input with regards to the effects of school policies and procedures on student engagement. Further, districts must take responsibility for “knowing” their students. Tracking the progress of at-risk students, evaluating the
success of targeted programs and alternatives, gathering data regarding who drops out and why, and even simply keeping track of the number of dropouts, would enhance educational decision making. Yet many school districts do not gather such information about their students and programs and as such their interventions are often based on misinformation, or on an "individual deficit" perspective. Unfortunately, programs using only "risk characteristics" to target at-risk students are unsuccessful in addressing disengagement and dropping out (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002).

**Implications for Educational Leadership**

**Building Community**

Altenbaugh et al. (1995), Noddings (1992) and Wehlage et al. (1989) suggest that only through the creation of true learning communities built on the principles of care can we hope to significantly impact students' engagement in school. Adopting community as a metaphor for schools may serve as a means for reducing alienation among students, staff and parents and promote both membership and engagement. According to Sergiovanni (1996),

Communities are collections of individuals who are bonded together by natural will and who are together bound to a set of shared ideas and ideals. This bonding and binding is tight enough to transform them from a collection of "I's" into a collective "we". As a "we, members are part of a tightly knit web of meaningful relationships. This "we" usually shares a common place and over time comes to share common sentiments and traditions that are sustaining" (p. XVI).

The building of community is at the heart of every proposal for change outlined above, and illustrated in the community theory proposed by Sergiovanni (1994).

Sergiovanni (1994) outlines four components of community (of kinship, of mind, of place and of memory), and criticizes the traditional conception of schools as organizations, in which human behaviour is controlled by contract and hierarchical power
relationships, suggesting an alternative view of schools as communities characterized by family-like relationships and shared leadership, in which human behaviour is internally motivated by obligations to group norms and values. Theories borrowed from the corporate world are, he believes, inappropriate for education. A suitable theory for schools must be idea based and emphasize moral connections, reflect constructivist teaching and learning, and encourage all members of the school community to be self-managing, responsible and intrinsically motivated by their commitment to a social covenant.

Community theory meets these requirements. The source of authority in such a community is moral not bureaucratic, relying on the power of ideas, values and commitment to norms. Leadership also changes, from leadership as management, to leadership as pedagogy. Members of the community follow the idea, not the person. Sergiovanni challenges the assumptions upon which school policy and structures are decided, and asserts that our current approach must be reversed: form should follow function (what we believe is good). He proposes a theory of change that seeks to alter our “mindscapes” and focuses on capacity building through individual, professional and relationship development.

Finally, Sergiovanni (1994) presents a framework for leadership in a community. As one progresses from bureaucratic authority toward professional and moral authority, one relies less on rules, defined roles and established hierarchy, and more upon felt obligation, shared values and shared leadership. A community of mind develops where shared values and internalized norms provide the motivation for action to fulfill mutual obligations. The result is “a place where people care for each other, help each other,
devote themselves to their work, and commit themselves to a life of inquiry and learning” (p. 198).

**Transforming Leadership**

Building upon community theory, enacting meaningful cultural change requires a commitment to transforming leadership. Burns (1978) was first to distinguish transforming from transactional leadership. The latter, he explains, is based on bargaining or exchange, but lacks a binding, higher purpose. In short, it is leadership and followership based solely on self-interest, and thus limited in influence. In contrast, transforming leadership occurs when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality...transforming leadership ultimately becomes moral in that it raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leader and led, and thus it has a transforming effect on both. (p. 20)

Leaders attempting the cultural change required in the building of community cannot rely on transaction. Reform or restructuring requires an understanding of organizational change, human needs and transforming leadership.

Leadership in a community is shared. Critical theorists have pointed out that traditional leadership and organization disempowers staff and students. Transforming leaders are adept at the creation of enabling structures that promote shared leadership and educational change. For example, through the creation of forums (formal and informal) for dialogue and idea exchange, through the provision of adequate resources (time, money, space) for curricular innovation, collaborative pedagogy, and community involvement, and through an understanding of the needs of the community. Burns (1978) suggests that leadership occurs within a system of mutual influence and necessitates the
ability on the part of leaders to enter the worldviews of others in order to understand their values and needs. Leaders listen to and learn from others. As such, effective leaders promote leadership among followers (staff, students, families, and communities) in order to achieve collective goals. Leadership and followership are best described systemically. Such is the transforming leadership of community, and the leadership required to enact meaningful solutions for disengaged youth in schools and in society.

Limitations of the Current Study

The current study suggested a process of disengagement and reintegration to school comprised of three movements based on the individual narratives of five participants. The degree to which this process captures the experience of disengaging and reintegrating students in general warrants further investigation. It is beyond the scope of this study to ascertain the universality of this process or suggest causative factors.

The narratives and process were based on retrospective accounts of disengagement and reintegration elicited during extensive interviews with former students. As such, they relied upon participants’ abilities to remember and articulate their educational and personal experiences. Given that our memories are not fixed, but subject to the influence of time and experience, it is impossible to verify the accuracy of such memories, or even their impact upon participants’ choices. Participants’ memories are subject to current desires and the wisdom that comes from experience. Further, participants varied in their abilities to reflect on and articulate their experiences. Some participants, having spent years exploring their pasts in counselling and related endeavours, offered rich, detailed narratives of their educational experiences. Others had spent little time in reflection and continued to struggle with some of the negative emotions characteristic of their years in
school. As such, they required a great deal of support and assistance to share their stories.

Finally, research of this type is particularly subject to the biases of the researcher. The narratives of disengagement and the process gleaned from them were informed primarily through in-depth, unstructured interviews with participants. Although every effort was made to ensure an open, accepting and non-directive approach to such interviews, it is impossible to separate the person from the researcher. In the end, my questions and conclusions were informed by my perspective, that of a practicing school counsellor and novice researcher in the field of student disengagement. However, this limitation was tempered by repeated “member checking” in which participant feedback was repeatedly sought. Transcripts and summaries were provided to participants, and their feedback was incorporated into the final document. Further, narratives were reviewed by my doctoral committee members and by one external reviewer.

Suggestions for Further Research

Despite the proliferation of research on student disengagement, there is a paucity of research on student reintegration to or persistence in school. As stated above, the extent to which the process of disengagement and reintegration to school derived from the preceding narratives is representative of the experience of most or all successful at-risk students is questionable and worthy of further investigation. Researchers must continue to gather the stories of students who successfully reintegrate to school and persist to graduation. Such research must attend to process over time. Research conducted in “real time” (Downie, 1994), in which students are followed over the course of their school
careers, or at least for several years, might best enable us to articulate such a process without the limitations inherent in retrospective research.

Research must address current dropout prevention efforts and the effects of school policies. Programs and policies should be subject to evaluation regarding their impact upon student retention and achievement. Similarly, the policies and practices of schools must also be subject to evaluation in order to ascertain their influence on student disengagement and persistence.

This study identified numerous examples of effective teaching attitudes and supportive practices within schools. Such attitudes and practices are worthy of further research to identify and explicate the dimensions of effective practice with at-risk students. Similarly, the current research identified specific factors influencing "reintegration", including close personal relationships, specialized programming and the development of special skills or competencies. Further research is required to examine these factors and possibly their interaction.

Family and parental support and involvement (or lack of involvement) were identified as extremely influential in the lives of students. This involvement was influenced by parental educational histories. Further investigation of family "disengagement" and "reintegration" patterns might prove a fruitful area of research. For example, researchers might gather parental narratives of their own and their children's experiences in school. Also, further research might identify best practice for the inclusion of parents in the education of their children.

Finally, research on broader educational policy is warranted. Given the current political climate promoting greater student achievement and accountability, and resultant
policies, research as to the implications of such policies, particularly for at-risk students, is timely. Often such policies conflict with the implications for educational practice outlined above. The effects of caring school communities are not easily measurable and thus difficult to justify to constituents, and as a result, student achievement is often seen as the only suitable goal for educational reform. Depending upon how such a goal is framed, it may be incompatible with recommendations to increase student membership and engagement, and thus may have disastrous implications for at-risk students. Such policies must be subject to ongoing research and reflection.

Summary

This study utilized a narrative inquiry design to examine the process of disengagement from and reintegration to school among five former "at-risk" students, with an emphasis on participants' perspectives on and interpretations of this process. In-depth, unstructured interviews provided the data for the resulting narrative accounts. Five individual narratives of disengagement and reintegration were produced. A cross case thematic / temporal analysis of these narratives suggested the existence of three movements which characterized the process of disengagement and reintegration to school: Early problems and the search for belonging; The middle years and the struggle to survive; and From at-risk to risk taker: agency, relationships and the road to graduation. Disengagement and reintegration, for these participants, resembled a roller coaster ride. Participants reported a growing disenchantment with various aspects of their early life and an escalating series of problems across numerous domains. This was followed by a middle period characterized by a series of disengaging experiences and continued attempts to reengage. A critical period defined by an increasing intensity of
both personal difficulties and in-depth self examination served as the catalyst for the final movement during which participants reintegrated to school and achieved secondary school graduation. A framework for understanding reintegration based on the development of agency and the primacy of caring relationships was presented in conjunction with implications for education and educational leadership.
References


Appendix A: Participant Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT BY SUBJECTS TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT OR EXPERIMENT

The University and those conducting this project subscribe to the ethical conduct of research and to the protection at all times of the interests, comfort, and safety of subjects. This form and the information it contains are given to you for our own protection and full understanding of the procedures. Your signature on this form will signify that you have received a document which describes the procedures, possible risks, and benefits of this research project, that you have received an adequate opportunity to consider the information in the document, and that you voluntarily agree to participate in the project.

Any information that is obtained during this study will be kept confidential to the full extent permitted by law. Knowledge of your identity is not required by anyone other than the principal investigator, Karen Reilly-Clark. You will not be required to write your name or any other identifying information on the research materials. Materials will be held in a secure location and will be destroyed after the completion of the study and defense of the dissertation. However, it is possible that, as a result of legal action, the researcher may be required to divulge information obtained in the course of this research to a court or other legal body.

Having been asked by Karen Reilly-Clark, graduate student of the Faculty of Education of Simon Fraser University, to participate in a research project, I have read the procedures specified in the attached information sheet.

I understand the procedures to be used in this research project and the possible personal risks to me in taking part.

I understand that I may withdraw my participation in this research at any time.

I have been informed that the research material will be kept confidential by the Principal Investigator. The material will be used for the purposes of a Doctoral Thesis, academic papers for publication, and conference / teaching material. However, at no point will my identity be revealed and I will have the right to refuse the inclusion of information gleaned from me for any of the above purposes at any time.

I also understand that I may register any complaint I might have about the experiment / project with Dr. David Paterson (Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education) or with Dr. Robin Barrow (Dean of the Faculty of Education).
I may obtain copies of the results of this study, upon its completion, by contacting Karen Reilly-Clark at the Student Support Centre, Surrey School District #36, 12772, 88th Ave. Surrey, B.C., V3W 3J9. Phone 596-9325.

I agree to participate in this research project about my educational experiences by meeting with the principal investigator for two or three interview sessions which may last for approximately two hours each, as described in the document referred to above, during the time period of September 2000 to February 2001. I understand that this project will require me to talk about my life experiences while a student in elementary and secondary school. In addition, I will be contacted for up to two follow up meetings, between September of 2000 and June 2001, to confirm the researcher’s transcripts and findings. The total time commitment will range from six to twelve hours.

I understand that the interviews may be conducted at my home, Simon Fraser University, or the Student Support Centre, School District #36, Surrey. The location of the interview will be at my discretion.

I also understand that these interviews will be audio taped, and that the contents of the interview will be kept confidential and used for research purposes only. These taped interviews will be labeled with a randomly selected number and erased upon completion of the research text and doctoral defense.

Name (please print): ________________________________

Address: ____________________________________________

Signature: ___________________ Witness ___________________

Date: _________________
Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet

Information Sheet for Subjects

This form describes the proposed procedures involved in this research project and any potential risks to participants.

Proposed Title: The Process of Disengagement and Reintegration to School: A Narrative Inquiry

Research Project: The purpose of this study is to investigate the lived experiences of successful at-risk students in order to further our understanding of the processes of disengagement and engagement in schooling. Through narrative inquiry methodology, the early educational and social experiences of participants, and their perspectives as to their school disengagement, engagement / reconnection and success, will be examined. Participants are former Surrey students deemed “at-risk” for dropping out (by school staff) at some point in their educational careers, due to academic, behavioural and emotional concerns. However, all participants in this investigation continued on to complete secondary school and are currently successfully engaged in post-secondary study or vocational pursuits.

It is my hope that through listening to and recording the experiences of successful students, and by sharing these “stories”, this research might assist educators and parents to better understand the needs of “at-risk” students. Further, it is hoped that this research might encourage reflection on how our educational practice might better reflect these needs. In short, I hope to improve our understanding of at-risk students, and the process of engagement and disengagement in school.

Procedures: The study will consist of two or three “story” interviews which may last for up to two hours each. These will be private meetings at a location and time that are convenient for participants. These interviews will be audiotaped in order to ensure accurate collection and recall of information. In addition to these interviews, it is important that all participants have the opportunity to review transcribed notes, draft texts, and the final research document. As such, several follow-up meetings ((from one to three, depending upon the needs and wishes of the participant) will be scheduled to provide an opportunity to share results. These meetings will last from one to two hours each. The total time commitment will be approximately 6 to 12 hours between September 2000 and June 2001. In addition to interviews, this study may involve the analysis of documents such as school files and personal materials, such as photographs, journals and letters. Such documents and personal materials will be accessed and analyzed only with the explicit permission of the participant and only if deemed important to understanding the participant’s story.

Potential Risks: Due to the personal nature of this research, and the possibility of sharing distressing experiences, it is possible that participants may experience some measure of stress, anxiety or sadness. Often this may result if participants have not had the
opportunity to discuss such experiences before, or if they disclose traumatic experiences. Should participants experience any distress during the course of the interviews, or after, the researcher will stop the interview, ensure adequate time for debriefing and will provide any required referral for follow-up services, such as counselling support. As a trained, professional counsellor, the researcher will remain vigilant for signs of stress that participants might exhibit throughout the interview process.

Potential Benefits: In addition to the general educational benefits outlined above, the opportunity to reflect on and discuss life experiences may have positive psychological and educational benefits for participants, allowing them to explore the meaning of past events, actions and relationships, and how they influence current behaviour, feelings and choices. It is hoped that this research will have benefit participants and researcher through this increased opportunity for personal reflection.

Rights of Participants: All participants have the right to withdraw from this study at any time before, during and after completion of the study. This includes the right to have your personal history and related information removed from the final document, even after completion of the interviews and review meetings.

Confidentiality: All interview material (transcribed notes, audiotapes) and documents will be protected and seen only by the principal investigator. Audiotapes will be labeled with a random number and erased upon completion of the study. Note that the transcribed notes, the investigator's doctoral committee, which is comprised of two SFU faculty members and one SFU instructor, will review audiotapes and research text. In addition, a fellow doctoral student may review these materials. However, at no time will participants' names, or any other identifying information, be documented or provided to anyone other than the principal investigator.

For further information please contact: Karen Reilly-Clark at . . . or e-mail . . .
Appendix C: Staff Recruitment Notice

Recruitment Notice (School District Staff)

Researcher: I would like to take this opportunity to introduce myself and the research that I plan to undertake. My name is Kaien Reilly-Clark and I am a doctoral student in the Department of Education at Simon Fraser University. I also work in School District #36, Surrey as a District Resource Counsellor. I am seeking volunteers for the following research study.

Proposed Research: The Process of Disengagement and Reintegration to School: A Narrative Inquiry

Research Project: The purpose of this study is to investigate the lived experiences of successful at-risk students in order to further our understanding of the processes of disengagement and engagement in schooling. Through narrative inquiry methodology, the early educational and social experiences of participants, and their perspectives as to their school disengagement, engagement/reconnection and success, will be examined. Participants are former Surrey students deemed “at-risk” for dropping out (by school staff) at some point in their educational careers, due to academic, behavioural and emotional concerns. However, all participants in this investigation continued on to complete secondary school and are currently successfully engaged in post-secondary study or vocational pursuits.

It is my hope that through listening to and recording the experiences of successful students, and by sharing these “stories”, this research might assist educators and parents to better understand the needs of “at-risk” students. Further, it is hoped that this research might encourage reflection on how our educational practice might better reflect these needs. In short, I hope to improve our understanding of at-risk students, and the process of engagement and disengagement in school.

Procedures: The study will consist of two or three “story” interviews which may last for up to two hours each. These will be private meetings at a location and time that are convenient for participants. These interviews will be audiotaped in order to ensure accurate collection and recall of information. In addition to these interviews, it is important that all participants have the opportunity to review transcribed notes, draft texts, and the final research document. As such, several follow-up meetings (from one to three, depending upon the needs and wishes of the participant) will be scheduled to provide an opportunity to share results. These meetings will last from one to two hours each. The total time commitment for each participant will be approximately 6 to 12 hours between September 2000 and June 2001.

Participants: Potential participants are former Surrey students who were deemed at-risk for dropping out at some point in their educational history, but who continued on to graduate from secondary school and experience success in post-secondary studies or career.

Please contact Karen Reilly-Clark if you know of any individual who meets the above criteria and who may be interested in participating in this study.
Appendix D: Participant Recruitment Notice

Participant Recruitment Notice

I am currently looking for volunteers to participate in the following research project. Potential participants are graduates of the Surrey School District, who were deemed at-risk for dropping out at some point in their educational history, but who continued on to graduate from secondary school and experience success in post-secondary studies or career.

Proposed Title: The Process of Disengagement and Reintegration to School: A Narrative Inquiry

Researcher: My name is Karen Reilly-Clark and I am a doctoral student in the Department of Education at Simon Fraser University. I also work in the Surrey School District as a District Resource Counsellor. I have worked in the Surrey School district for five years as a teacher, school counsellor and district counsellor, and within the public education system for nine years.

Research Project: My proposed study will explore the experiences of former students, examining personal perspectives and memories of school, home and community. In particular, this research will focus on students who experienced difficulties at some point in their school career. Such students are often labeled “at-risk” for dropping out of school. However, all of the students in this study went on to achieve high school graduation and are currently experiencing success in their post-secondary studies or career. It is my hope that through listening to and recording your experiences and the experiences of other successful students, and by sharing these “stories”, this research might help educators to think about and better understand the needs of “at-risk” students, and perhaps consider how their practice might better reflect these needs. In short, I hope to improve our understanding of students, such as yourself.

Procedures: The study will consist of two interviews, which may last for up to two hours each, and several follow-up meetings (from one to three) to provide an opportunity to share results. The total time commitment for each participant will be approximately 6 to 12 hours between September 2000 and June 2001.

If you are interested in participating, or wish further information, please contact: Karen Reilly-Clark at . . . (Work); . . . (home) or e-mail (home) or (work).

Please see the attached information sheet for more detailed information.
Appendix E: Sample Interviews (Ray)

Interview One

January, 2001

K: So basically . . . we’re going to go way back and this is really an informal interview. I don’t have a sheet of questions that I’m going to be asking you, I’m just going to be taking my cues from you.

R: Alright.

K: . . . around what’s important. Let me tell you what I need to cover or what we need to cover and then however you want to do that we can. The main focus is on early educational and social experiences, so everything from your very first memory of school, if it’s kindergarten or preschool on . . . what’s been helpful for a lot of people is just going year to year as best they can remember and talking about some significant things that happened throughout that time, and then going back and forth between home and school, personal experience and school experiences . . .

R: Okay.

K: So that’s basically the way we’ve done it and it’s been very conversational so however you’re comfortable starting. You can tell me as much as you want and as little as you want. If you’re not comfortable just say let’s move on from here.

R: Okay. That sounds fine for me.

K: Good. So let’s go back as far as you can remember and start with your earliest school memory.

R: Okay, I remember my first day in grade one.

K: Okay, wow.

R: Umm. I remember it ‘cause my dad got my brother and I out of bed early that morning and took us out for breakfast before school. Before my first day. And uh, he got us up early and took us out for waffles or pancakes or something and them umm, and I remember the sun coming up and playing in the playground and he wanted us to play a bit before we went, and uh, he looked a little nervous actually. I remember that and then I remember him taking us and I remember, I don’t know if I remember that actual first day beyond that point I just have that memory before that first day began and I remember . . . I can still recall grade one.
K: I think I’ll get you to stay with the memory for just a second that you were just describing. What does that memory mean to you? I can see you were picturing it as you were talking there.

R: Umm hmm . . . what does it mean to me umm, the one I just told you about?

K: Yeah, yeah that your dad would get you up early and take you.

R: Very special, very special memory you know. Yeah, I just had a sense I would remember that moment.

K: So is it fair to say that the start of school was seen as a really special thing, a new phase, a transition point?

R: Oh yeah, yeah and I, I can’t remember if I had an opinion either way about school at that point but I knew that it meant a lot to my father.

K: Okay. Your brother is older? Younger?

R: When I started there when I had one younger brother. I actually had two younger brothers.

K: So what else do you remember about grade one?

R: I remember learning how to read and umm. I remember, yeah, I remember learning the alphabet, learning how to read. I remember that first time I figured out how to read a word.

K: What was that like?

R: It was a wonderful feeling and umm I had a pretty good teacher in grade one. She was a pretty happy person. I can’t remember her face all I can remember is the general impression of the person. She was, she helped me uh, I remember her helping us along with the alphabet and helping me in particular with our vowels and such. And uh, yeah, what else can I remember about grade one? Umm, just you know, for me it was big change getting used to the routine I guess, just uh, I wouldn’t say necessarily unpleasant but umm it was just so new.

K: Had you gone to kindergarten?

R: I can’t remember. I could ask my mother. I’ll talk to them this weekend and ask them.

K: Yeah. But certainly grade one was the significant point that you remember and that’s probably all that’s important. You remember a little bit about your teacher, not the
details of course but that she was helpful, that she was happy. Umm anything else stand out at all?

R: Umm, yeah, let’s see . . . I remember, I think, I never really verbalized it much but I remember realizing how complicated it was. I remember realizing how complicated it was going to be to make friends and figure out the dynamics of interacting with more than one or two people, you know, I remember that made a big impression on me. This was a whole different umm, whole different game. Not just your parents or your brothers or maybe one or two friends but it was, there were other things going on and uh . . .

K: Was it hard for you to make friends or easy?

R: Umm, initially no, umm, later on I had difficulty making friends but initially I remember in my young years, grades one to four anyways, I remember making friends.

K: So those early years, we can talk about them maybe as a group. I mean certainly it’s hard to kind of break it all down and remember one, two, three, but looking at those primary years, were you in one spot, one school for those years?

R: For grades one through four I was in Edmonton.

K: Okay.

R: I was at . . . elementary in southern Edmonton and ah, that school playground is where I learned to ride a bike with my dad. He would take me for lessons there. I lived about a block from the school. I could see it from my house and uh, I remember umm, I got teased quite a bit as a young child in elementary school. Starting with, I'm not sure with, I recall grade one as not being too bad an experience but I remember grades, definitely grades two and three and certainly four being quite unpleasant and that I was teased a fair bit. Umm, and that was quite a hard experience.

K: Can you tell me how?

R: Oh, verbally you know, umm, I, uh, I think just, I think maybe just being a little bit more, or just being labeled as different or a little bit more, maybe not as tough as other kids you know, quite sensitive I think and uh, umm you know occasionally I got beaten up and things like that.

K: Right, so aside from the obvious which is, it was unpleasant, what was that like for you as a little guy in elementary school?

R: Very scary.

K: Okay, so going to school was scary?
R: Hmmm, yeah I remember, I recall umm I recall being bullied and afterwards you know it would, it would . . . if it wasn’t one student there was always another that wanted to get a piece of me in that regard and uh I remember pretty much just about every day I remember going to school feeling scared wondering what was going to happen that day. I recall my father ahh, I can recall one time it didn’t actually happen in school but it was in a public swimming pool and I’d had swimming lessons and I remember getting bullied and pushed around by a couple of boys and there was one boy one night pushing me around and I happened to look over and there was my father standing there and uh, watching this boy hit me and my father didn’t do anything he just stood there and watched and he was angry, and he looked at me and he said come on hit him back and I was too scared to and uh, I was crying and uh my father looked like he was close to tears himself. But he said come on hit him back and I couldn’t, I was too scared. I remember the boy laughing at me and at my father and uh then my dad I think eventually, I don’t know if he stepped in or not, I think he did but umm I just remember that. That moment I think really solidified for me that, the realization that umm there was another world beyond the affect of my parents and that I was, I would need to fend for myself.

*THIS SENSE OF BEING ALONE, OF ISOLATION, OF HAVING TO STICK UP FOR YOURSELF, SEEMS TO BE A RECURRING THEME THROUGHOUT YOUR STORY. WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THIS?*

K: A breaking point. And that was how you made sense of it at the time or is that how you made sense of it later?

R: I think it drove the point home.

K: Yeah. When you were standing there did you understand why your dad wasn’t intervening? How did you make sense of that?

R: Intellectually I understood but it broke my heart you know to feel that.

K: You felt abandoned?

R: Uh hmm, yeah.

K: Intellectually what did you make of that?

R: Umm, I actually remember asking him after why, why he didn’t step in? And he said because I have to, I remember him telling me ‘cause I have to learn to stick up for myself. That was a reoccurring theme throughout my childhood was learning how to stick up for myself, how to defend myself and I always, I became aware at a very young age that uh, I

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1 Comments in italicized capitals were inserted into the transcript of interviews one and two for participant reflection and response prior to interview three.
developed a belief at a young age that there was something wrong with me, not intellectually or physically but just emotionally [WHERE DID THIS BELIEF ORIGINATE, CAN YOU ELABORATE]. There was something in me that people uhh, I think I was, I didn’t take the teasing well. For some people they could, it could slide off them like water off a duck’s back and I think to some extent that’s a skill I’ve maybe developed somewhat over time but uh, it’s uh, as a child it was torment in that regard and uh, I, I just remember through those kinds of experiences realizing how cruel and specifically children could be. Umm, yeah, you know looking back on it now and even as a teacher now, I’m aware not in the sense that I’m aware of everything that goes on in the school here but I’m aware of what a different world it is for a student to be in a school as opposed to being in a classroom, you get such a little snap shot of what they’re like as people and what their world is like inside this classroom, you know?

K: What I hear you saying is that there are separate worlds and that there’s these different pieces and you can only see what you know, school. What we say school is, coming to school and learning and being in a classroom setting . . . but the more significant things might be happening out there in the relationships that they have and what’s happening and what they’re experiencing emotionally. And I guess it’s been made really real for you just remembering your own experiences.

R: Umm hmm, yeah.

K: Other things stand out for you like that when you were younger? Other memories that are really strong?

R: Umm, yeah I can remember that it wasn’t just boys it was also girls that could be quite cruel. I remember a girl . . .

INTERUPTED HERE BY CUSTODIAN

K: We’ll take a stop time. We’re back.

R: I can remember uh, it’s funny when I moved, I moved from Edmonton to . . . and there was a girl that I went to elementary school with who moved from the same elementary school in Edmonton to the same elementary school in . . . that I went to.

K: Wow, okay.

R: And wouldn’t you know it, she was not, we weren’t friends. She found my weak spot so to speak and she used that as a basis to form, to establish power for herself. So, that didn’t help but I remember her years later when we were actually finishing up secondary school or we were in university and she came up to me and she said that she was deeply sorry for what she did.

K: Wow.
R: Yeah, which impressed me and I remember receiving it in a pretty good spirit and uh thanking her for that. So yeah, I was really happy for her actually and uh.

K: Came that far.

R: Yeah, it was really nice to see that.

K: Just thinking about those years where school was a scary place and coming to school could be just a frightening experience, did you ever avoid school early on because of that?

R: Umm, I don’t know if memory serves accurately. I’m sure the thought crossed my mind you know?

K: Yeah.

R: Umm, I umm, yeah I’m sure the thought crossed my mind I don’t think I would ever really act on it. Umm, umm, growing up, when I was in elementary school I, I encountered violence from three different angles. There was physical abuse in my home, there was abuse at the hands of other students and there was, occasionally you’d get the strap from principals.

K: Okay.

R: Basically, there was just this overwhelming sense that physical pain was not far around the corner. You had to really watch your step.

K: Almost unavoidable.

R: Unavoidable, yeah, yeah, really, but uh, thankfully by the time we moved out here to BC in grade five they didn’t use the strap in school so that eliminated one . . .

K: Umm, I think maybe if we can just talk about those different aspects of your life a little bit umm but just staying with school for right now, you were going through this at school, often scared to be there, some bullying going on. Did you ever get help from anyone? Or was there anyone you felt that you could turn to at the school?

R: Umm, in the early grades, grades one to four in Edmonton I can’t recall if I went to someone other than umm, within the school I can’t recall if there was anyone I went to in terms of help. I wouldn’t be surprised if I did, like if I, you know asked a teacher for help or told on someone or whatever. I’m sure I probably did.

K: It doesn’t stand out for you.

R: No, no.
K: And what stands out is that it continued.

R: Yeah, yeah. Umm hmm.

K: You described violence from the principal. How were you a part of that, is that something you experienced directly or was it something you saw other kids experiencing?

R: Umm it's something I experienced directly. I remember you know, I think getting in trouble for, I can't actually can't remember why, I think it was something involving maybe, you know throwing a snowball at somebody or whatever and getting the strap and peeing myself in the office right there . . .

K: Oh my god.

R: Yeah, but uh, I remember it was this gray long thing. A woven uh, hard cloth belt or something. Pretty, semi rigid you know, so . . . But uh, I mean I have pleasant memories of school too. Yeah, there was some neat teachers [DO YOU REMEMBER ANYONE IN PARTICULAR, ANY SPECIFIC EXAMPLES?]. I remember struggling with math [WHAT WAS THIS LIKE FOR YOU? HOW DID YOU MAKE SENSE OF THIS? DID YOU GET HELP?] and uh, but I remember being fascinated with reading about the Fjords in Norway and things like that and uh, umm, reading about different countries. Geography interested me, looking at maps. I remember I was quite interested in that. I still am.

K: Reading was easy for you?

R: Umm, yeah, I didn’t have any particular difficulty with it and it’s something that my family encouraged and I found a lot, a lot of enjoyment in, right from my childhood years up to teenage years.

K: So there were some real rewards to being in school for you?

R: Oh yeah, umm, I never, well I wouldn’t say never but I would say for most of the twelve years I found, I found value in going to school. Yeah, I liked learning [WHAT DID YOU LIKE ABOUT IT / WHY VALUABLE?]. I remember there were some things that I would really . . . I remember doing a book report in grade seven, Dr. Suess, and sweating it but I enjoyed learning, I enjoyed reading and in particular I liked to reflect on stories and things like that.

K: Okay. Tell me about that book report. Why do you bring that up?

R: Umm, just because I, it’s one of the earliest, well I wouldn’t say earliest but I remember that one specifically.

K: And it was hard work.
R: Yes it was. Yeah, and I remember you know having a tight stomach afterwards and going upstairs and telling my parents and you know from all the worry of doing it. And I also remember grade five, we had to draw a picture of our family at Christmas and I drew this elaborate picture and I remember the teacher putting it up and I felt wonderful when he did that. [WHAT DID THIS MEAN TO YOU – CAN YOU ELABORATE?]

K: To be acknowledged.

R: Yep, it was really special.

K: Where did that value of education come from? Was that just something because it gave you pleasure when you were in school or was it something that your family valued that kind of was passed on to you?

R: I would think both.

K: Okay, okay.

R: I would say both.

K: Okay, how was that communicated to you from your family say, or from where ever else it was coming from?

R: Umm, my parents, they definitely supported me in learning. You know, they encouraged, well demanded that I do my homework and what not and you know structure my time after school, so that’s what I did. Umm, and uh, they would ask you know, monitor my brother and I doing our homework and they took my education quite seriously and uh, I can always remember my father in later years saying it wasn’t important to him if we went to university but that he wanted us to get our grade twelve so . . .

K: For you, did you have a goal, about getting through school and going to university?

R: No, I didn’t, I didn’t really question it you know. For me it was, I don’t really recall having a real dream, passion or interest umm, I was just sort of fumbling through childhood you know.

K: Like we all do.

R: Yeah, yeah, and uh . . .

K: Can we move just over to the home side of things for a little bit?

R: Yep sure, yep.
K: Still kind of talking about early on, what was home life like?

R: Umm, well, I was born in Scotland.

K: Me too!

R: Oh really?

K: Yeah, I was born in Glasgow.

R: Oh, whereabouts?

K: Crookston, the south side.

R: I was born in Kilmarnoch, but I know Glasgow.

K: We left when I was six and, I mean I've been back, but Crookston is a bit of a distant memory for me so . . .

R: My dad was a doctor, he just retired, and so we came to Canada, umm as a . . . although he had finished medical school he was an intern in Banff and in Edmonton and he initially was a GP and then he became a psychiatrist and my mother was a nurse, and so I remember her working. I remember my father, he was away quite a bit working as a doctor, working as an intern like you know, particularly when he decided to become a psychiatrist there was a lot of time spent away from the home where he would work you know full time and then study until midnight every night for a year to write the exam. And when he was interning out at, umm, north of Edmonton there would be days where we wouldn't see him and my mother would be left to look after two children and uh, I think my mother found it quite difficult to make the adjustment from being in Scotland where her family and friends were to being in Canada umm, looking after three children figuring out a different culture and uh, albeit one that had the same pigmentation of the language but still . . .

K: It's still different.

R: Very much so.

K: How old were you when you left?

R: When I came to Canada with my parents I was two and my other two brothers, one was born in Banff and one was born in Edmonton.

K: Okay.

R: And uh, my dad was uh, I mean he worked. He studied very hard and he worked hard and of the two parents he was the one I had an easier relationship with.
K: You’ve mentioned your dad quite a bit since we started talking and I noticed that, that he was the parent that you talked about most.

R: Yeah and my mother, I don’t want to get off topic but I . . .

K: It’s hard to get off topic in this, you can go wherever you want.

R: Well my mother umm, was she, she wasn’t especially happy with her life I don’t think in, in dealing with the situation she had, she uh, she struggled with, well, I think she struggled with very much the sense of isolation and so I think for her school was a time for her to be who, to let down the guard a bit and perhaps it was some time for her and umm, so the only time I could really stay home, like I know some, I know some parents will umm will let a child stay home just for the emotional sake, just for a day of rest you know. But I don’t really recall much of that, it was only if I was sick I was allowed to stay home. So uh . . .

K: And you knew that early on?

R: Yep.

K: What you just described is something, I mean it’s easy for an adult to kind of recognize and understand those, those things after reflection but did you know that as a child or did you sense that as a child not just about you not being able to stay home but just your mom’s feelings and discontent?

R: Umm, at the time, I don’t think I uh recognized it cognitively but I sensed it. 

K: Okay.

R: And uh, I always have this image of being here in . . . being out here in . . . in grade five, six and seven in elementary school and I would come home and I would come in the door and I remember walking up the stairs and I can just, I can still see her back. I remember walking up the stairs and I can remember she wouldn’t turn to look at me until I was almost in the kitchen after walking up the stairs she’d be at the sink or the counter doing something, I think she was preparing herself for the children coming back into her life. An interesting image.

K: It is. Do you know what that meant to you?

R: What I sensed from that was that uh there wasn’t a lot of warmth from my mother and uh, umm, she was quite a, she’s umm well our relationship has gone through a variety of phases and it’s on the upswing these days and we’re, she’s been in AA for about seven years, six or seven years now. She struggles with, she struggled most of her life with manic depression. She’d been suicidal and umm when I was a child I was, she could be
quite violent umm, umm and it was quite terrifying. So uh, I actually moved out of the house when I was quite young just because it got too much to take.

K: And you couldn’t handle that.

R: Yeah.

K: This is the violence you were talking about before, in the home. Umm staying with when you were fairly young, was that a part of your life early on?

R: Yeah, when I was uh, you know grades one to four you get those days where you get you know you get beat up in school and then you’d come home and you’d do something wrong you’d get a spanking or if you do something really bad you’d get the belt. And uh, from, well you know, maybe you’d get hit by your mother and then dad would come home if he was mad enough he’d give you the spanking too or the belt or whatever so . . .

K: Right.

R: Yeah so, it was, you were ready for bed.

K: Couldn’t get . . .

R: But umm, you know I always remember that kind of violence and you could, you could sort of you could take a spanking or even a . . . but when you get hit in the head or . . . that was hard to take. It just, it was so painful. Physically it was painful but you know, I mean they, you know they talk about when we’re, using a comparison when you pet a dog it shows a dog you respect it if you pet it underneath on the chest as opposed to on top of the head because that’s a sign of domination and uh, and I think with a blow to the head like that it’s really hard for a child because there is so much, it’s, it’s a form of domination.

K: Yeah. Did you feel that when you were young?

R: Umm, yeah.

K: I mean I know you couldn’t probably put those words to it then but you were . . . actually I shouldn’t put words to it . . . what did it mean to you?

R: Umm, well the feeling was one of umm, the feeling was one of, or several of uh, terror, umm helplessness of uh, trapped, vulnerability umm . . . somehow it was my fault in that I’d made a mistake. Umm and uh, that something was wrong.

K: You knew something was wrong.
R: Not with me but deep inside. I think umm, there was the feeling that uh, life was uh, yeah it was something, this was something that I could not control and that I could not umm affect and that I simply had to endure.

K: Okay. How did you do that?

R: Tried to get out of the way as much as possible.

K: Withdraw?

R: Yeah, withdraw, I mean when you are being physically beaten you, you just don’t resist and you just umm, you try not to show too much pain otherwise that would just irritate them more, and uh, so in a sense you, you sort of own . . . the one thing you in a sense can control is your reaction so that uh, you don’t want to anger them anymore than they already are but umm, so I guess that’s the kind of child I was. Those were some of those feelings that lingered and I took with me to school to somehow tie it in.

K: Were there happier times at home early on that you can remember?

R: Uh, yeah . . . yeah, umm, when we first moved to Canada we lived in Banff we had a little house and umm, it’s funny you know because, you mentioned that because I remember looking at uh, in Edmonton, when there were problems in the family and I remember looking at pictures of me as a child eating cereal out of my little beatrix potter cereal bowl in my pajamas and you know, you know just looking like this really happy little boy and uh, I remember looking at it, who is this person and even now I look at that and I . . . and yet I remember those pictures now and I think what a you know, what a beautiful child I was too.

K: Mmm hmm, there’s innocence there too when you were like that.

R: Yeah innocence and it was real happiness in my face.

K: Hmm . . . and that was surprising to you?

R: That was surprising to me I felt, I felt umm . . . I was surprised to see such happiness in my face. Uhh, but umm I do recall feeling umm . . . I was never a boy or a student who wanted to dominate or, or show off. Umm, I just wanted to fit in you know.

K: You wanted to belong.

R: I wanted to belong yes. I wanted to be accepted and . . .

K: At home and at school.

R: At home and at school yes.
K: You didn’t feel that at home or at school?

R: At school no, no, umm and at home I think you know you look back on your family and you just you realize just how much everybody, parents and children are just trying to figure it all out you know?

K: It’s a big mystery everyday.

R: It’s a mystery to everybody you know . . .

K: So you see yourself when you look back at everyone stumbling through day-to-day trying to, trying to get it right.

R: Yeah. The family gets up in the morning and you go through the identical routines and yet somehow each day is a little bit different, you know.

K: Did you have extended family that were out here or was everyone back in Scotland?

R: Umm my father had an uncle, oh, sorry a brother who lived on the Island, Vancouver Island and he’d been here since I think, geeze, the late 40’s and uh, we came out in ’66 and uh, and so, umm, but other than that the rest of the family was back in Scotland.

K: So there wasn’t a lot of kind of family support for your parents?

R: No, no . . . and uh, we had some good neighbours uh, the family had six kids and uh, they were good people and uh, yeah, really no there were . . . we lived in a, we lived in not upper middle class but a comfortably middle class neighbourhood in Edmonton and uh, nice neighbourhood nice house and people were, there were people who were comfortably middle class and they knew it and they were, they were very grateful for the benefits that they had in life and uh, and so, but they weren’t so comfortable as to be closed off from being having . . . it was interesting how many, it was mostly pretty much all white but there were a lot of immigrant families from Europe you know who had done well for themselves in Canada so.

K: Tell me about the move to . . . what was that like for you?

R: Umm, well I actually didn’t want to go. I wanted to stay in Edmonton and umm we moved in I think, we actually moved there on the labour day weekend. It was weird I did the first couple of days of the school year in Edmonton and then we moved. So it was a week after labour day and uh . . .

K: You were grade five?

R: I was going into grade five yeah, yeah, and uh, I don’t know if you remember, well yeah, September is usually a pretty hot month out here so, I remember driving down with this incredibly hot wind with the cat in his cage and stopping at Boston Bar but umm,
yeah, my dad had finished becoming a psychiatrist and he wanted to practice out here in BC and there were a lot of opportunities so . . . we moved to . . . and uh, I remember you know, even though I was teased and bullied you know, I still remember having friends you know and doing a lot and having a very enjoyable childhood still. And uh..you know in many ways I was quite fortunate. Again, I had a good roof over my head. I had uh, you know I was well fed and clothed and was healthy.

K: You didn’t have the physical needs.

R: No, no.

K: . . . that other kids might have.

R: Yeah, yeah.

K: Can I just, I mean not to take you away from that . . .

R: Sure.

K: . . . but just to ask about that . . . I mean what were those other things in your life that were happy for you? You talk about friends that you had. Were you involved in activities or . . .

R: Yeah, I was in cub scouts.

K: Okay, okay.

R: I enjoyed that. I played hockey. I enjoyed that for the most part. Actually it’s funny umm, I would get in the hockey rink and I would play defense and I was vicious.

K: Really?

R: Yeah I’d become, it became an arena that I could get a one up on somebody and wouldn’t think twice about body checking somebody and umm, it was a place where I could be violent and get away with it and uh, yeah.

K: So at that point in your life I mean those things were valuable enough that you didn’t want to move away from those things.

R: Yeah, I had, I had, you know, I had a life there but . . .

K: Yeah.

R: My dad was (inaudible) so we moved out here and uh, umm, you know, I can’t say I regret moving but I never, I never did . . . there was a happiness umm that I had there as a child. I had, yeah, I had troubles but I still had, I still had, I still had things I didn’t want
to leave. And a lot of it just had to with just the fact that I was... I would have a little place I would read every Saturday I would go with comics by myself every Saturday you know. I had routines you know, and so coming out here it just... I never... in terms of school anyways... umm, maybe in a couple of instances umm, I remember grade five being a difficult year to end. Very soon I fell into a pattern of being teased again, having difficulty fitting in. Umm, having to adjust and, I remember that first, I remember that first day walking home from school and uh, trying to figure out where my house was, was it this one, was it that one, I couldn't remember, and uh... 

K: Can you, I mean you can't remember what you were thinking at that point but what is the general feeling that you recall?

R: Umm, one of abruptness, you know sort of being ripped out of one environment and placed in another and uh...

K: Displaced?

R: Yeah, just, you know, I think I finally started to figure school out a little bit in Edmonton and then umm... and so it was having to contend with, with dealing with figuring out a new school and who I was going to make friends with and umm, I was... I remember feeling frustrated that umm... I think the awkwardness and over sensitivity that I displayed as a, displayed was so evident with students so early on and that they found that as a weak point in my personality and umm, they uh, I found that very frustrating. I remember feeling deeply saddened by that. Yeah. We actually for the first couple of months we lived here in... we actually lived in a motel until we managed to find a house and so I went to one elementary school and then transferred to the other one that I was at and uh, I remember hating that. You know, living in a motel it was awful.

K: I bet.

R: Yep.

K: You're already feeling out of place and away from home, ripped away from what you know and that's such a transition place, and so you started in one school and then moved again right away to another school.

R: Yeah, I started at... and went September and October in one school and then went to the other school.

K: Umm so it wasn't a fresh start. It wasn't a new opportunity for you to come into your own and you weren't excited about it you were worried...

R: No, no, I didn't like it.

K: Okay, okay.
R: And yet... is a beautiful place, I mean it's, you know... to a ten year old I mean... I don't know... what's appealing to an adult is... is not necessarily to a child.

K: Okay, so kind of moving through those last elementary years, umm, just whatever stands out for you, umm learning wise, school wise.

R: Elementary, let's see I started in grade five and umm, it was nice not having snow to contend with.

K: Hmm, yeah, it would be different.

R: Uh, you know we were, I had a... my grade five teacher, he was an interesting man, Mr. H. Big tall man, curly hair, a runner and uh, he wasn't ah, he was a quiet man but not uh... very aware of what was going on. And uh... I think he tried to make me feel comfortable in the classroom. I remember liking him and feeling, you know feeling like he was an okay person. The uh, you know I had difficulty being teased and being bullied and I... although I wasn't... it's funny you know, I remember although I wasn't comfortable with the move to Victoria I was profoundly displeased to say the least to discover that my problems had not escaped me, the problems I had in Edmonton and uh so umm, that was distressing. You know I got into, I played soccer umm, I think umm, I found groups of boys to play with, you know play football and whatever, soccer or ride bikes with, I'd go to the beach. You know, I still remember, uh, you know, spending, having, forming friendships for a while with certain kids and we'd do things like hike or umm, go on a bike trip or something like that and umm... academically I think umm I wasn't really trying for umm for "A". Sometimes I would, sometimes I would get the bug and I would try for an "A" in something. Umm, but math again... I did have difficulty with.

K: Okay. When you said difficulty could you tell me a little bit more about that?

R: Umm, uhh, just in terms of understanding it, try and understand how to do it... uh not necessarily uh hating it just umm having difficulty uh understanding what was, what I had to do to do it successfully.

K: Do you remember how you made sense of that at that time? Was that something you were worried about, concerned about?

R: I think uh yeah, I was worried about it umm but I just did... I just, for one reason or other I just generally didn't know umm, and I found it, it was the one sticking point with me. I can remember one night my dad uh, was determined I was going to learn some math problems and he would review with me and every time I got one wrong he would strike me across the back of the head. I remember being terrified and it went on for about an hour and uh I generally didn't, I couldn't get it right and he found it so frustrating... so you know I... English and socials and science I didn't have a terrible degree of
interest in but umm, uh, grade six umm, I had Mrs. Stevens and umm she was, she had been teaching for quite a while at that point and I wasn't a very organized student. Which she found that quite irritating but uh...

K: How did you know that?

R: I think she expressed that she was displeased with me in that regard. Umm, facial expressions for sure gave that away and uh, I don't think she, if I remember correctly I don't think she had a belief that I was all that intelligent. Umm... but uh... she umm, yeah once in a while I remember a few, I can recall a few condescending remarks from her but they were never truly malicious they were, they may have indicated the fact that I wasn't a rocket scientist but uh, they weren't willfully malicious. Umm but at that point I remember in grade six I became aware of boys and girls and the potential for them to be attracted to each other but just you know it was beyond me at that age. Umm but yeah, I remember having difficulties with organization in that grade, and uh, I was in the choir umm, I had... going to point I always make the memory about an unpleasant experience in the classroom... the choir master we had uh lunch in one of the classes, we would eat our lunch in the classroom and I guess one circumstance or another I had made a mess. I think I, I spilled something or whatever and the teacher came in and said, I remember him saying to me, I don't know if your family eats like pigs at home but you know I won't allow you to eat like that here and I just, he said it to me in front of the class, he pulled me up in front of the class and said it to me in front of everybody and I just, I thought man you know that's just not right. I was deeply embarrassed.

K: You knew that wasn't right then?

R: Yeah I think that was actually in grade five so uh, I remember making the decision not to continue with choir.

K: Because of that?

R: Yeah.

K: Wow.

R: Yeah, but uh, I remember going on a school choir trip and uh, we went up to Prince George or no, Williams Lake. We did a, our choir went up there on a bus and that was a great experience so, you know we traveled for several days and that was fun. We had a border family and it was a great experience you know you're having dinner with a different family and they lived in a trailer and I thought that was the greatest thing, and uh, yeah, they were nice people. They were, my borders were nice people. They were a different type of people than my parents but they were kind you know. They watched out for me. So, you know school was fun in that way and I liked participating and I liked, I enjoyed singing and I was in band as well, I played the drums and I liked that.

**DID BEING IN BAND PROVIDE A SENSE OF INCLUSION / BELONGING / SCHOOL MEMBERSHIP?**
K: It's interesting to me that the negative experiences didn't keep you from doing those things.

R: No, no . . . umm . . . oh, I remember in junior, in elementary in band I sort of had this . . . I remember I was going to prove to the other drummers that I deserved to be there and I did. You know, they had a, there was one guy that always got on the drum set and I was never able to jossle him away in there but I was relegated to the lowly snare drum and uh I uh, I remember we were playing this one song and everybody is having difficulty and they sort of stopped playing, the drummers anyways, and I continued. I had a buddy, one of these friends who, Glenn was like, he was the shit. This guy was, he was Mr. Cool you know but he wasn't. Like he came from a, he was the youngest of and all the brothers were aces with cars you know and uh, his mother was a teacher actually and uh, Glenn uh, that was the first place that, they had a pool table, you know and that was great. He played tuba, you know, a really cool guy you know. He had a good sense of humour and he befriended me. He'd let me hang out with him. He pointed out to me that he was impressed with uh, with the fact that I continued on and I never forgot that you know, and uh, I still remember that. And umm . . . he uh, yeah.

[YOU TALK ABOUT HAVING SOME FRIENDS, DID YOU HAVE ANYONE YOU FELT VERY CLOSE TO, THAT YOU COULD CONFIDE IN(CHILD OR ADULT), THAT YOU TRUSTED COMPLETELY AT THIS STAGE IN YOUR LIFE (ALSO LATER...)? ALSO, YOU HAVE SAID LITTLE ABOUT YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR BROTHERS, CAN YOU COMMENT ON THIS?]

K: What do you think it meant, such a cool person wanting to be friends with you?

R: Umm, to me it meant that umm that I had the potential to be accepted, and uh, umm, although that friendship went by the wayside as the years went on, not completely but it definitely waned. Umm, yeah, it, it, I became, another circle of friends became closer to him and I was relegated more to the outside but still . . . But that was an important . . . and I remember you know doing participation and running and, yeah, you know and really excelling at that, and umm, I remember in grade seven watching the movie Rocky and just finding an immense amount of inspiration from it you know just you know [WHAT WAS IT ABOUT ROCKY THAT WAS SO INSPIRING / TOUCHING?] I'd buy the tape and I'd listen to the tape and you know I'd pretend I was boxing and there was just a . . . I can remember running and doing so much better than everybody else and I can remember them being jealous and making snide remarks about it but I still felt and I was good at something.

K: Sounds like you were good at a few things.

R: Yep, yeah.

K: Sounds like there were a few things in your life that went well. Moving into high school. Let's talk a little bit about that.
R: Yeah umm, I went to Saint ... 's secondary school for grade eight and that was awful. It was just awful. I think my dad, my parents were concerned about my marks and they wanted ... I think by now the pattern of me being teased and bullied was very much evident and then they wanted to try a different venue, and uh, you know like, it was an unpleasant experience umm.

**HOW DID YOU FIND MOVING TO A SECONDARY SCHOOL AT FIRST? WHAT WAS IT LIKE FOR YOU?**

K: Is this a private or a ...

R: Yeah private school in ... So I went there for a year and it wasn't good. I think I failed French. I passed English and I can't remember about math. But uh, I actually remember being hit by a teacher in the classroom in private school. Being frustrated with me and actually hitting me you know. And uh, I can't remember if I said something maybe I'd said something back but I remember him hitting me.

K: Do you remember what happened after that?

R: Umm, umm I think, I think, I think I said something to my father and I believe he said something to the administration about it and I think he was, if memory served me correctly he was disciplined but umm, umm, yeah, and there was another teacher who actually physically grabbed me and shook me one night on a camping trip, and uh, he uh, I think he was a vice-principal. I'm not sure but he was in the end expelling me from the school at the end of grade eight. I had an experience in grade eight that changed my life. Umm, I'll mention that in a second but I do remember a really cool teacher in grade eight a science teacher, Mr. P.

> [WHAT WAS SPECIAL ABOUT HIM? ABOUT HIS TEACHING...?]

Yeah, Mr. P. and you know he was just, he uh, he was a cool guy. Bald fat guy but just umm, even when we were talking about sex ed. Actually he was kind of a kinky pervert but nonetheless he was ...

K: (inaudible) different twist it takes when you look back on it.

R: Yeah, yeah, when you think back on what they’re really saying and he just basically going on about how when sex is great it doesn't matter what you’re doing and you know, I had a pretty active imagination so, uum, I thought wow, what is this guy saying you know this is, but uh, he uh, I guess he was trying to tell us about the power of the human body I guess, what a powerful thing it is and umm, he was an interesting teacher. I think one of his sons went to the school but umm, it was him. I remember my English teacher in grade eight. I remember him reading to us and I really enjoyed that. I liked being read to. He was a school priest I guess, it was a catholic school.

K: Oh, okay.
R: And uh, I remember having some difficulties with some boys and, yeah, I had a conflict with a student in the classroom and he pulled me out in the hallway and spoke with me and I was crying and I just felt like . . . and he said . . . and I always remember him saying this to me . . . I said I just want to fit in I want to be accepted. He said yes, you just have to stop trying so hard at it, you know and uh, and he was kind, he was honest but he was kind with me you know. And I always respected that.

K: It meant something to you that he took the time to say that.

R: It did, yeah, yeah, yeah it did and uh, umm . . . but I uh, I was in scouts in grade eight and we went on a camping trip and I got quite sick and I actually developed pneumonia. I had a temperature of 107 and just about died actually and so I was in hospital for a good part of a month. I think right around this time of year actually and uh, you know I lost 40 pounds in a week, went bald, lost the ability to focus with my right eye, part of my left lung. I was pretty messed up. So here I was in grade eight, verge of puberty, and uh, I had to wear a touque for a while because I was, I had patches of hair. So, Saint . . . didn’t . . . I mean I was physically quite weak after that experience.

[WHAT DID THIS MEAN TO YOU?]

Didn’t play rugby was excused from PE so to speak but umm . . . There were good teachers there too, I mean they brought Valdi in to sing to us once, and uh, umm it was, it was an interesting experience for me because it was, you know it is actually both my younger brothers graduated from there and it’s internationally, it’s one of the, in essence one of the best private schools in North America. [tape acting funny] exposure from all parts of the world [tape acting funny again] umm . . .

K: Can you tell me why you left?

R: Oh, I think I was labeled as a problem child umm, I just didn’t fit in. [DO YOU KNOW WHERE THIS LABEL ORIGINATED? CAN YOU ELABORATE ON “NOT FITTING IN” AND WHY? WHAT DID YOU THINK / FEEL ABOUT BEING EXPELLED?]

K: You got in trouble sometimes.

R: Yeah, yeah, umm, I think I actually, I think I recall actually perhaps skipping out a little bit in grade eight [CAN YOU RECALL YOUR FIRST TIME SKIPPING? DID YOU SKIP ALONE? WHERE DID YOU GO?]. Just not wanting to bother with certain classes and umm, and with grade nine . . . I went to . . . Secondary in . . . and umm, that was, not an enjoyable year [WHAT WAS YOUR TRANSITION TO THIS SCHOOL LIKE? DO YOU RECALL ANY SPECIFICS?]. But at that point in grade nine my home life was not good either. Actually, yeah, things were very hard at home between my mother and I. Umm there was a lot of conflict, umm, I was, I was starting to defend myself against physical attacks and was starting to feel physically strong to the point where I could defend myself and I was feeling angry at the situation so that merely escalated things. Umm, so sometimes I go to school without breakfast umm, I occasionally got kicked out
of the house at night with just a pair of shorts on, you know a variety of things and it was just hard for me to even begin to wrap my head around the idea of academics.

K: Can I just ask where your dad was in that picture?

R: My dad, I mean, he was at home with us. My parents are still married umm but he always had a way of justifying it. You know your mother has her bad days and more or less telling me that I shouldn’t provoke her, and again umm, laying the blame at my feet.

K: But you didn’t want to accept that blame.

R: I struggled with that one. I tried to... I mean... I couldn’t... I had trouble with that one. I was having troubles with, difficulties with anger. Grade nine was a hard year because I was still feeling... and I see it in the kids I teach now. You know I see, especially in boys. You know they’re losing that, that sensitive child and they’re starting to discover umm, a strong sense of displeasure with the world, and families and cynicism. You know it’s very intoxicating. And uh, and so, although it’s not an invigorating kind of power I think it’s something new, you know. And umm, so... and teaching does this, it reminds me so often of those experiences, you know.

[YOU TALK ABOUT YOUR ANGER – CAN YOU ELABORATE ON HOW YOU EXHIBITED THIS ANGER AND TELL ME MORE ABOUT YOUR GRADE 9 YEAR – CAN YOU RECALL ANYTHING SPECIFIC? WHAT ABOUT YOUR CLASSES?]

K: Well you can’t get away from it because you’re watching it unfold in front of you so, yeah.

R: Yeah, umm, so yeah uh, definitely there was a lot of confrontations [CAN YOU ELABORATE]. I actually, one of the things my father did umm, I remember he took us to see Rocky the movie and then he took us to the Y, my brother and I, and he took us for runs and I was pumped you know. And uh, that was in grade seven and in grade eight I was the same. I did rugby and whatever and then in grade nine I started to umm... my parents... I started to discover my body, you know... I started to discover... not athletics in a sense of a team sport but I started to discover weight lifting and I uh, if there is anything that... well, there’s probably several things that probably saved me as a teenager but that was one of them. As the years went on I got a lot of uh, a lot of power from that. The thing is, there is so much that happens at this point. Grade nine you know English, science... I remember hanging out with guys that, they were all kind of odd, you know, off to the side of the classroom especially in science and just hanging out with them and they are sort of looking down at me to make themselves feel better but they’ll still let me sit with them because you know they, when push comes to shove they’re odd balls too right? And so, I’m sitting there, taking any kind of attention I can get and umm... ’cause my mom and I are just not getting along and uh, umm they have me in uh, going to church on Sundays as well. To Sunday school and I remember sitting there, listening to them and just like you know, what is the point of this, but there I was.
[YOU TALK ABOUT ASSOCIATING WITH "ODD" PEERS...DID YOU FORM ANY CLOSE FRIENDSHIPS AT THIS TIME? HOW DID YOU SPEND YOUR SPARE TIME?]

K: Was your mom’s illness diagnosed at that point or is it now?

R: Umm, I knew she had difficulties but I mean she wouldn’t admit to it. My dad had a big trunk full of medications. Like literally a trunk. A huge trunk full of them, anti-depressants and she’s had dozens of psychiatrists and all kinds of . . .

K: Okay.

R: But you know, she was an alcoholic as well so, umm, at that time so that complicated things.

K: You were aware of that?

R: Umm, I remember her when she was drinking and I can remember there was no, there was no filter between what her mind and what she would say, and it would be very cruel things. I can remember her telling me you know she wouldn’t be surprised if I ended up in prison, things like that. I remember telling her she was a bad mother for saying that.

K: In school you kind of found the other group of kind of different kids is that...

K: Yeah, they weren’t, I mean they weren’t close friends at all they were just kids that I would sit near in school. But I started to discover the ability to (inaudible) my physical strength, I started to fight back. In grade eight I did. I started to fight back in grade eight but I had yet to discover my strength. But in grade nine, uh, I remember beating up a kid in grade nine and just, I remember what a, what a powerful feeling and what, what a great feeling it was because he had been picking on me and he was just a little snot but he was picking on me in front of his buddies and I said okay, just you and me and I remember you know all these kids watching and I just, I always remember that feeling you know, feeling vanquished. I called him on it and you know he was much more subdued after that, and I earned respect and that was important to me, you know. I didn’t like fighting but I knew I, I knew that’s what I . . .

K: How did you know you’d earned respect?

R: Umm...

K: How did the message get through to you?

R: I earned it because A, he left me alone after that, umm and secondly, there were kids who, although they didn’t like me . . . I wasn’t a bully I didn’t go out of my way. I mean I wasn’t tough at all but umm, I guess I people knew that I had a temper and that I would, if I was forced I would act on it.

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WAS FIGHTING A REGULAR OCCURRENCE AT THIS POINT IN YOUR LIFE?

K: Make people think twice?

R: Yep, exactly and, and, I didn’t think . . . I don’t know if it won me any friends but it might have deterred a few enemies. And yet you know also in grade nine there was a one, one student, Mike something, who was a, he came from a very ill adjusted family and I think he liked to make fun of me and he’d pick on me a little bit and I went and complained to the counsellor, he was a good guy, this counsellor was a good man, and uh, I remember going to this counsellor and saying look you know, I knew that I couldn’t handle being picked on by this kid. I knew this kid wasn’t bad but I also knew that it was causing me a lot of grief, so I remember going to this counsellor and I remember this counsellor saying okay, it’s Friday afternoon, I want the both of you to take the rest of the day off and I want you both to hang out with each other. So he just sent us off and said go do whatever. And you know we discovered that we liked each other, Right then. Umm, and you know I think back on it now and I think about all those guys . . . girls I didn’t, I didn’t even bother with girls. I, I, I felt physically attracted to some of them but I had no clue how to uh, how to deal with them so I didn’t.

K: Didn’t deal with them.

R: Didn’t deal with them yeah. So uh . . . but all . . . I look back on it now and I think of all those boys . . . he had realized how superficial they were not by choice really but much more out of a sense of protectiveness. You know, I look back on it now and I can see it now.

K: Tell me what you mean by that.

R: Umm, that they all had this veil of toughness or you know, being druggies or being tough guys or athletes or whatever but you know. Underneath it now I can see how it was all just you know, so cliché to say but a façade in a sense, you know. And they’ve, they’re separating from the home and either by choice or by necessity and uh, informing and this is their first moment . . . a new form of interaction forming groups you know, almost sort of tribal in a way.

K: Looking for identities.

R: Looking for identity yeah, and uh, I don’t know, I wasn’t, I look back on that and I think I somehow knew that that wasn’t for me umm, that I didn’t, I felt . . . I looked to others for acceptance but I didn’t look to them for assistance necessarily. I don’t know if you know the difference or if I’m making sense. I still felt very much alone and I felt that I had to be alone.

K: You didn’t have an expectation of help from them.
R: No, no I didn’t, no.

K: But you wanted it.

R: Hmm . . . I think well, I think I would . . . I wanted . . . I recognized that I wouldn’t be able to sit down like I am with you and tell them what I’m thinking and feeling and have a receptive ear. I knew, I wasn’t blind to what I was dealing with. Occasionally I would have umm maybe a friend that I could talk with on the way to school about you know, what I’m feeling at home or what I’m feeling about a teacher, another student or even a girl or something like that you know, but umm, no, no I, I was quite selective in that sense of who I opened up to.

K: Did you have a group that you fit into? You described some of the typical labels your druggies or your burnouts and your athletes and your brains and those kinds of people but . . .

R: By this point I was working out so umm, what I found is that I found, I loved working out so I would do that and I had that part of my identity. That was after high school. I would go somewhere to work out after the day was done in high school. I played sports a little bit I think I played some rugby. Umm a little bit of basketball but I, I don’t know why I played basketball because they treated me awful they were . . . umm, I think again I did that, I liked it and I did it to fit in but I wasn’t treated well by some of the guys on the team. Umm, but umm, I don’t know I refused to be pushed off you know and umm . . . so that was grade nine.

K: Academically?

R: Not great. I think I failed a few courses.

K: Okay.

R: Grade nine I remember being in, you know, I would need help with math in grade nine. Umm, I remember umm a social studies teacher Mr. Bradley and what an odd fellow he was and girls . . . there was this group of girls and I realized that they, it was amazing how much more they had life figured out you know.

[TELL ME MORE ABOUT MR. BRADLEY – WHY ODD? ALSO, WHY DO YOU THINK YOU MENTIONED THE GROUP OF GIRLS, CAN YOU ELABORATE?]

K: The girls did?

R: Yeah, so to speak or how much more they felt like they had it figured out.

K: That may be more right.
R: Yeah, yeah, and uh, you know they couldn't be any less interested in boys in grade nine it was the older boys, boys in the older grades. And if a girl was in grade nine she had a girlfriend in Mount Doug who was in grade eleven which was an entirely separate school but whoa there is something, there must be something special about this girl you know. Not special in the sense that maybe you're attracted to her but she must have something that you didn't see or whatever. But you sort of respect that anyway.

K: You talked a little bit about your anger kind of growing, more acting out. What kind of contact did you have with say the administration of the school?

R: Oh yeah, I would be referred to the office for, I think I was at times acting out in the classroom over a few fights here and there umm, umm . . .

K: What kind of response . . .

R: Sorry?

K: What kind of response did you get?

R: Umm, at . . . uh, not, uh, I can't recall. I was never, I never got into deep trouble. I think you know, I was maybe disruptive and I would be disciplined for that. Detentions, I'm sure I got them. [WAS THE ADMINISTRATIVE RESPONSE HELPFUL? DID IT HAVE AN EFFECT?] Umm, but I mean at that point I would, I hadn't even touched alcohol or stuff like that so . . . grade nine was just a year in which was just ugly you know, not a good feeling. Like your repertoire of responses and thought processes is not all developed so you just sort of, you just sort of get through it as best you can.

K: React to it.

R: Yeah, not very proactive, exactly. Umm hmmm.

K: Okay. You talked a little bit, just staying with the academic for a bit, you got help in math.

R: Yep.

K: Learning assistance is that the kind of . . .

R: No, no, I wasn't identified as having a . . . I don't know if they even had that kind of help then . . . But umm, yeah I had some help in math.

K: Where did that help come from?

R: I think I was referred by a math teacher and there was a . . . I think there might have been a, a special education component. I can't quite recall, but umm . . .
K: Do you remember your view of that or how you felt about that?

R: I didn’t like it. You know, I’m sure it was helpful but I didn’t like the idea of it you know. {WHY?}

K: Okay.

R: I think I was resistant to it. But I think I came around eventually. I remember the person who was helping me. I could see fairly quickly that they didn’t have any, they didn’t have any problems with me as a person [TELL ME MORE ABOUT THIS IF YOU CAN...]

K: Right, okay.

R: I think as a, I think I can remember them umm being fairly consistent with me, fairly calm and umm ... yeah, no, no ... I think, I think I got through grade ten math umm, I’ll get to grade ten in a minute I guess.

K: You can go there now if you want.

R: Yeah, okay. Well that was pretty much grade nine, just you know, I had some friends and hung out with them a little bit but I didn’t ... yeah I mean there were guys I saw on a regular basis and, but they were starting to smoke pot and drink and I was more into working out and starting to develop my body as a way of ...

K: Those things didn’t go together.

[TELL ME MORE ABOUT YOUR DAY-TO-DAY EXPERIENCES IN SCHOOL – WHAT KIND OF RELATIONSHIPS DID YOU HAVE WITH TEACHERS, WHAT ABOUT SKIPPING, HOMEWORK, ETC. DID ANYONE DISCUSS YOUR LACK OF PROGRESS WITH YOU? TRY TO HELP? WHAT WAS A TYPICAL DAY LIKE?]

R: No, not for me. And uh, grade nine in the summer ... umm, by grade nine, by the end of grade nine it was umm, by the end of grade nine things between my mom and I were very, very bad and uh, my dad said okay so it’s time to get you out of the house. So my father ... I had to take summer school that summer. I took two courses, failed them both and umm, had a good teacher in summer school, Mr. Coots. His son is now a teacher, anyways uh, yeah, it’s funny I remember him. I try and model myself after him a little bit. [TELL ME MORE ABOUT THIS!] Umm, anyway, my dad rented an apartment and would stay there with me a couple of nights a week. I’d be there, there was just a table, a chair, a small hide-a-bed and a foamy and that was about it really. And uh, dishes, a few different things. It was very kind of lonely for me.

K: You lived there?
R: Yep, yeah. And uh, he gave me a certain amount money for food and things like that but I worked as well in the summer and uh, was also working out. So I thought it was kind of neat in a way, uh, well here I am living . . .

K: In your own place.

R: My own place. But also I felt, I remember going to sleep at night feeling very lonely and uh, umm, I remember saying to my dad . . . but you know, in one sense it was sort of like ooo isn’t this interesting living alone but also saying to my dad, what do we do I mean, where do you go with this? And he said well, and I remember telling him look you know, what about a counsellor? And he said well if you want a counsellor you’re going to have arrange it. So I went to social services on my own and uh, I mean my dad was a psychiatrist he had a practice and I think it kind of caught him off guard that I actually did it but I did. I went there and I phoned and uh, set up an appointment and uh, yeah and, uh, umm went down and was interviewed and uh had a woman counsellor who was quite good and then umm she referred me to another man, Ken, who I still talk with once every few years and he was uh, very uh, very, influential person in my life. He uh, he had a real, real way about him and still does of being very uh, helping people to see past anger. Helping, he helped me to uh, slow down and to think. He would take me out for lunch once a week and uh, we would talk about boxing, ‘cause I was big into boxing I wanted to be a boxer. I wanted to be Rocky essentially. And uh, I remember him taking me out to MacDonald’s once a week and we’d sit and talk in the car and I just loved that. I just loved this person spending time with me. Even though I knew it was his job you know, umm but we would just umm, just talk you know about school, family, where I was going and I think he uh, he got me to start thinking outside the box a little bit you know, about you know, my life and umm, he would sit down and talk with my mother and my father and me about the family and my brothers and he uh, he was good. This was going into the fall of grade ten and I met him in the summer initially and I remember him saying to me if you had a magic wand . . . he would stop me and say yeah, but if you had a magic wand . . .

K: Miracle question.

R: Yeah, yeah, and it always just through me you know and I’d say . . .

K: What was your answer?

R: My answer was I’d like my family, to be back with my family. And he said well what has to happen before you can be back with your family and I’d say, well I need this, this and this and I need to stop doing this so my mother won’t, you know, beat me or whatever. He helped me to see that it wasn’t my fault that she was like this and uh, you know he umm, he’s a good man.

K: What did your family think about you seeing him?
R: I think they were uh... I think they were uh... everybody knew that something had to be done and uh, uh... so they were ready for any kind of help.

K: I'm interested that you say that actually because that makes sense that they'd be ready for help but you went and got the help. They didn't go get the help.

R: Yeah. I always felt that there was something wrong with that picture you know, but uh, again, it went back to that feeling that I was on my own you know, and uh, and I was going to have to uh figure it out for myself. Umm, eventually the idea... I told, I remember telling you know I wasn't happy with living in an apartment on my own. You know, we both felt that... it was a new experience for me, an adult asking me, you know what I felt, you know, what I wanted and uh, that was a real gift.

K: Did you know that at the time or are you reflecting on that now?

R: I was probably too cocky to admit it but you know I, I know now...

K: But you saw him and you kept those appointments I'm guessing.

R: Oh, yeah, yeah, and I respected him. You know I, I know I could be, I know I pissed him off a couple of times but uh, he would let me know. He was very firm with me. I remember one time we were having lunch and...

[end of tape 1]

[CAN YOU FINISH THIS STORY?]
March, 2001

K: Okay so basically where we left off was, just kind of the end of your junior high years. Grade ten, you'd moved out or you'd been asked to move out, something was arranged for you, into an apartment and you'd started seeing a counsellor on a fairly regular basis and that person . . . that person was . . . someone I guess you really appreciated having, being able to maintain that relationship, or to have that relationship so, where ever you'd like to go from there.

R: It's recording?

K: It's recording.

R: Okay. Umm, well I think uh, like I said, just listening to the tape again, it made me realize, and it reminds me even now, a lot of teenagers . . . I won't say all but there is definitely, you're pretty safe in making a general statement that a lot of teenagers are aware of different possibilities in life and, and, and I don't think some of them realize just how constrained they are by the lack of experience and what they can actually achieve. Not in any kind of grandiose sense but just in terms of choosing their own stability and the way that's going to look and I think what this counsellor did for me was get me to do some imagining of what a safe and happy environment would look like for me. And uh, he . . . it's, I think everybody, even if they've got a lot working against them umm, still have an impulse to try and move towards a place of safety. And so, that's what this counsellor started to do with me was just ask me to imagine and to dig a little deeper and uh, and from there he began to talk more about the reality of me eventually where I could be stable and have a foundation and we came up with the idea of having either me being in a group home or having foster parents. It wasn't something he rushed into but he met with me, he met with my parents and we talked about it for several months before it became a reality and umm, they were wonderful people and I still keep in touch with them.

[TELL ME MORE ABOUT THIS STAGE OF YOUR LIFE...YOUR FOSTER PARENTS, THE MOVE IN, ETC, ETC]

K: Your foster parents?

R: My foster parents yes, and him, my counsellor as well. Umm, but uh, they, my foster parents uh, enabled me to ensure that I had a place where there were adults and where I could be fed consistently and uh, and I had my own zone of safety in other words my own room, basically. And from there I was in, I switched to a different school half way through grade ten and my head wasn't in it. I liked the social aspect but I was not there academically at all. It was like moving through cement, you know I wasn't focused on that at all [WHAT WAS IT LIKE TO BE IN CLASS, CAN YOU DESCRIBE IT?] and uh, as I find a lot of boys that age are, however uh, I got through. [HOW DID YOU GET
THROUGH? TELL ME MORE ABOUT THIS SCHOOL AND YOUR EXPERIENCE / WHAT WAS IT LIKE TO BE IN CLASS]

K: You stayed in school that time?

R: I stayed in school, yep, end of grade ten, umm, and I somehow I got involved in sort of a work and learn thing and I was able to uh, through a counsellor arrange to work for a moving company. I had met the owner of it through this gym I was working out at and uh, that was a good experience and I worked very hard and enjoyed . . . [TELL ME MORE ABOUT THIS PROGRAM AND HOW IT WAS ORGANIZED, YOUR EXPERIENCES, ETC. HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED? WAS THERE AN ACADEMIC COMPONENT?] I found that . . . I discovered that I enjoyed hard physical work and uh, my foster father and mother felt that I was, they felt that I wasn’t really interacting with them. I was relying on them for physical comfort but I wasn’t exposing myself. I wasn’t being considerate of their feelings . . . and I wasn’t, I realized, but they were very good about it [I’M NOT CLEAR ON THIS PART – CAN YOU ELABORATE?]. Umm, but at the end of high school when I turned sixteen, I remember they took me out for my birthday and uh, I recall uh, my birthday in May and then at the end of June they felt that I should quit high school and umm and go out and work. But then my foster father was on good speaking terms with my father and they would often, my father would come around usually once or twice a week and talk with my foster parents and he would supply them with a little bit of money to cover costs and things but anyways, mostly it was to talk about how I was doing . . . it was just decided between the two of them that this school just wasn’t for me and uh, and in hindsight it wasn’t at the time and the best thing I could have done was to get out for a year and work.

K: This was at the end of grade ten?

R: End of grade ten so I was sixteen. So I moved out of my foster parents and I actually moved back home and worked for the moving company and umm, I had my own sort of living area downstairs with a hot plate and a little fridge to limit the amount of interaction I had with my mother.

K: So the relationship was still very much the same.

R: Yep and uh, even though I was living in the same space, the reduction of contact did help but eventually things just deteriorated to the point where I had to get out again. So I ended up living with one of the bosses of the moving company. I slept on a couch for a year.

K: Wow, okay.

R: Or a good part of the year. And, you know, I worked out. I didn’t party at all.

K: Had that been something you were doing before?
R: No, not at all.

K: No, I don’t recall that, that’s why I . . .

R: No, I didn’t, I didn’t. Occasionally I think I would have a beer, but it was very rare and I worked out religiously and uh, and I worked hard during the day and made money and paid the rent and all that. Umm, so I found an outlet in physical exercise. And I worked with guys. some were just out of prison, some were you know, just making money to buy alcohol, just guys, just getting by. You know, borderline welfare guys. But I had a good, my boss was a very stern person but he, I guess he saw some good in me and he kind of treated me like a son. You know it’s just amazing how much the kind gestures of an adult can mean to a kid . . . and uh, so I was a bit of a liability as an employee. I occasionally broke things and scratched things but he kept me on. He actually said you know, you’ve worked enough, you should go back to high school, and after a year I did. I went back.

K: Can I ask just to back up a bit from that. When you’re foster dad, your dad kind of . . . was it your foster dad that presented that to you the idea of not going to high school?

R: He did yep.

K: How did you react to that? What was your feelings at the time?

R: Umm, it was as if a weight had been pulled off me but . . . it was kind of a dull recognition of that on my part. I uh, I don’t think I really . . . there was an awareness that . . . it was the best thing to do.

K: Why?

R: Umm, for me because I was struggling so much with uh . . . I’m just going back into that feeling and I’m trying . . . that’s . . . all that, all of that sensation. I was really umm . . . I needed to figure out who I was and where I was going. I wasn’t identifying with my peers, my life was very different from a lot of theirs. Less so, with the school that I finished my grade ten with which was more lower middle class and umm, and there was some kids with some definite struggles.

K: But you felt very definite from kids generally.

R: I did yeah, I identified more with adults, and uh, actually I remember a teacher even in grade, in early grade ten, he told me the same thing. He said you should just, you should get out and work. You’re head is not in it. When I heard it from him I didn’t accept it, I didn’t argue with him but I thought he was, I thought it was flawed advice. When my foster father told me I thought you know, because he was able, he was able to talk to me, he was able to get me to look at my heart and uh, and realize that I was stagnating and uh, and so . . . it’s just what I feel upon recalling that.
K: Stagnating meaning you weren't doing . . .

R: I was spinning my wheels, I wasn’t doing the work, I was skipping classes, not a lot but here and there and I look at some of the boys I have in my class now in com 11 and I see myself you know, just boys that uh, you just feel for them because uh . . . I was just in an interview, parent teacher interview and I remember talking about grade nines you know, they don’t really know which way they’re going and I think whether they’re going to be children or they are starting to embrace adulthood but grade then the other shoe drops and reality starts to set in. And I think a lot of kids in grade ten and eleven find it a very sort of umm, I guess, bewildered wouldn’t be the word, I would think more umm, kind of a melancholic umm, almost shock, you know, but not like a startled shock just a sense of loss somehow I think, for, I hope I’m not being too melodramatic but, sort of a loss of innocence or a loss of something sacred or precious. I don’t know maybe it’s just childhood innocence, I don’t know and they have to . . .

K: Is that along with kind of the realization of increasing responsibility or expectations or those kinds of things?

R: Yes, that kind of thing and wanting to appear capable and yet feeling like there are so many new different things to contend with you know?

K: And wanting to be protected from that maybe a little . . .

R: Yeah, yeah, and uh, it’s not like we don’t have those feelings when we’re in our 30’s.

K: Well, that’s it, you know, I was going to say that, does that go away?

R: So uh, and I just really feel for these boys because umm, you know, it’s just a really wonderful thing I think when an adult can, can just accept the student for who that person is and uh, and go from there.

K: So, I’m guessing, I mean those are some of the things that you were experiencing during that grade ten year.

R: Yeah.

K: Umm, led to you not working, not being there all the time, were other things happening at the time you weren’t really engaged with your peers at all.

R: No, when I moved from literally one side of . . . to the other.

K: Yeah.

R: I went from (school name) and (school name) which is a middle to upper middle class affluent area to (school name) which is over by . . . courts which is you know, a lot of definitely low income households so, it was a very different environment so I didn’t
really keep in contact with many of my peers from the old school and I didn’t really have many, I didn’t really make . . . I made a few new friends but nothing of any deep consequence. So I identified more with adults especially when I started to work.

K: Those adults were out of school.

R: Yeah and again I didn’t really even socialize with them. I had friends through the gym that I worked out at the Y friends that I still have today. And uh, I, I enjoyed working out because it was hard physical, hard and physical and also it was very social and uh, I mean, here I was out of grade ten and I was enjoying the company of grown men you know I was conversing with them and I found that quite rewarding and some of them slowly encouraged me to return to high school. So, after a year I felt, after a year of working I think I felt that you know, yeah I was going to make money moving furniture but I think I sensed a need to go back and . . . [TELL ME MORE ABOUT THIS, HOW DID YOU COME TO THIS REALIZATION?] going back to high school was in grade eleven a good thing for me to do. Umm, I was able . . . having seen that . . . although I enjoyed the company of adults I realized that I was still a teenager and I got . . . I was more involved in grade eleven [WHY? WHAT LED TO THIS INCREASED INVOLVEMENT?]. I played on the basketball team, I socialized more and I, I umm, I worked a little harder. A little harder, but still my head wasn’t really in the academic realm and I actually was deep into weight lifting and body building at this point and uh, training quite hard at that but still getting into fights from time to time. I actually got into a fight in a classroom once. It was quite a serious one.

[CAN YOU TELL ME MORE ABOUT YOUR RETURN TO SCHOOL?]

K: What happened?

R: Oh, I think . . . it was during a time when I had . . . I had gone back to school and I’d also moved back home and it wasn’t working out and I had to move out again and get another place and that was . . . I always remember sitting on the bus and having to go look at a place to live in grade eleven and just feeling resentful and abandoned and, you know I think any kind of, anything could have set me off you know and I think some kid probably made some . . . maybe some kid I didn’t like maybe said something to me and I just attacked him right there in the class and a couple of teachers had to haul me off. And uh . . .

K: How was that resolved?

R: Oh, I think I got suspended and uh . . . I learned . . . there was a second there you know when I was beating this kid and definitely getting the upper hand and this teacher pulled me off and I turned to him and he said come on have a go at me. The teacher said that actually I was surprised. I thought well if a teacher will say that this must be serious so, I uh, I just had a second of recognition of what a stupid thing I was doing and uh, I felt ashamed and uh, I went to the office and there were consequences but you know, I had some good teachers that umm . . . it’s funny in talking about this and being a teacher
I realize you know, just how important... it's just how much teaching is in social interactions because I think school is a place where children and definitely teenagers begin to let go of... they go beyond the realm of their parents influence and they start to establish their own values and their own rules and their own social circles independent of their parents and yet they still need the presence of adults.

K: So how were those adults important to you when you went back to school?

R: Umm, the ones that I liked umm, you just, you just want to be in their presence. And whatever they're teaching is almost secondary.

K: Sure, so what was it about them that made you want to be in their presence?

R: Um, they were uh, they were generally always happy people and uh, they may be grouchy from time to time but you would accept that. They uh, they just made you feel... they noticed you and they had a good sense of humour and they seemed to enjoy what... there is pretty stock answers you know they enjoyed what they were teaching and umm and they didn't have... I think they had uh, room in their heart and minds for people other than just those students that fit the ideal student category. They had room in their hearts and minds for all kinds of people in their classroom.

K: So how did they show that to say, yourself who was not an ideal student?

R: Umm, well they would, they were... there were inappropriate behaviours which they didn't accept but umm, even though you may have not have been doing well academically they would still ask for your opinion and, and ask you what you thought about something and, and tried to keep you involved. Umm... and there were... they would ask you questions about your life you know, how you were doing and get a sense of your reality outside the classroom and uh, I think, I think students really wanted to... there are students that really want to share with their teachers what's happening you know good and bad, whatever...

[CAN YOU THINK OF A SPECIFIC TEACHER THAT EXPEMPLIFIED THE ABOVE?]

K: Do you have a sense and maybe you need to move back for this or forward for this... umm, you talked about the school is kind of on the periphery a bit...

R: Umm hmm.

K: And all the other things that were happening in your life were more in the forefront but while you were in school, whether it's grade ten or grade eleven, umm was there anyone or was anything happening to try and get your head into that space? You were talking about your head wasn't in it, your heart wasn't in it...

R: sorry was there?
K: Were any attempts made to try and help you at the school with that or address that at the school?

R: Umm there were teachers who did try and certainly I saw counsellors [TELL ME MORE ABOUT THIS IF YOU CAN? WHAT DID YOU SEE THEM FOR, ANYONE IN PARTICULAR, WHAT WOULD YOU DO WITH THEM, WAS IT HELPFUL?]. ALSO, DID YOU HAVE A MENTOR?]

K: So the counsellors at the school you spoke to . . .

R: Yep there were counsellors . . . umm, my father was called in but by the time I was seventeen or eighteen and in grade eleven my father felt that it was pretty much my show.

K: Sure.

R: And uh, he’d done all that he could and umm . . . There was a vice principal at the school who I’d always thought was a bit of an odd ball and yet the more I think about it the more I realize I was very similar to him. I am very similar to him. He’s kind of an independent and he was . . . I always remember. I can’t remember his name but uh, he, he, I think he saw a bit of me in him and he had a way of just making a comment that would get ??? He could see who I am and he would get me to look at myself a bit and he would see my strengths and comment on them like you are a really independent person, I bet you work really well alone, and that’s a good strength to have things like that. He would acknowledge me in the hall and say hello, say my name. Mentioning a person’s name can, over time, consistently over time, can just have such a . . . there’s a lot of power in that. And uh . . . I think of him and ummm, there were teachers I know that I, you know, gave a lot of grief to by having a very sort of “what me care?” kind of attitude toward some of the courses and umm . . . by grade eleven I was starting to feel confident enough to approach girls and things like that and was starting to date a little bit so my head was elsewhere but uh . . . There was a very good coach on the basketball team and uh, he was a university student that was coaching the team. He was good about, even though I was always a bench player he was good about including me and trying to get me to play and uh, he had a great sense of humour and he had a lot of vitality and that was a very important experience for me.

K: That was in grade eleven?

R: Grade eleven, yeah. And uh, I was, I was living out of the house and I was working part-time.

K: Just in an apartment on your own is that it?

R: Yeah, yeah. And I was getting some money from my father but I was having to pay for a good chunk of the bills as well so I’d work on the weekends at a restaurant. I remember our basketball team won at the Islands and I couldn’t go to the game because I
had to work. So, you know, for me, I'll always remember that moment clearly because for me it defined the extent to which I could and could not be involved in high school life because my life had an adult component. Umm, I finished grade eleven and went through grade twelve as well. And uh, by this time I had friends and contacts and I was somewhat of a character and I had a little bit of a community you know and I was accepted [HOW DID THIS COME ABOUT?]. That was really nice. I don't know if I had a lot of close friends but I had a lot of acquaintances and you know, again I was a body building kind of jock and a bit of a character and I ate a lot of bananas and ate a lot of food and goofed off and probably had some attention seeking behaviours that annoyed the hell out of teachers but I wasn't a bad kid. And I think, I had a lot to offer. I remember I had a great student teacher in grade eleven who did MacBeth and she played MacBeth on a record and that just grabbed me and that was the first time that uh, I became interested in academics in all of high school. Grade eleven and this student teacher comes in and she does the stone angel and I found that interesting and then she played this record and I never, I'll always remember feeling the drama and it just went straight through me.

K: Hmm.

And I think, when looking back on it now I think one of the reasons why Shakespeare is great is because his characters go through such intensity of emotion and yet they are able to articulate that you know, in such precise ways that, that can have a lot of meaning for teenagers and for me it certainly did. And umm, it was very powerful, I remember enjoying MacBeth immensely. And so little things like that I remember. And in grade twelve English I had Mr. J. my English twelve teacher. And you know he would let us read and he would let us write and uh, I remember when he uh, read out something that I had written and I just felt so proud, you know. I was just so proud of myself and uh, 'cause I was living out of home and I remember he gave me an A on it and I was, I was just blown away and I remember looking over and there was this other girl, Indo-Canadian girl sitting over in a corner and she was a genius. She was miles ahead of anyone in the classroom and I knew it and she wrote some incredibly articulate things and I remember she, I wouldn't presume to share her umm . . . she went on to do her PhD in English literary criticism of some sort and she was, she was beyond high school and that's what . . . now that I think about it that was what I share with her was this recognition this deep, silent but knowing, that it was okay if I didn't fit in with these kids because I had things that they didn't. I had an awareness of the real adult world and so did she. And when she wrote this, the room was always stunned because it was, her writing was so lucid and she inspired me. Her quiet presence inspired me to take a chance. Where she wrote and said articulate things, I would speak and I would . . . and in discussions I was, I felt brave enough to say what I really felt and thought and this teacher encouraged that. I remember a quote that said that many men lives of quiet desperation and I always remember being in class and he was really impressed with that. And uh, this is a teacher who had just come back to teaching after several years off. He'd worked with the coast guard and I think for him he had probably had a sort of a philosophical journey and that really resonated with him. So that English class was a real inspiration to me and I recall umm I was in grade twelve and I was, I was still struggling
academically but I was getting through but I was going to have to umm . . . it was about two thirds of the way through the year and I realized I was spending a lot of time still working out and I was going to have to make a decision about where I was going to put my energies, and I recall deciding that I was going to put athletics in a secondary position and I was going to focus on academics and I got through. I got through with a technical grade twelve, not an academic.

[HOW DID THIS CHANGE OF FOCUS COME ABOUT? CAN YOU DESCRIBE IN MORE DETAIL WHAT LED TO THE REALIZATION THAT SCHOOL WAS IMPORTANT? HOW DID YOU MAKE IT HAPPEN?] 

K: Okay, can you tell me or think about what led up to that decision? It’s sort of a major decision.

R: I think, I think umm . . . It was a decision that uh . . . I think I had made friends and I enjoyed going back to high school. I mean, I remember the first day I went back to grade eleven and I remember puking in the bathroom I was so nervous and I knew it was instinct, an instinctual decision to stick with it but I also knew that umm . . . DID THIS FEAR SUBSIDE? HOW? I didn’t share a lot in common with the kids even though I had been . . . you know, had made some acquaintances and I knew that there was a bigger world out there and I, I just . . . you know I was starting to come out of my shell and I just wanted to be done and I just you know, I think I’d gotten tired of going through those patterns and I was feeling inspired to . . .

K: Inspired to what? What was it in your head?

R: Inspired to, inspired to uh, I think inspired to be honest with myself about where I was at in life and it was time for me to grow up. I think I felt I was maturing and I was starting to feel. I just didn’t see any value in repeating the year so, I wanted to move on I guess. I wanted some closure.

K: To move on to what?

R: That’s what I wasn’t sure about.

K: Okay.

R: Yeah.

K: So you didn’t have a clear picture at that time that you were anxious to be or do?

R: No, I think what I wanted . . . I couldn’t really see beyond the end but I wanted the end. And uh, I had no idea. And after I got my technical grade twelve I still needed a credit and I remember I had to take life skills or something in summer school. And you never know where you’re going to find inspiration but I remember taking this class and it was life skills and someone was cooking and blah, blah, blah, but she also spoke about
Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and that was the beginning of... that was sort of my first ummm, intellectual epiphany you know like wow, this is a concept. A way of breaking down life you know, you have your hierarchy of needs and I just thought, that’s interesting and then, right at that moment I felt... and I asked her what is this and she said oh, he’s a social theorist and I said well tell me more and I was really interested and this like a non... course and here I am having these thoughts you know. It was very invigorating and she, she told me about that and ultimately I think that’s what got me interested in sociology and political science in university was that. Umm, by now I was finished grade twelve and I was uh, that year after I finished my academic grade twelve.

K: Your academic grade twelve?

R: Oh, sorry my technical grade twelve. I uh, my father said you need a trade, so my father still was looking out for me but uh, he uh, he said you need a trade so he enrolled me in something called track. Which was a trades program and I took steam fitting and I did that and I was body building and I was living out of the house and I was living on a sailboat actually and riding to work every day and working out. The steam fitting course it was just... a lot of guys... I realized very soon I wasn’t going to be a trades person. I felt nothing but contempt for them and I actually looked down on them and I felt that they were dead... little awareness beyond getting stoned and getting drunk and using the word fuck in every other sentence and I just thought, this is not for me and I wanted... I knew I was interested I think because of that partially because of that life skills course that talked about the seven hierarchy of needs I felt an interest in university. So umm, I took biology eleven and I had Mr. H. I went back to my high school for one course and they took me back. I was eighteen, I was nineteen actually, yeah I was, sorry I was nineteen and I went back and I was doing this steam fitting course and I was training for a body building contest, working and taking this biology eleven and I found it fascinating. Really interesting. Mr. Hunt was really a good teacher he had enthusiasm for biology and he umm, he was a really nice man. And you still admired him for even though you could tell when somebody was being nice but insincere but you still admired them for trying to be nice and he would be. You could see he was tired sometimes but he would still have some joy to give to the kids and uh, I got through biology eleven and did my body building course and then uh, I finished my steam fitting course in the full awareness that it was something I did not wish to continue.

K: It’s not what you...

R: And then I thought you know, I really want to go to university. I like learning and umm, I had a counsellor at (school name) my second grade ten school, where I finished grade ten, named Sherry and umm I went to see her at (school name) and I was twenty years old and I said I want to come back to high school and uh, she knew about my history of fighting and my problems and she said well I want to let you back in but you have to have a meeting with the principal and convince him.

K: Okay.
R: And umm and they let me back. By this time I was working night shift at McDonalds and umm that was a very . . . I started the first couple of months, I started to flounder a bit. I was taking, I was taking algebra eleven and I was taking history and biology and English Lit. No, for my first semester I was taking biology twelve, algebra eleven, physics and chemistry and I absolutely bombed. And algebra, yeah algebra, and I bombed, I failed. I dropped out of physics, I failed chemistry, I failed algebra although I tried and uh, and so I put all my energies into biology twelve. And so here I was twenty years old and I ended up getting an A in biology and I passed a scholarship [WHAT DID THIS MEAN TO YOU?]. I’ll never forget studying for that exam because I stayed, I locked myself in my room for two days and studied and it was such an amazing feeling to learn . . . it started to click for me about mid November and I just remember it was almost spiritual you know, just that feeling of learning. By the time I wrote that exam I was so charged and so it was a good way of going into the second term and I redid algebra eleven and I’d failed algebra eleven four times and I go back . . . and I had, had it with the same teacher who I had failed the last time with and he looked at me and said no, no, you get another teacher, but they couldn’t switch me so he said okay, you work and you study and I got it. I got A’s and I remember his comments like, you know, the pheonix rising from the ashes, he was just, he was blown away, he treated me, he treated me a little differently because I was an adult. But uh, that was a really fun experience and just, I loved trying to work out the problems. I . . . I . . . my brain was coming alive, I’d worked through enough emotional stuff that I was able to, to learn and I could think in the abstract and that was a great feeling. English Lit my teacher was a bit of a prude but I still enjoyed it. And history I had a great history teacher and I got the scholarship in history twelve and English Lit twelve and uh, so just a wonderful experience.

YOU ACHIEVED A GREAT DEAL THIS LAST YEAR – CAN YOU TELL ME MORE ABOUT THIS – HOW DID YOU FIND THE STRENGTH TO KEEP GOING INITIALLY DESPITE DIFFICULTY? TELL ME MORE ABOUT THE CLASSES AND YOUR NEW WAY OF BEING IN SCHOOL? WERE YOU MORE ACTIVELY INVOLVED IN CLASS? HOW WAS THIS ENOURAGED? WHAT STRATEGIES DID YOU USE TO SUCCEED? ETC...

K: Right.

R: That last year was just like a . . . you know all this murkiness up until this last time and I was twenty-one when I finished but I just, I shot through and I just, I got it you know? And uh, life was looking good.

K: It sounds, I mean it sounds like you kind of threw this cloak off and moved forward.

R: Yeah, yeah.

K: That’s what I’m picturing as you talk and just all those problems and everything that had been keeping you back for so long. I guess what I’m trying to understand and maybe it’s not possible to put into words or even . . . is how you got from there to there. Umm
you know that... I mean you talked about certainly some, some things that came through from being in settings with the trades people and being in a job and those kinds of things were experiences that really kind of showed you what you didn’t want to be...

R: You know and I think, I think uh, yeah, it’s like dating you kind of have to find out who you click with and who you don’t. I think, I think it’s, it’s that tenuous balance between schools and the real world you know. Kids have to see the connection between what they’re learning and what interests them in the real world.

K: That hadn’t happened for you in school before.

R: No, and I don’t think... You know, I saw an interest in biology definitely and yeah. I was thinking about this the other day. I mean like school really is, it’s a culture of adolescence. You know, it’s their place. I mean, teachers teach the academic material and they’re in charge but really it’s the place of the adolescent. They say that prisoners run prisons and I think in many ways students run schools. ‘Cause just by, there is so many more of them than adults. And umm and I think what drew me back ultimately to high school was a need to connect with my own age group, and uh to be around adults that weren’t emeshed in, or mired in simply just trying to get by making a buck you know. Adults that wanted to be around kids. You always get that when you’re a teenager working in some minimum wage job. As to what changed I think, I think it would have to be encounters with adults that uh, it would have to be numerous encounters with numerous different individuals adults who genuinely cared, that made efforts to interact with you and bring out some of your goodness and help you manifest it, and, and I think, I think a lot of kids are, I think some kids and certainly some adults are trapped in cycles. Trapped in patterns and I think a teacher of someone at any age will show them how to get out of that pattern, how to try a different, take on a different perception.

K: So you were trapped in a pattern.

R: A pattern of uh, of not, I don’t think I felt I was that smart. I think I felt I had average intelligence and I think I’ve realized that I have a mind and uh, I have a curiosity about the world and when that comes on you know it’s, beautiful, it’s very powerful.

K: How might, and this is asking you to speculate on something that didn’t happen, which is how might that have been ignited earlier? ‘Cause you were the same person, your abilities didn’t change.

R: Yeah, well, I don’t know. Umm, I can tell you what doesn’t work, I mean, umm, it’s you know, it’s obvious but you know... troubles at home umm, conflicts with parents, I think. [end of side 1]

K: Works against...
R: Umm yeah, well . . . I think a student who uh . . . there are kids who will do this you know, will try and shut down from the world and just try to become invisible and I think umm for me umm, I knew that I'm a person who craves contact with people and what worked for me was adults who were willing to spend some time with me and uh, just me you know . . . I was at a work shop with Barry Bennett uh that the district put on and uh, a really good presenter and umm he said you know, most of the teaching is teaching kids and you teach your course second. And I think, I think back to Mr. H and to Mr. J and umm Mrs..what's her name . . . you know, students are uh, they are an immense, I mean, students are in an immense place of wonder you know, especially grades nines I mean, they say that grade nine, the only other time grade nines go through such physical changes is at the age of two. That's when their minds and bodies change so much and I think they're very curious about the world because it's, it's almost like being born again in a way that . . . you know because they have this whole new identity and I think . . . I think umm . . . I think it's important for students to have umm an adult who is very uh, who is very strong in a sense that they're not necessarily firm but they are strong in the belief that life will work out that life is good and that they can find uh, someone who has a lot of levity you know. Someone who is able to uh, not in an insincere way but in a very true way and uh, it needs to be someone that has the ability to create happiness in themselves and others. Umm, through being silly, being able to laugh at themselves being able to get a teenager to laugh at their own selves is also a big skill and I think there were, my foster parents and other people were able to do that with me. I think as a teacher you know you're always fighting for time to plan and time to teach and using as much of that class time as you can but, you know you need to kind of . . . it used to be give and take and that it a place of youth culture and you have to have fun activities. And uh . . . it's . . . I never thought I would become a teacher. It never occurred to me umm, but uh, every day I'm reminded of my own childhood you know, especially my own teenage years and uh . . . I think at-risk kids . . . I think the term is uh, I think that term is a bit, it's a label you know. It's a label of convenience as are so many but uh, you know they bring something to a school, they bring a . . . I mean we all, every body goes through at some point in their life, has got to go through a period of you know, being jaded or being overwhelmed with troubles or whatever and some of those kids just coming to those, that zone early. And uh . . . but they bring, they're bringing honesty, you know and I think that's what I gave, that's what I gave back that enamoured me . . . my year of working, what enamoured me with the kids at that school is that I was very frank with them. If I'd . . . if what they were telling me was what I felt was bullshit I would tell them you know, and I would say look you know, you don't know what it is really like out there you know, it's a . . . and I think those kids believe it or not though they may flounder academically umm they can let kids who have been doing well in the school. I mean it's okay for kids to do well in school academically, but you know, how many people do we know that have gone straight from high school into university without really living their lives outside of an institution. You know and some of these kids at-risk are just simply . . . they may not seem like an opportunity for them, they are getting the chance to try, to develop skills that we're all going to have to develop at some point or other, and so, it's a gift of sorts I guess.

K: Interesting.
R: I mean, I know a woman who at age sixteen was working as a waitress at all night diner supporting herself and her mother was a principal in... and her father was a university professor and yet she couldn't live at home, and uh, now she's a, now she's a judge.

K: Wow.

R: She's being considered for a judge position, so she's overseen a few test cases and she's... I mean she's been a successful lawyer and she's moving on to become a judge now.

K: So, hearing you right, there's not just skills but life... life skills, life abilities.

R: Yeah, life... yeah, yeah, yeah.

K: That you develop from being at-risk, so to speak, that you couldn't possibly from kind of going through the way other kids do.

R: No, I mean an institution will always shelter you from, from, from certain things that we all have to face individually.

K: What I was also getting out of that was the need to respect that as valuable as opposed to just what we consider valuable generally in a middle class school with you know the values that we have. Umm so I guess my next question around that would be how could we show that respect? Speaking from your own experiences as a student not just kind of reflecting on it now, how could that respect have been show to you I guess in a school setting.

R: Umm... well I go back as a student who went back to high school and especially when I was twenty years old at (school name), there were teachers who would often, not often but would look at me a little differently, like come on you know what it's like out there, you know, back me up here a bit you know. That has to be done carefully because sometimes a student can already... a student that's wanting to get on with it and is, you know, it just wants to do, do well in school that can put them on the spot so I think it has to be something that has to be, you can't really demand it of a student but umm, you know, I've got... I think uh kids who have been... who have been through fait or necessity have been shoved into contending with adult themes very early on and may deal with them in very unhealthy ways, they're still capable of being leaders you know. That may, that may be limited to hey can you help me pass these papers out to umm being involved on a team. You know I think they have an, they can have an awareness and the maturity and I've seen it in my own classroom. Kids who don't have a home but will say hey come on focus, you know they'll be one of the first students to say let's focus on this as opposed to goofing off, and uh, you know, even though they may at present suck at academics they still realize that learning is a safety thing, and that you can't stay suspended in an adolescent realm forever. My answers are... tend towards pretty... I like words so I don't always give concrete examples but I see what you're getting at.
K: No, this is perfect, it's . . . it's . . . you know in terms of being able to umm write about your experience I mean . . . I can just take it directly from you because you've already done the you know, the analysis of your experience, you've already thought about that and thought about what it means . . .

R: Well, good.

K: Yeah, yeah.

R: I think I guess the word I'm looking for is those kids can be sobered, not necessarily jaded and defeated but they . . . their perspective is a bit uh, not somber but sobered you know they're not intoxicated on hormones you know, because they've . . . they've gone through the other side of that whole . . . they indulge themselves in other things that some kids can only dream of. But they are also aware of the down side of that...and uh...you know they're still...it's still part of their life but they're not uh...they don't deify it you know...they don't give themselves over to it completely. They are starting to see okay you know...I got burned by this you know...and uh...you know I have...you know maybe there is something to ...to learning and....not learning just so you can get an education and get a job but learning so that you know...you know...I think there's a...there can be humility in those kids even the arrogant ones. There's a boy who sits right here who....our school is the only one left that will take him in Surrey and uh, and I've got three boys in this com class that are...they all have court dates pending but they all....you know they may...some of them maybe cocky but they're still ...there's a lovely kind of humility about these boys....I mean not all of them, but some of them....and uh...I don't know...I mean, academics is only part of it. I mean, you know...there's a lot of people who academically do really well but they have no soul you know. And some of these kids have a lot of soul.

K: So it's inclusiveness. It's looking at including those kids regardless of . . .

R: I mean how do you grade soul?

K: Yeah, no, you can't.

R: You can't. You know, and yet these kids bring soul to the school, you know.

K: Okay. So it's somehow getting across to them that we want that . . . that we value that, that we appreciate you being here for what you bring.

R: Umm hmm, yeah, and I've never really thought about it much in such a cognizant way until now but here talking about it it's really neat to hear that you know.

K: Yeah.
R: You know there maybe kids that um, do well academically and get their work done but they're not, they don't have that dimension of personality and that's not to be critical of them it's just that they haven't been tested by life, you know? You can bring a kid up and do all the right things and have wonderful, give them a wonderful environment and they'll be thankful for it but you know, we all have to let go at some point, these kids just have to let go at the ages that are probably just too young.

K: Umm, this is a more concrete question. Around that counsellor that you were seeing outside of school, to me it sounds like that was one of the first people that helped you start looking at another way of being. Another way of presenting yourself to the world. Umm, when did that relationship end?

R: Probably ended... well formally it ended probably once I went back into high school. I didn't really ... umm ... umm, I keep in touch with my foster parents all the time, like we talk several times a year now and uh ... but with my counsellor I mean ... what he gave me was a firm honest but sensitive you know ... and he uh ... I was into boxing and body building and he was a boxer as well as a social worker and he would give me that ... he would affirm that interest of mine in macho ... independent macho ... the lone martyr, physical martyr you know, but yet he would also give me that ... he would throw a loop by talking about emotions and feelings and having to look at ... and I was caught in this ... it's amazing the power of fantasy some kids create in their own minds and the fantastical identity they create and I think some of them need to be pulled out at ... and he pulled me out of mine and it helped to look at my life. So it's ... there are many different scales you know.

K: I think I'm going to make this my final question because I'm watching the clock for you and I know you have parents arriving anytime. Umm, just a question around school policy and approaches to you in those earlier grade nine, ten years where you were getting in some trouble and you weren't achieving any comments on how the school handled that and how that could have been handled differently, around discipline, around anything about that.

R: Umm, well I was in a public, a private school for grade eight and I had a teacher who used to beat on me physically now that wasn't good. I didn't appreciate that. But as far as the public school system goes I mean, it's hard to say, hard to recall. I remember one of the counsellors in grade nine and grade ten and I remember just you know being really grateful for them and I think they handled me ... I think they did a really great job with me and uh, administration, I was never the type of at-risk kid that umm did anything really disruptive or threatening like some kids do, I mean here we have students who, obviously can get pretty violent pretty quickly which is ... I was never like that.

K: You were more the disengaging student.

R: Yeah, disengaging.

K: You may not have had a lot of experience with that kind of thing.
R: No, I, I wasn't . . . I think you know I got into trouble here and there and was probably referred for skipping and things like that but you know, I remember . . . hmm, you know for the most part I felt I was treated pretty fairly. You know, I think I had a sense of fairness by the time I went back in grade eleven and when I was spoken to by the principal. I remember once in grade twelve I didn't like the principal umm and he was admonishing me and I remember I started to tell him to f-off and it was a little voice in my head saying you know what, pull your head out of your ass you know, you really should take a good look at yourself, and the VP walking in at that moment and said watch your tongue and that brought me down...I mean being a . . . being a principal or vice principal has got to be a tough job and I think, I don't know how much changed really umm, I know that it has but uh, I mean essentially you're just a . . . you're still the keeper of the gate and uh, it would seem to me it's a much more complicated job now than it was twenty years ago. But as to how they dealt with me I never really I felt if I did something wrong I felt that you know I deserved to have the consequence so . . .

And that just wasn't 100% clear for me so that does clear it and that you really were more the quiet disengaging as opposed to the in your face umm kind of stuff that would lead to that, that kind of interaction with admin. So, okay, alright, I really do need to let you go...'cause I'm going to get someone fired/ Thank you very much. I'm just going to end here.

DID YOU GO STRAIGHT ON TO UNIVERSITY FROM HIGH SCHOOL? WHAT LED TO THIS DECISION?
WHAT LED TO YOUR DECISION TO BECOME A TEACHER?
June 23, 2001

Hi Ray,

I've attached a copy of our interview transcript. As you read, you will likely think of many things that you would like to add. I also had some questions as I read through it, and included these in capitals / italics for your consideration. We can discuss these further in another interview, or if you prefer, feel free to jot down your thoughts, as your correspondence can be used as part of the final data set. Also, if you wish to delete anything, please just cross it out and we won't use it in the final narrative. If you have any questions or concerns, please give me a call at . . . or e-mail me at . . .

Thanks again for your interest and participation. Have a great summer, and I look forward to meeting with you in August or September.

Karen
Interview # 3
Transcript Review

Jan. 25, 2002

K: When you first started school, you talked about what that was like, but . . . "QUOTE" . . . Tell me a little bit more about what that meant to you, what you meant by that statement. How did you come to that realization? How would you come to that conclusion, that this is a major transition, you’re talking about a transition right off the bat from family to school.

R: You go from your family, you’ve got your brothers and parents, and you’ve developed conscious and unconscious ways of interacting with them, and I became very aware in grade one that the interactions have a specific purpose, to learn, to complete a task, and in families children might compete for a parents attention. I remember a sense of comparison, a sense of competition in order to show that I could complete something or do a task, more independence.

K: The sense of comparison was at school?

R: Yes

K: It’s interesting that it was noticeable to you right off the bat

R: Yeah, the teacher is there to guide you in your thinking and the process, but you don’t have that intimacy with them. I got the impression that more was expected of me in an independent way.

K: Did you feel a need to establish intimacy at that point?

R: Mmm, yes

K: So it was noticeable to you that it wasn’t there. The next question was more of a comment, the sense of being alone, of isolation, of having to stick up for yourself . . . that keeps coming up, along with here I am an adult at 14, on your own . . . Does that fit for you? What did you think when you read that?

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As this was a transcript review session to clarify material in the first two interviews, only new material is included here. Excluded are lengthy quotes from the original interviews. Readers may refer to the original interviews for full text in some sections.
R: Definitely... I look at it and it's... my experience this past fall was very different from last year... and it was very much an unpleasant experience... mirrored what happened...

Note: tape jumps at one point here, had turned it off while got tea, then started in middle of question.

K: Feelings of isolation... how did they influence school?

R: I think I've always been at my best when my mood was up, but that's not to say that's the only time I've done good work. I have a very strong will to complete things. When I've been depressed or down, I've still managed to get ahead with things. I've done things in my life to develop a positive attitude, I don't necessarily bring a lot of joy to completing things... attitude learned as a child... definitely my mother, you may hate things but you still go ahead and do them. I adopted that perspective, the way I often felt in school. I just wanted to get through, looking for average marks, it was what was expected of me, my parents, they always did say that they wanted me to get my grade 12

K: Did you understand that?

R: I knew that it was important to get an education, at least grade 12, umm, I didn't realize how... I guess I came to understand it when I quit after grade 10 and went and worked. I quickly realized after a year that if you don't have your formal education you are limited as to what you can do, and secondly it's where your peer group is, where you're going to form friendships,

K: You felt really lost

R: Yeah, I was in an adult world, and I knew I had to go back.

K: That came out really strong for me, just that you were living an adult life really early, but it didn't really hit you until you left school and experienced that dissonance, I don't belong here. So, I guess you didn't have an understanding until later. At the bottom of page 4 "belief at young age something wrong with me". My question was, where did this originate?

R: I would say from home for sure, I became aware that simply being or being around was enough to cause a sense of irritation in my mother, that almost nothing I could do was right, and as such I was criticized for her bad moods, I was required to take ownership for making sure she was in a stable mood

K: Who required this?

R: She did and my father, part of it was my parents had come over from S. And a lot involved in my father establishing himself. I don't think my parents had a lot of
emotional space to let me into their space. There was a defined role. There were moments when you had great expressiveness and warmth ...

K: What was your experience of that?

R: I realized I needed to keep part of myself for just myself, and that I had to be a different person, I had to take on a different role in my family. I remember a corner of the house, a space between a bush and corner of house, and I would go there on a Saturday when the weather was nice and I would go there and read my little ... it was precious. When I went there I felt content, I escaped, I didn’t feel a wariness. In my family my experience was I had to watch it because I knew there could be physical consequences, or just anger, so you learned to watch your step. So I think going to school with that I look at people, both students and teachers, and I see some teachers and students that are often two different people ... roles ... and then I see others ... get a sense they are genuine ... but get sense from some that they are really authentic. (Ray wrote: “SCHOOL AT VARIOUS LEVELS IS A NEW AND THREATENING EXPERIENCE” ... ). That means, umm, not just that ... it is in many ways amazing and wonderful ... but ... two things, it can be threatening, or you can feel vulnerable beyond a level that is safe, in terms of new people, working out new power dynamics.

K: Goes back to what you talked about before, grade one ...

R: Yeah, umm, and then people could or can react by presenting a different person, protective image

K: Math struggles ... how did you make sense of that, what was that like to struggle?

R: You felt like you were ... I got the feeling like I was consumed with, emotionally I didn’t feel like I could connect to math, or what was being taught, I felt a dullness, a lack of interest. I could see teachers trying, but I didn’t really feel like putting myself out, until I got to grade 11 algebra when I was 20 and I loved it, I had a great teacher.

K: So it wasn’t ability, it was something else?

R: Yeah, I mean there may have been a problem with ability, but I remember grade 3 in particular and I remember teachers working with me and I didn’t want to try

K: You felt disconnected. You liked learning, you found value in it. What was valuable for you?

R: Elementary ...

K: Yes. It stands out for me.

R: Well, I, what worked for me best in elementary were visuals. I remember going nuts over the fjords in Norway, but it was fun.
K: Tell me about that.

R: I remember the teacher, she was really enthusiastic about it, and she talked about these people in Norway, how they lived, how they dressed, their music, certain beliefs, she told stories that they told, and then she had us do some basic geo research about it. She had us write a story as if we were living in Norway.

K: You mentioned that last time, it strikes me . . . It sounds like it gave you an opportunity to be or do something that you weren't , it opened up another world for you, the idea that there could be something better out there might be exciting.

R: There was something about her as a teacher. She was a little funky. She was interesting to me as an adult because she was enthusiastic, and had a passion for learning, but there was a cynical undercurrent too, not overpowering, but she was a realist, a positive skeptic.

K: You liked it.

R: One because, the way I saw that belief manifest itself was in her sense of humour, and I thought to myself, hey, here’s an adult who, having sort of a tongue in cheek attitude about the world, laugh about things, and yet still striving to be good. I can only surmise that maybe I had similar feelings, like looking at the hypocrisy in the world, someone who could see those things and yet still have a sense of humour.

K: My guess is you maybe had seen people who were striving, but there was maybe a little more of that kind of hard work approach . . . and this was a new way of striving and yet enjoying at the same time.;

R: Absolutely.

K: Ok, page 8, drawing a picture, can you elaborate on why that was so important?

R: It was of particular worth to me because I had just moved . . . difficult move, trying to fit in and find friends . . . something I had tried really hard on . . . ideal image of Christmas. I hung onto it for years.

K: Page 11. This image struck me “coming home, walking up the stairs” . . . powerful. What I got from that was a sense of being invisible. Did you experience this, this sense of invisibility, or is that too much, too strong a word?

R: What I get from that image, like if you see a typical Hollywood portrayal of a mother greeting her child after school, this was the opposite of that. As soon as I came through that door she knew I was in the house, I would say hello,. She always asked us to let her know we were in the house, to announce our presence . . . It’s not that we weren’t there, its that we weren’t wanted to be there . . .
K: Not invisible but shut out, closed out?

R: Yep.

K: Jump ahead to page 13. “Belonging”... big issue... attaches to issues of being alone... Did you find that at some point later in school? Did you later on feel like you had found belonging in school, or was it more that you weren’t concerned about belonging anymore?

R: I did eventually achieve membership in school. After I went back, I found friendship, I joined a basketball team. When I was moving furniture, I knew I had to go back to school so I could get my academics, but I also knew that I had to go back because I could be a part of who I was, I had gained a confidence in myself, but I had to go back, I could show more of who I was, and I was accepted.

K: One of the things that came out of your story...I wondered if it was less about being accepted and more about accepting your own difference, accepting who you were...here I am, I’m okay with who I am, and that allowed you to be a part of that group and you were still you.

R: Absolutely. I had a confidence about myself. I remember feeling, I’ve got my flaws but I’ve got my strong points too. I didn’t feel academically engaged yet, but I felt very curious. I had gone out into the world and I came back. We’d had some pretty philosophical discussions moving furniture, and I was able to hold meaningful conversations with adults, and that gave me a sense of confidence, so when I went back, I almost went back in a way as an adult, having experienced things they hadn’t.

K: Its interesting, you weren’t as engaged academically at that time, it was some time before that piece of it fell into place, so your impetus in going back was more finding a place as a person, or socially, it wasn’t “I’ve got to get to graduation so I can achieve this this and this”.

R: Yeah, I knew I needed academics, but I needed to find myself as a person. I knew if I went back I could let more of myself flow, be drawn to it.

K: Why couldn’t you do that outside of school?

R: Because I knew I wouldn’t have to worry about economics. My father would help, but... limits your time for yourself.

K: Practical... Another thing I’d like to understand better. You’re out there, working, living this life and realizing this isn’t my life and it’s not what I want. Are you coming to that conclusion on your own, reflecting on this, or are you bouncing it off anyone?
R: Yeah I’m sure I probably spoke about them with my boss. He was a father figure... he encouraged me to talk about it. I had spoken about it with my foster father. He had initially encouraged me to go out and work

K: That was another question, around your foster parents. They had encouraged you to leave school. Interesting. You didn’t talk much about your foster family... you moved in there...what happened?

R: Well, it’s funny you should ask that. (Socks on the table...) When I moved in, I had a really good social worker and he introduced me to Mark and Sue. Mark had insisted on meeting my parents and brothers. I moved in just after new years. The first night he took me out for dinner and we saw a movie. I just knew, I could smell the safety. I just knew I had to get through another month or two of shit with my parents. Ken really helped me to focus on the future, and then when I got there, things just opened up.

K: So they provided safety.

R: Oh, yeah, physical safety. I could do my laundry, they gave me freedom to go out. As it happened, I didn’t have a lot of friends at the new school, so I was in a lot earlier than they asked to be in I didn’t really hang out. They gave me some very basic provisions and freedoms that were lacking in my other situation.

K: What about emotional safety?

R: Um, they kind of let me come to them. They had a two year old son. Mark was a juvenile parole officer, Sue a stay at home mom. They didn’t impose themselves on me, but they let me know I was welcome. One of the big things for me was I could go and get something to eat anytime I wanted.

K: Tell me why that was important, it’s not just about food.

R: It’s about love, about acceptance, about giving and fulfilling need, and I felt like a king... there was never any hostility, never any anger. There was frustration eventually, and where that came from, was after three or four months, I was making use of, enjoying living there, I had a secure environment and food, but I wasn’t really interacting with them. I would talk, but I really kept to myself, I was very private. I wasn’t giving of my person to them. I wasn’t being intimate or open. I was fixing on the physical aspects, that I wasn’t really giving to the relationship. I wasn’t violent or mad, none of the behaviours that I had shown in my family, I didn’t yell, swear, shout, and I didn’t really go for it academically at all either, and it was Mark that told me, you should just quit for a year and work. He was honest with me. He was firm but not hostile. Anyways, Sue, when I first moved in she bought me a pair of socks and I hung on to them for years. Then this last Christmas, she bought another pair. I was with them for about seven, no about ten months and I went from there, I actually moved back home for a while, while I was working.
K: What did being with them allow you to do?

R: It allowed me to spread out a bit, you know when you’re walking on eggshells where you’re in a situation where you really have to watch your back, you can’t really breathe, you can’t spread your wings, so that just gave me freedom to do that.

K: And you mentioned, it wasn’t so simple, that oh okay, here I have some security, I feel good, now I’m really going to excel in school, it didn’t work that way, and that’s not the way it works for anyone, but tell me more about that . . . it wasn’t enough at the time . . . you talked about being on a physical level . . . Maslow’s hierarchy, having to fulfil those needs took a long time.

R: You know what, I felt like I had just come through a big marathon, a labyrinth of tests, and then just to be with them, sort of like as soon as you cross the finish line, just collapsing. When I was with them, I indulged in a fantasy side of myself. I got more into weights, I listened to rock music which I hadn’t been allowed to do. I remember buying records and then being told to take them back. I dressed like a tough guy, I took on a kind of fantasy role, I developed this whole image. The Rocky movie. I tried to model myself on his persona.

K: What was so inspiring about Rocky?

R: Tenacity, self belief, sense of purpose.

K: So being with Mark and Sue allowed you to try on a new role, something new. You needed to do that first?

R: It was an important thing to do. It was a side of myself that I probably carried over into my twenties. It allowed me to develop confidence physically. It was something I started to do before I moved in with them. I was devoted to it, lifting weights, bodybuilding. I didn’t choose a social path. It was a solitary thing.

K: Tell me what you mean by that.

R: Umm, I didn’t, I chose a way of self expression that was very, that was about presenting an image to other people, but it wasn’t one of being intimate and socializing with them...

K: It wasn’t to be part of a group.

R: No, it was to create a self image for myself.

K: Okay, that makes sense. On p. 15, you talked about playing hockey and other sports. Did you continue with that stuff?
R: I think I tried Basketball and rugby when I was in JH, but it didn’t really go well. Basketball . . . there were a group of guys, they tolerated me and I played hard, but I got bullied a bit and I didn’t feel part of the team, but I was going to tough it out, umm, later, I found a lot of comraderie. Oh, when I played rugby in grade 9, not too bad, I was accepted more as part of the team.

K: Umm...band, p. 18 . . .

R: Yes, a sense of belonging . . .

K: I would like to ask more around band, but leave it for now.

R: Band was creative, it was musical, and . . . let’s leave it for now

K: You talked about having friends, but I wasn’t sure if there was anyone else. . .

R: When my brothers and I were younger we talked more about our feelings, but by the time I was in grade 9 I was pulling away, I was just trying to . . . I was in a very self-protective mode, very independent . . . there were a few friends that I talked to and told them what was happening.

K: Was there someone in your life that you felt, I can trust them completely?

R: I’m not sure.

K: Bottom of that page . . . your move into sec school. We didn’t really talk about what that was like. How did you experience it?

R: It was an all boys school, so . . . I remember the first two or three weeks, going in cautiously, wide eyed, trying to figure it all out. Again it was trying to fit in all over again. I could see other boys feeling vulnerable and looking for identity within a group. And I could see others resisting trying to fit in or fitting into a group that was widely noticed. Some boys survived by holding back, appearing almost invisible. So, me, I was interested, I was interested in all these different guys, although I was picked on eventually, I did have some friends. But then, half way through grade 8, I had pneumonia, and when I came back I was completely different . . . partly bald . . . touque to keep my head warm . . . 13, not good.

K: What effect did that have?

R: Very self conscious. I got teased when I came back. I was actually asked not to come back at the end of the year. When I came back I was tired of being picked on, I started getting into fights, became more argumentative.

K: What about the adults. What were they doing?
R: Umm, it was a pretty formal private school, so I mean I was called into the office for fighting and things like that. Some of them were nice, some formal authoritarian figures. There’s lots of places where students can carry on activities without any adults around. This was an old boys school and there was an expectation there would be some bullying. It wasn’t stated but communicated somehow... One time, I was being picked on by a bunch of boys... They held a meeting in school gym, emphasizing the need to be kind, respectful... 

K: Some attempts, but not that effective?

R: No, actually, it didn’t have a lasting effect. Private school... concerned about their image... I can recall waiting for the bus and listening in to all these conversations about what these boys were going to be doing on the weekend, get drunk... there was a very formal... but then a very raw side... I kind of liked that a bit more real.

K: You were observing but not a part of it.

R: Then there was a camping trip... one teacher... I think I was upset because I had lost something and the teacher came back and started wacking me. Twice that year I was hit by teachers. Tough world... same message... survival.

K: When you came back from your illness, you had difficulties. Was there anyone that tried to help you deal with these problems?

R: A few older students were kind to me, boys in senior grades... rugby... gave me a bit of advice, but you know, it was sort of like, I see what’s happening but you’re on your own. A couple of teachers I spoke to. They listened and gave me a sympathetic ear. I can remember being picked on in an English class and leaving in tears. I got into an argument with one of the kids and started crying and the teacher kicked me out. He came out and asked what was going on. And I said I felt alone. He said to me, you know, you’re not alone, and we don’t hate you, just try not to be so noticed, try to lay back a bit, not make your presence known so much, he was trying to be kind, I mean I did that and it did actually work.

K: What did that mean to you?

R: His tone was sympathetic, but in my head, what that said to me was there’s something about me that’s not acceptable, try and eliminate or change, or make it invisible.

K: And that’s kind of the message you got at home. Illness... what did it mean to you to come back physically weak?

R: It’s funny you ask that, right now with my eye, I’m off. I’ve had this operation, it reminds me of going back not feeling 100 percent. At some point when you’re young you feel infallible, nothing can hurt you, right? You’re aware of how frail the human body is. I definitely felt brittle, and when you feel physically weak and brittle, you don’t
feel like you can protect yourself as much, um, and I just didn’t have the strength. A couple of times I remember getting picked on and I just didn’t have the strength to fight back. There were a couple of kids who stepped in but uh . . .

K: So it’s fear again?

R: Yeah.

K: Why don’t we go with that again. Fear . . . that’s where we started going earlier on and we left it. Do you want to talk a little bit about that?

R: About fear in school?

K: Yeah.

R: Yeah, it seems like a lot of my experience in school has been one of being afraid. And uh, except for when I went back in grade 11, I didn’t feel afraid. I was nervous, but aside from that I had more confidence, and um, but um, (long pause here), I’m trying to . . . do you want me to talk about . . . Again I became very aware of trying not to aggravate certain people, trying not to show vulnerability and weakness and just not knowing how to do that sometimes.

K: Seems to me that that must take a lot of energy and then there’s not much left over if you’re supposed to do other things.

R: Yeah, how to avoid having trouble find you, I guess.

K: And you talk about now trying to deal with some fears again . . .

R: Definitely feeling alone, rejected, frankly just you know, terrified . . .

K: I was going to say there’s a worry there. That’s a very strong word. [Note: Ray talks briefly about current teaching difficulties]. I think what comes through for me with this stuff, is it’s not just so simple as there’s a student and a struggle and then things turn around and they graduate, and go onto success. You still struggle with those feelings, because what you experienced as a child is so meaningful it does come up again and again as you experience new things, and you have to rework through those issues again and again so things that happen in your childhood are really far-reaching.

R: I feel like my past is weighing down my future, but I want to move forward. I thought I had conquered fear in the classroom, both as a teacher and a colleague.

End of tape.
Interview # 4:

Final Transcript Review Session

March 15, 2002: In person interview
March 28, 2002 (Completed last part of interview by phone)

Basically, Ray, what is still missing for me is a sense of your “school life”. I feel that we have covered your home, and to some extent your emotional life, quite well. However, I still don’t feel that I have a good understanding of what school was like for you, particularly in junior high, and how your disengagement was experienced in a school setting (for example, did you start out engaged in elementary, doing homework, attending classes, etc., then slowly drift away or did you follow a different path? When and where did this path begin – secondary, or before?)

Similarly, I wonder about the path of reintegration or engagement that you followed when you returned to school.

R: Even though I disengaged early from school, I was always interested in physical activity. I was never a club kind of person. I did enjoy running in late primary, early secondary, cross country, things like that. Umm, in high school when I returned I joined the basketball team, because of a suggestion from a friend. I saw it as a social opportunity, a way of fighting isolation and connecting.

K: So you were involved in activities early on. That waned when?

R: I ran until grade 9, then I started getting more into weight lifting and body building.

K: That was more of a personal activity you did outside of school?

R: Right . . . I began to drift down a different path, not care about academics so much, and fight back, in grade 6 or 7, fight back in terms of being bullied and things like that. Definitely in grade 8 and 9, I began to assert myself, it was sort of a do or die mentality. Definitely one of the things was of course, my illness, my pneumonia, umm, really reinforced the survival instinct in me. I discovered I had a skill for resistance. After being sick, I just had less tolerance for being picked on, bullied, both from kids and in terms of things that were happening at home

K: Skill for resistance. What do you mean by that?

3 The bold print indicates prepared questions, delivered ahead of time to the participant via e-mail. Ray in turn spent time reflecting on these and wrote detailed responses prior to our meeting. Those responses, and any additional discussion, are detailed below. As such, this review session was more “formal” and less conversational than previous sessions.
R: I seem to find some strength in opposition, in being defensive. Definitely in sports, I've always seemed to play better in defensive positions. I found that I somehow liked taking the opposing view on things, I started to question what I was being told in school and by parents, sort of question authority a bit more.

K: You got a bit more control that way.

R: Yeah, I felt more empowered, not that I was always coming from the right place.

K: But that's interesting, I mean, from not being within the mainstream, but from moving away from that.

R: (Continues with above question) I recall feeling engaged and willing to learn in K, but in grade 1 I began to feel different and isolated. I recall doing classroom tasks so that I could socialize, primarily and feel / appear accepted. At times I was genuinely interested in what was assigned, at others I just did class work so that I could talk to others. Eventually when I sensed that real communication wasn't happening, I felt less inclined to keep up with certain tasks. Somewhere in grade 2 or 3 I recall feeling futile about being isolated, a sense of permanence about it. I still have these feelings today.

On the original transcript, p. 21, you comment that you were labeled a “problem child” at school. Can you elaborate on this? What behaviours did you exhibit that might have led to this label? What did they see? In what ways was school difficult for you at this time (we have talked about teasing but what else?) Would you say you were disengaged at this point, or was this the beginning?

R: Behaviours . . . teasing others, distracting them in class, especially girls.

K: So you were doing some teasing?

R: Yeah, yeah, it wasn't so much, it was more sort of attention seeking teasing as opposed to like bullying or taunting. Sometimes I'd be crying in class, either because of something I felt but didn't understand, maybe something that happened to me. I would complain to the teacher about things. I was very neglectful of things like organization, and I have my suspicion that this was again a way to get attention.

K: From whom?

R: From the teacher. Fighting occasionally in elementary, but mostly to defend myself.

K: You talk about wanting to get attention from the teacher. What kind of attention did you want?

R:Acknowledgement.
K: You didn’t feel acknowledged?

R: Umm, by certain teachers I did yes, but I needed more.

K: And part of that might have been your background.

R: Undoubtedly, I think I was getting it, but perhaps I wanted more than was due my share perhaps. Occasionally I would steal from other students, just things like food from their lunches, never clothing or money.

K: That stealing, what was that about for you?

R: I think it might have been about trying to have some kind of power, because I stole at home, but I stole money at home, so, it was about freedom and power I think. But especially in school the chance (tape inaudible . . . ). At St. . . . it was a private school, all boys, with an old boys network, umm, grade 8 to 12, much more of a sink or swim mentality. Went to church once a week, and we shared lunch. There were boarders there . . . we had lunch every day, head teacher at every table . . . rugby was sort of the untouchable sport, it was THE sport. Competitive, pretty rigid and high academic expectations, and I pretty much floundered.

You were expelled or withdrawn from the school. How was this explained to you? How did you react to this?

R: I wasn’t measuring up in behavioural or academic terms, and that I was a problem child, this is why I was asked to withdraw. I didn’t protest, I wanted out, and I more or less accepted it.

K: So it was almost a relief to you?

R: Oh yeah. I was just happy it was over.

K: It sounds like you were disengaged, but initially an acting out kind of disengagement, then later withdrawal . . .

You mentioned that you skipped out in grade 8. Can you recall your first time skipping? Also, how often? Did this increase in later grades? Where would you go, with whom? What was the school/administrative response? Was it helpful?

R: Second half of the year, I remember skipping out, especially after my pneumonia, sometimes I’d leave school half way through the day, go for walks around the neighbourhood, go to the mall, umm, and more so, 3 to 4 times a month in grade nine, and maybe twice a week in grade ten.

K: Alone?

R: Yep, yep.
K: And did that ever change?

R: Sometimes. Actually once in early grade 10, I remember having a session with a
counsellor over a student who was picking on me, and the counsellor actually told us to
leave school and hang out together. And that was pretty good.

K: Which was a really interesting counselling response . . .

R: Yeah, it worked well. It definitely lessened my anxiety around going to school, I
definitely felt more comfortable being there.

K: Just from that? Why do you think that was?

R: Just cause this kid was being pretty threatening, and so once that was taken care of . . .

K: Just staying with that, talking about the administrative response. At one point there
was a counselling response, but what other kind of response? Did the principal get
involved, were you disciplined in any way for skipping out?

R: Yeah, I think my parents were asked to come in a couple of times. I don’t recall being
suspended for skipping, I was given detentions. I was never destructive of property or
anything, I was always one of these students, in grade 9, and grade 10, I was always just
one of these students who always just sort of flirted with the edge of dropping out of
school completely, and just kept a foot in . . .

K: That’s a great way to describe it, though, because there’s a huge chunk of kids that do
that . . . that are just kind of maintaining themselves, but really aren’t being successful,
and anything could really push them over the edge.

R: Yeah, and I was fortunate that nothing really did push me over the edge. I think in the
later grades I had more of a sense of myself, and uh, I had a real fear later on of what
might happen if I was to fail in school . . . fear of failure, and being stuck in a menial
labour position, cause I had come into contact with those kinds of people when I was
moving furniture. I knew also, from when I switched schools in grade 10, that uh,
whereas in grade 9 I had taken on this kind of facade of acting and looking tough and
lifting weights, when I went to really rough school, and I got a taste for what really rough
kids were all about, and I knew that I didn’t have the stomach for that, and not only did I
know that I couldn’t cut it in that world, but I knew it wasn’t what I wanted either.

K: So you have to be faced with that and see that?

R: Yep

K: Was skipping helpful? What purpose did that serve for you?
R: Just withdrawal, withdrawal from... knowing I didn’t have to go home for a few hours, and knowing that I didn’t have to deal with other people. I liked... I didn’t mind my own company.

K: Sounds like it was almost some peace. It’s interesting, because other people might say it’s to challenge authority, or it gave me a thrill, it doesn’t sound like that for you, it sounds like more of a way to find...

R: Yeah, I think the education system... I mean whether a teacher takes a sick day for mental health or peace of mind, or a student skips, even now I look at skipping and I think it’s healthy to a point, that everybody, be it teachers or students, just take a day off from that system, and just hang out and do something that they enjoy... umm, they’re the ones that are going to be content with themselves as people long after the school experience is over.

K: Absolutely, and I agree with that, but the other side of that though I guess is, it sounds as though you skipped a fair amount for a long time, and given that academically you were floundering, what effect did that have on your achievement?

R: Undoubtedly it affected it. That’s the other side of the coin, it’s a... when it becomes chronic like that, it’s more of a hindrance.

K: And how did you justify that to yourself?

R: Umm, back then, I just did it because I wanted to, I didn’t really justify it.

K: So the other things that you were getting out of that were more important. In terms of admin response, you kept skipping, so it didn’t really make much difference?

R: I would say it made some difference, but not a lot. It maybe wasn’t as effective as it could have been, but it certainly had some effect. It made you think twice at times, but sometimes if you had a really bad time at home or you’d been in a fight at school, nothing’s going to change your mind, you just need that break.

**How was your achievement in grade 8? Do you recall courses?**

R: I was a c / c- student in grade 8. I failed French, after my pneumonia I didn’t do anymore PE.

K: Were you frustrated by the grades you were receiving or did you just not care?

R: I would have liked to have gotten better grades, but I didn’t have the ambition. I was still very much a boy, in grade 8, even grade 9, I would say in a lot of ways I didn’t really begin to lose... it wasn’t until grade 9 that I started to move into adolescence... so for me, I just wanted to be happy, I wanted to have fun. I enjoyed reading, I read a lot at home for pleasure, I would read on the weekends and afternoons, at night, that was
where I'd use my mind the most. But at school, occasionally something would grab me, but my biggest concern at school was feeling safe and feeling accepted.

**When you moved to grade 9 at a new school, what was your experience there? What was the transition like? Any specific memories?**

R: Umm, starting over, trying to make new friends, I was trying to reconnect with friends I had in elementary. Some of them took me back into their circle, some of them didn’t. Some of the kids who had bullied me in elementary were there, again it was just a repeat of fighting and teasing that I had experienced from those students in elementary, like we hadn’t skipped a beat. I took band and I enjoyed it.

K: I want to back up a bit . . . (go back to question 4)

R: Part way through grade 9 I moved out and began to live by myself, and about two thirds of way through grade 9 I gave up team sports, and began focusing more on weights, just on my own, doing my own thing away from school.

K: What prompted that decision . . . moving from team to private activities?

R: I wasn’t . . . although I wanted to be happy and have fun...I wasn’t really establishing any deep or intimate or lasting friendships, I would keep my fingers in maybe two or three circles of acquaintances / friends, that I knew on a, not on any intimate level, I mean I would talk about what was happening at home, I had some friends from elementary that I would talk with, not at school, that was back in my neighbourhood, umm so at some point I think I decided I’ve got to get through this on my own. Umm, and I’d lifted a bit of weights, and again I’d seen Rocky and I wanted to look tough and be tough. I remember in grade 9 struggling with math and science especially. I enjoyed English, I played rugby and b-ball. Rugby I enjoyed, but bball I had to fight to stay in the team, not the coach, but there were other students who didn’t want me on the team. Umm, I was focusing on physical image as a way of building a sense of confidence about myself. School dances I remember there were lots of drugs and alcohol, but I didn’t partake in that, I didn’t want to. There were lots of kids doing it, but I wasn’t part of that circle. It was just something I didn’t want. I remember building up the nerve to ask a girl to dance. I remember taking drafting and mechanics, woodworking. I enjoyed it, it was kind of neat working with my hands.

K: You talk about struggling in math and science, what was that like?

R: I had some help in math, I took an alternate math, and uh, I had a fairly good teacher for that, he helped me get through. Umm, science, I had an ok teacher, nothing great . . . I can’t remember. It’s funny how you just remember the emotional impressions of teachers, and you don’t actually remember their face.

K: Did you work, do homework?
R: Yeah, I did some. I tried, I did some homework, I tended to do the stuff I found easiest. If I couldn’t get it, and my dad was busy, I couldn’t really rely on my mother for that, so, uh, I did what I could. There were times later on when I didn’t expect myself to do as much, I just wanted to get to the gym.

K: The impression I get is that you just did what you needed to do to get by, you know, you really didn’t put a whole lot of effort into it, but you didn’t you know, do nothing, you went to a fair amount of classes, skipped out here and there and just kind of drifted along.

R: Yeah, drifted along for sure

Can you elaborate on your grade 9 and 10 years? Day-to-day experiences, such as courses, school work, relationships with teachers and students, involvement in activities / sports, homework. Basically, were you engaged at all during these years in the life of the school, or were you just going through the motions?

I took drafting, PE, band, English. English was fun, I still remember doing Julius Caesar, I had a really good teacher. Umm, I also remember responding to some guy that was picking on me, I tried to throw a volleyball at his head and he ducked, and the PE teacher saw it coming at the last minute, and he had to duck as well. After that I got a detention, I mean I knew why, and I was very apologetic. He was good, he didn’t address it right away, he waited, and that just built my fear. I felt like a complete asshole. Even going into grade 10 when the shit was really hitting the fan at home with my mother. In grade 9 I moved out and just before grade 10 started at Arbutus sec. I moved back home and things really deteriorated after that, I was doing band twice a week early in the morning and basketball twice a week in the early evenings, so I was still involved. Again, academics were largely secondary. Most of the homework I attempted was completed on time, some was late, some wasn’t done at all. I had help with math. But I also saw school as a break from home life. I mean what else was I going to do?

K: So that kept you there?

R: Yep, yep.

K: So, even though you were disengaged it still was better to be there than at home.

R: Yep

K: Tell me why Julius Caesar and why English?

R: Fun teacher, and JC you got to act out parts of the play and I liked that, I enjoyed that.

K: So you liked the dramatic part?

R: Mmm hmm, certainly.
K: What else was fun about that teacher?

R: Yeah, I remember him talking about... he was a little outside the... he played in a rock band, which I thought was pretty cool. He brought some of his personality into the classroom and talked about his life, and he talked about things that he liked about our lives. He made it personal, very personal. One of the things he did specifically, was during short stories, he asked us questions, what do you think about this person, did they do the right thing, how can you relate their experience to your life, and I enjoy doing that.

K: Were you good at it?

R: Umm, well I still at times struggle with grammar, but back then I liked writing stories, and I liked writing my opinions, and I liked speaking, I had opinions and I liked speaking in public...so although I lacked confidence in myself in other ways, I felt very much compelled to speak about certain opinions.

K: That is quite a contrast, you'd think it would.

R: Pretty impulsive I think.

K: To me,,although there was some engagement... you really were going through the motions, is what I get from those years, there were a few things that caught your interest that kept you there, some personal reasons for being there, but to be honest it really was just...

R: I was a 50 / 60 / 65 percent student, occasionally working my way into the 67 / 68 percent.

K: You didn’t really reflect on that at the time, it wasn’t an issue?

R: The only sense it was an issue, was because my parents wanted me to get an education, they didn’t insist on a university education, but they did insist on grade 12.

K: So it was difficult in terms of their reaction. Did you have conversations around that?

R: Yeah. We talked about it, you know, why aren’t you doing better. There were reprimands and occasional physical consequences. Sometimes my parents would try and help me with my homework. Sometimes I remember if I didn’t do well or misbehaved, I had to do lines. I’m trying to remember... the message was that I had to get through grade 12. My dad said you don’t have to do really well, but you have to get through.

K: So, you’re hearing at home that it’s important to get through, you know yourself it’s important to get through, yet you are comfortable drifting. How do you make sense of that?
R: Well, looking back, what came through for me, was you know academics at that point... I think I had a mind that was there, but I wasn’t ready to use it, I don’t know if I had the skills yet to use it. Academics didn’t grab me, I didn’t see the importance. Grade 8 and 9, you can hardly see past your nose, and I didn’t lose that boyish aspect of myself until after grade 9, and I was more concerned about feelings...

**You talk a lot about your anger. How did you express this at school?**

R: Anger, well, I would say, when I was being teased or bullied, I responded by fighting back, swearing and hitting, and I also started to respond to some teachers, I would show my anger towards them... if I didn’t like them, maybe they had said something to me.

K: You were just reactive... Back up a bit... You started teasing other people, yet you had been teased for so long. How do you make sense of that?

R: I think part of it was probably I felt that if I could do it I could be accepted, umm, maybe, I may have, I think I recall teasing someone who was the friend of my enemy, who had bullied me... teasing was a way of finding weakness in others, in terms of making myself comparably stronger.

**Friendships: you talk about associating with “odd” peers. Did you form any close friendships at this time? How did you spend your spare time?**

R: No. I had no real close friends, although near the end of grade 9 there was a group of boys that I hung out with on a fairly regular basis. Now that we talk about it there was one guy that I spent a fair amount of time with, closer to the end of grade 9, Bernard, I could actually talk about my feelings. Him and Tom, they allowed me into their circle, and I could talk about what was going on for me, and they even thought it was odd that I wasn’t living at home.

K: That gave you another perspective on things?

R: Yeah, and for them it sort of bought me a sort of cool factor, in grade nine in the summer, I remember them coming over with some beer. I remember going into grade 10 they were sort of co-opted by a bigger group of guys, and they were into drugs and so I sort of was pushed out to the fringe a little bit.

K: You’ve mentioned a few times that you weren’t into that, drugs, which I find interesting, it seems to me that someone that’s looking for escape and that would easily fall into that, especially if your friends were into it.

R: I was afraid about what my parents would say. I knew my parents wouldn’t approve of it, and I was into feeling healthy, feeling strong, and I saw it as an extremely evil thing, an extremely bad health choice.
K: I like your word evil there, cause that's a family value

R: Yeah, it totally had moral overtones to it. However, I do remember grade 10, my dad took me to Edmonton, and I remember going up to a university party and getting absolutely plastered...but I didn't do that again until about six months later.

You talk on p. 23 of fighting back. Was fighting a regular occurrence? What gave you the courage to fight back?

R: I fought usually in response to being bullied, usually a couple of times a month, on average. My source of courage was anger, and also fear. I didn't feel I could talk my way, I didn't have the emotional development to reason with people. I didn't always win, especially in grade 10 when I moved into another school. And also I remember in certain fights, I remember, I loved playing rugby in grade 9 I could get out there and give as good as I got, and I remember a couple of fights and I remember feeling the support and admiration of people and that felt nice.

K: I wrote down here acceptable... there was a level of acceptability to physical fighting... it made a lot of sense why you would choose that.

R: In grade 9 what you're doing is you are trying to maintain friends and relationships, and umm, a bully will sometimes come in and try...pick on, humiliate you in front of people you want to be friends with, so your ultimate goal is to maintain that acceptance with another group of people.

You comment on several teachers that you enjoyed and this made a difference. Can you be more specific? For example, Mr. C.

R: Mr C., my math teacher in summer school. Always humerous, upbeat, umm, told stories. Good teachers I had didn't play favourites, they didn't exclude anybody, they invited students to participate, they were friendly but not necessarily a friend...professional, they weren't buddy buddy. They made an effort to give all students equal amount of time, should they need it. They acknowledged students, as a person, looked at you, said your name, smiled...basic human contact, and somehow that drew you into the classroom. Mr. P. . . . grade 9, umm, grade 10 my english teacher, I still remember a sub we had for one or two days in science, he was very matter of fact, very confident.

K: It's amazing what stands out . . .

You became involved with your counsellor (social worker) Ken in what grade? Tell me a bit more about this relationship. How long did you see him? What was his role in your reintegration / engagement in school?

R: Well I contacted him in July between grade 9 and grade 10. I saw him for about a year. He facilitated the transition between homes and schools for me . . . and of course I
switched schools halfway through grade 10. After Christmas I switched from (school name) to (school name), and he set me up with the counsellors at the new school. Sherry, a friend whom I still keep in touch with, a great person and another counsellor who Sherry referred me to, her name is Brenda, she was younger, quite good. He set up my foster parents, he was really good with that. He didn’t just yank me out of the house and put me in with Mark and Sue. He did a lot of visits with my mother and father, and he took me round to meet Mark and Sue a couple of times. He was very careful about how he did things. He helped provide me with a stable environment in terms of food and shelter. Although I did find that once I got into (school name), if anything I was even less engaged, I sort of retreated into my shell a bit, and school became even less of a concern oddly enough.

K: Even with the support around you?

R: I just enjoyed three square meals a day.

K: I think we talked about that last time, there were just other priorities for you despite the support you were getting, you just weren’t ready to connect.

R: Yeah, when the worm finally turned, it turned in a big way.

K: So is it possible that the process had begun, it’s just that you weren’t at that place yet, so the support you were receiving was making a positive impact, but it just took a while for it to click

R: Yeah, I mean, yeah I suppose its possible, I mean things sort of gestate for a while right. It’s not a case of one switch going off and another going on, there’s that in between period, that’s life right?

K: Sometimes you have to hear something ten times before it makes a difference in your life and you change your behaviour.

R: Some words have an amazing amount of power, but you just have to hear them...for me I was just out of this toxic home situation, and it was just time for me to enjoy that environment.

K: Revel in that kind of safety . . .

R: Yeah.

Other than your foster family, counsellor and employers, did any other “mentors” assist in your reintegration and eventual graduation? If so, tell me about them.

R: Sherry Debitz, just a very loving and unflappedly positive person, very practical, she’s the head of counselling at (school name). She tried to help me with my graduation.
When I went back to high school and I was 20, she took me into the principal's office and vouched for me, that I would be a good student, because he had some concerns about my age difference, and she made me promise, and I kept that promise. There was one time where a younger student was really taunting me and trying to engage me in a fight and I dealt with it in a mature way. I went to the counsellor and I talked about it and I tried to work through it.

K: Why do you think she vouched for you?

R: I don’t know. I think she saw that I was really serious about it.

K: What kind of counselling relationship did you have with her? Did you see her on a regular basis?

R: At SJ, yeah, I saw her . . . for misbehaviour, not getting work done,

K: Did you enjoy that?

R: Yeah, I liked her, she was a neat person. She didn’t come down on me, but she would ask me, she’s the kind of person that will ask you what you will do to be responsible for yourself. We would do role rehearsals, I can remember practicing those with her, that helped...I liked her as a person, she’s got a lot of energy.

K: It was just an enjoyable personal relationship.

R: Yeah. Craig at the Y. He ran a weight room at the YMCA. He was a neat guy . . . done a lot of travelling . . . quite influential on me in terms of inspiring me to go travelling at some point. He combined that, the weight lifting side with interest in other things in life, he had other interests. He could see I was becoming a bit of a body building meathead type and he said listen you don’t want to confine yourself to that role, you want to have other interests, you want to engage the world with other emotions, other than just aggressiveness, be receptive to other people. It’s funny what comes back after reflection.

K: Can I go back to Sherry? When you went back to school, was there a regular relationship, was counselling a part of your reintegration to school?

R: No, no, umm, yeah, nothing formal, I would pop in . . . I was a hands off student, when I went back I was devoted to studying and learning.

K: You were already there by that time.

R: Yeah, so I was never sent down, I was 20 years old, I wanted to learn.

K: I guess what I’m thinking if things came up where it was a struggle . . . you didn’t need to do that . . .
R: Couple of other people... Perry and Victor... Perry was a semi-pro hockey player trying to become an opera singer, Victor had played in the CF.

K: These were adults?

R: Yeah, these were older brother figures, you know, I enjoyed their company and for whatever reason they took me in.

K: There were a number of people.

On p. 29 you begin a story about your counsellor (just prior to the beginning of tape 2). Can you finish this story?

R: Having lunch with Ken. We finished eating and I got up to go, and he told me sternly to sit back down. He didn’t shout but his tone was pretty firm, and let me know that I had acted inappropriate. And that the relationship wasn’t just about meeting basic fundamental needs, but there was more to it... it was more interactive and intimate than just simply sharing food. Umm, so I sat back down, and I knew that I wasn’t just going to dine and dash, that I was going to have to talk. And we talked about certain things that were going on with me. And this was something that came up with my parents too, it’s something that I still face with myself today, sort of taking from people, it’s sort of taking from people and not giving back.

K: For me that’s such a safety issue, I mean it’s been such a prominent thing for you, and protecting yourself, cause giving means opening yourself up to others and if that’s been scary for you in the past it’s not easy to do regardless of what treatment you’re receiving.

When you moved in with your foster family, you moved schools and “changed your image” a bit. By this time you were disengaged academically, and you describe it as “like moving through cement, ... wasn’t focused at all”. Tell me more about this? Also, you state that you got through. How did you do this (e.g. did you do some homework, get help, just do the minimum, etc). Tell me more about this new school and your experience there.

R: The only real friend, was Tony, he was a first nations kid, and I met him and his family, I had dinner there a few times, I hung out there a bit...

K: Let’s go back a bit to that description... moving through cement.

R: Cement head... It definitely felt like my brain was just full of the after effects of hormonal growth and change. It didn’t feel like much of a useful tool. When I changed schools I tried to stick to myself a bit more... rough school... I had to watch what I said... I was caught between not wanting to stick out too much and wanting to appear
tough... I remember goofing off in math class and pissing off the math teacher to no end.4

On p. 32 you refer to school being such a struggle. Why was this so? What made it so hard for you?

R: The physical changes I was undergoing... definitely the issue of emotional separation from home... loneliness... not being around my brothers... not really acknowledging the separation from my parents... loss of intimacy and abandonment. Academics by and large just didn’t play a role in how I felt about myself. I didn’t see any relation between studying and happiness... future distant notion. I needed an immediate source of confidence.

Tell me more about your return to school after working (see p. 34). Did anyone at the school support your attempts to reengage? Were there particular teachers/staff that were important to your reintegration? Can you elaborate a bit on this time? Did you start studying more?

R: Mr. C. was one teacher who was quite helpful... used humour. My SS teacher... probably mid 30s... he would use humour, try and get us to see outside of ourselves... talk from our own perspective. He wasn’t willing to be totally emersed in an adolescent mindset. Part of him would retain a sense of who he was... a bit aloof... not emotionally intimate but personable. He had an attitude... hedidn’t need to be liked... He enjoyed his students... helpful to me I think because I was living on my own and I didn’t really identify with typical adolescent experience, and I was skeptical... any adult that didn’t put a sacharine perspective on things... not necessary that people always be “up”, rather / prefer kind of a skeptical or questionable perspective as long as coming from a real, honest place, rather than teacher that fakes happiness... insincere, but it’s important for teachers to model courtesy and respect, to cultivate happiness in classroom. My basketball coach, a student teacher... great attitude, very positive, very funny, full of encouragement, great sense of humour. Once coming home after school on the bus, I had a game, but I wasn’t going. He said, we need you. And he played me that night. When I made a basket, he’d stand up and cheer. I appreciated his encouragement. He asked my opinion on things, engaged me in conversation. When teaching me a specific skill, one of the things he was good at was showing me how to shut off the self-talk and worry, and focus on the skill itself. Eye contact, getting in my space (not a threatening way), saw that I was easily distracted... not anything tangible... great guy... special ed teacher now. He would talk about school with me, not a lot, but... if I told him I was angry, he acknowledged that anger... come back then with advise, but first acknowledge, not sympathy, way of laughing at situation, a lightness about him, light about a serious thing, in a way that wasn’t flip... See the humour in situations, laugh at myself a bit... Mr. H. was down the road a year or two, when I went back to take

4 End of in person interview. Interview completed by phone due to participant time constraints.
biology 11 (now age 19) . . . in a thing called track, realized not what I wanted . . . taking the one course, science . . . enthusiastic man . . . he smiled, took a look around the class before he began the lesson . . . acknowledging us . . . taking the temperature of the class. Mr J., my English 12 teacher, acknowledged my writing. He wouldn’t say whose piece but read out my work. I still remember that feeling of being acknowledged . . . brought up in same piece with her . . . two pieces of writing don’t need to be on same level to both be mentioned . . . can be a very inspiring thing. Those few moments have shown me that I could write . . . feeling . . . you know how your mind can be right there right now . . . sort of like your heart being right there, right now . . . you feel like you are on the right path . . . feel like there’s light around you . . . athletes talk about being in the zone . . . everythings clicking . . . for a student to be really on their game . . . when a student’s heart is connected to the mind, there’s a real feeling of purpose, of value, of moral certainty . . . it’s the feeling that comes about from intellectual engagement. The reward for the risk.

Erwin, a Christian youth worker at school. He had a Christian students club at school and I started to talk with him a bit. We talked a lot about spirituality and writing . . . talked a lot about philosophy and writing . . . enduring friendship.

Spirituality . . . I had had exposure to feeling but hadn’t really talked about “my spirit” with my parents. The first person was Mark, my foster father. He talked about the spirit in relation to my person. Our schools are secular institutions but people’s spirits do dwell within them. Two thirds of teaching has nothing to do with what your teaching, its how and who you are. I don’t think you can have institutions that are responsible for students and ignore the soul and the spirit. I think you can find a spiritual path . . . find what it is that makes that student feel more of themselves. For me it was writing, working out, being athletic, sharing my thoughts.

On p. 36, you speak of belonging and acceptance: “I finished grade 11 and went through grade 12 as well . . . by this time I had friends and contacts and I was somewhat of a character and I had a little bit of a community . . . I was accepted. That was really nice”. Tell me more about how this all came about. What happened? Why were things different now? What was going on at school that supported these changes?

R: I was on the basketball team and that helped a lot. Grade 12 coming back, not walking into a foreign environment . . . I had put in some time with people. I had been there the year before . . . When I left after grade 10, I was leaving and emersed in adult life working, and then I went back and did my grade 11, working part time, then summer, went back to work, at that point, carrying on two lives, so it was, I was realizing how we could be different people in different situations . . . small school . . . it was a little bit more low key, more intimate environment, grad class of 87 kids. Smaller in hindsight that helped. It was harder to be invisible and the fact that I was a little more adult made me stand out more, in a positive way, now accepted on the team. I think, talk about being congruent, I developed an assurance that I was going to be OK. I felt assured.

K: So, you were different?
R: Yeah, the difference was me. I wanted to get involved in school. I wanted to meet people.

On p. 37 you speak of making the choice to put academics ahead of athletics. How did this change of focus come about? What led to the realization that academics were more important to you? How did you make this happen?

R: I knew that if I didn’t make that switch, I’d be repeating . . . been there done that. I felt I could connect . . . repeated certain courses and stopped and started and now I wanted to move ahead. Ultimately it was my will to move on and not get distracted. I had gone to a certain level with my body building and was growing beyond that, I wanted more, I wanted to get through high school. I developed a curiosity about myself, I was tired of floating, I could feel my mind getting stronger. I realized that academics satisfied a long restrained part of myself, I remembered being a child reading, and I realized I had lost that for a number of years . . . reclaimed . . . there was a period from grade 10 for a year or two, I didn’t read much . . . came to a point in grade 12, near the end the working out had satisfied me but now I was becoming interested in the mind. I had achieved a basic level of security (Maslow’s needs) and now saw worth in it . . . emotional feeling of safety led to natural osmosis, kind of sense of curiosity and wonder about world coming through again.

What role did athletics play in your life at this time? How important? Why?

R: Well, umm, just you can never underestimate the power of endorphin release
Generated social acceptance for me, team, gym, sense of physical power . . . strength of power held in quiet reserve, knowing you’ve got a healthy body . . . I had to work part time as well as go to school, and bball rounded out my life, gave it another dimension . . . Gave me a chance to positively interact and contribute to their efforts, a sense of purpose . . .

See p. 40 – you achieved a great deal in this last year of school. Tell me more about this – how did you find the strength to keep going despite difficulty? Tell me more about the classes and being engaged in school? What strategies did you use to succeed? How were your emotional needs met during these last few years in school (your feelings of loneliness, isolation, fear were so important to your disengagement. What happened to these feelings? How did you conquer them? Did your relationship with your family improve? What happened that allowed you to feel safe enough to go on in school?

R: I think about that last year I was making all the right moves. I had begun that last year working pt night maintenance, but was fired . . . Thank God. I had difficulty keeping up, Biology 12 was a lot of work, so it was good that I was fired. I started to train for marathon in Seattle. I started working again in the new year at a university student residence caffeteria and that helped to earn income, getting some money from my father for rent / food, some emotional reinforcement from athletics, definitely moving into seeing academics as a priority, willing to put up with more economic uncertainty . . . I
was starting to date more, reaching out to women... and I had friends in university at that time... interested in what they were doing at university. Talk to them about their courses... studying sometimes in the law library... learned about success to keep things simple, focus on a few things to get through... strength in routine... weight lifting helpful here... interesting journey, initially developed as source of physical strength, but longer I did it, source of personal strength, that’s why didn’t do competitions after first ones, superficial. Diet, diet, diet. I learned a lot about the importance of what I ate. Related to the above... healthy eating... helped me get through... music helped... inspiration and retreat... older friends and adults were emotional outlets... advice... gym important, hanging out and talking to the guys, meaningful conversation... I was seeing education as something... could see the benefits of that (education) from people at gym and university. Prior to this, I saw education from a practical angle, but later when went to (last school) I would see wonder and inspiration, the value of education from a more aesthetic perspective.

**What led to your decision to attend university? Did you go straight from high school? What led to your decision to become a teacher?**

R: No, I ended up taking... after I went through this great epiphany of learning, I floundered for a while... Went into business diploma program... Community college gave me time between university and high school...then I went into Wrap attack (fighting forest fires summers)... Why a teacher? Umm, something people had told me to do... had considered... but wasn’t something I wanted to devote myself to at the beginning... just wanted to see what interested in... combination of practical and aesthetic things. I needed to make a living and I liked the interaction with students. I hoped I could achieve something with meaning and purpose.

**You comment on several times being hit by teachers. Can you elaborate? What happened – to them and to you? What influence do you think this had on your disengagement, if any?**

R: Only at St... my grade 8 math teacher. I was moved to different math class... also on a camping trip... there were no consequences... What that taught me... I became much more wary of teachers, I knew that they could cross that line... more mindful of what I said...

**Would you describe yourself as engaged in elementary, or did your disengagement begin here?**

R: Yeah, from bullying and moving... moments when you would put yourself out on a stage... boos, curtain down... retreat into shell a bit.

**As I read through our sessions, I also wonder what your experience has been with depression?**

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R: Depression – yes, I still struggle with this. As child, I had depressive tendencies, I felt a real depth of need, I would cry . . . there are some needs that no one can satisfy for us . . . I was never diagnosed . . . Having done this how much its . . . especially since Christmas, given me pause to reflect on identity and self as a teacher, I found it invaluable . . . Come to see how much a person can rediscover through reevaluation . . . if you read a novel, see how the topic fleshed out through revisiting and investigation . . . interesting journey.